

Talk to the International School, Finchley, London

Given by Damian Quinn, February 1999

Hello everybody. It's good to be here talking to you today. But I'm afraid you are going to have to be a bit patient because talking isn't very easy for me. That's because I am dysphasic.

You probably don't know what the word 'dysphasic' means. Well it means that I have a disability that makes speaking and understanding very difficult.

When I was little, I didn't just learn to speak without thinking about it - like most of you probably did. I had to have every word taught to me and I had to go to a special school for dysphasic children.

Even when I was five I apparently only knew a very few words – I didn't even have a word for my Dad.

Do any of you know any disabled young people who have to be in wheelchairs because they cannot use their legs – or perhaps cannot control their movements properly?

Well, this is often because the part of their brain that controls their legs or their movement was damaged when they were born.

The rest of their brain is often working very well indeed – but the part that controls their legs or their movement isn't.

You see, the brain is like other parts of the body. It's made up of lots of bits that can work separately to the others. Just like the rest of your hand can continue to work even if you hurt one finger very badly, so the rest of your brain can continue to work even if one part doesn't work at all.

(By the way, a person's brain can become damaged as a result of an accident. This is why it is important to wear helmets when you ride bikes or horses. Helmets are to protect your brains if you have a nasty fall.)

To get back to dysphasia:

If any of you have watched babies growing up, you will have seen that they understand a lot of what is said to them before they start to speak.

This is because babies normally learn to understand words first. They then start to copy the sounds – and gradually their use of language develops.

The part of my brain that was injured is the part that controls all this.

This means that I, like other dysphasic babies, didn't automatically start to understand words and therefore didn't learn to speak in the normal way. Every word had to be taught to me - just like your lessons have to be taught to you.

Even when I did learn them I had some difficulty in pronouncing them. I still do – as you have probably noticed!

But it's not all bad. Other parts of my brain are working pretty well. I don't have any difficulty understanding computers and I didn't have any difficulty in learning to read and spell. I can also water-ski, ride horses - and look after them -, swim, do karate - and lots of other things.

However, there is one thing I do have lots of difficulty with - Maths!!

Do you like maths? I can't do it at all! Thank Goodness for calculators!!

Of course, when you are dysphasic, school is very difficult. The learning is difficult. With not understanding words very well, it takes longer to take things in. And writing was difficult. To an ordinary person, a piece of writing that is written by most dysphasics looks a bit childish, and it is the same with drawing. Therefore I find it easier using a computer.