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## An Interview with Don M. Winn: Comics as a Coping Skill

*Oct 5, 2020 by*  
**Michael F. Shaughnessy** *EducationViews Senior Columnist*

Michael F. Shaughnessy –

1) Don, I understand that you are doing a blog on the use of comics to help struggling readers. How did this come about?

I recently became acquainted with the work of Edith Zimmerman, a blogger and cartoonist who uses art to express her feelings and communicate with others. As I examined her work and saw the depth of topics she covered, including her four years of hard-won sobriety, I was intrigued by the idea of offering dyslexic kids the opportunity to draw their own feelings. As you know, kids aren't born with emotional coping skills, nor are they born with the ability to express their complex feelings in words. But kids of every age can doodle and draw, and a parent can learn a lot from what their child draws. Clues found in a child's drawings can help inform a parent of ways their child needs support and encouragement.

2) What have you observed about the needs of dyslexic students this year?

In many districts the school year has begun remotely. Some districts plan to conduct the entire school year in this fashion and others are taking it one day at a time. In either event, all students—not just those with learning challenges—are having to figure out how they feel about being isolated, about the almost daily changes being made to everything they've ever known as "school," and about uncertainty. Many kids are home alone all day, while others come to work with their single parents and have to work underfoot, as it were. That's a lot to process and a lot to cope with.

Those with special needs are largely not getting what they need, because the availability of "one-on-one" time with the reading specialist or other accommodations may not translate well into the remote learning format. Most of the families I converse with are complaining about instructions in multiple classes that tell their child, "read two chapters in your book and write 500 words about what you've learned." That format simply will not work for a child with dyslexia or dysgraphia. Or math homework that states: "watch this video and email me if you have any questions." Just when public schools were beginning to offer more testing and accommodation for dyslexics, thanks to the COVID crisis, now we've stepped back 60 years to the "one-size-fits-all" educational approach again.

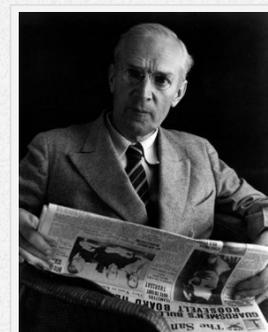
Since few parents are trained educators, and since parents are also having to figure out how to make working from home manageable, parents find that their time and ability to 'teach' their child is limited. The situation is frustrating. The kids don't know what to do either. Most would prefer to just check out entirely and play video



Don M. Winn

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games since they can't figure out how to make their school situation workable. But here's the thing: learning is not taking place. And that's not something we can ignore, or hope will resolve on its own. We need a workable strategy. And because children don't learn when they're in emotional pain, that pain—those emotions—have to be addressed first.

3) How could a parent use this method of encouraging their child to draw their feelings to help them cope?

There are lots of sources online in the world of child psychology that help a parent understand what their child's drawings may mean. In fact, the first thing a child psychologist will often do when they meet their new young client is to ask them to draw a picture.

No sunshine in the picture? The child isn't feeling particularly hopeful. Is the child huge and the parents tiny by comparison in the drawing? The child has sensed that the parents don't know how to take care of him and feels like he has to take care of his parents instead.

Are the figures of people small and near the bottom of the page? That likely indicates feelings of inadequacy or insecurity. Drawings depicting people with big hands and teeth can be a sign that the child is feeling angry or frustrated, as can heavy, dark lines that are drawn close together.

In any event, ask your child to tell you about what he has drawn and encourage him to talk about his artwork. It can also be helpful to ask the child if he feels those feelings anywhere in his body: stomach pains and tightness in the chest are common in kids who are feeling stressed.

The goal is to take a step back together, away from the frustrations of schoolwork, hit the "Pause" button, and have some time together to connect, discuss what is going on, what you both may be feeling, and take a little mental health break together. A walk around the block, a quick game of basketball, throwing a ball back and forth, a dip in the neighborhood pool, or a game of ping-pong are all physical activities that help dispel stress hormones and help reset the brain to a more positive state of receptivity that is necessary for learning. Making some hot tea or hot chocolate is helpful as well since hot drinks help people of all ages to relax.

With your love and patient guidance, your child can learn how to express his feelings, first through drawing a comic or cartoon, then in words as you discuss the drawing together. Once he has the words for his feelings, he can learn how to address them, cope with them without shutting down (video games or other withdrawal strategies), and most importantly, learn to ask for what he needs. Let him see you coming up with a plan to discuss his needs with the school so that he can get the accommodations he needs to keep learning.

4) When I think of comics, several memories come to mind. I remember well when I was a young boy- waiting expectantly for the weekly (it seemed) comics to be delivered. I also remember "Classics Illustrated" Are they even around anymore?

You bring up a good point. Parents who make time to read to their children raise better readers and have closer relationships with their offspring than those who don't. And if your child is a struggling reader, comic books/graphic novels can be your child's gateway into the world of reading.

Classic stories like *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and dozens of others are available in a beautifully illustrated form that parents can read to their child. The picture-heavy content helps stimulate the imagination and helps a dyslexic reader anticipate what comes next in the story.

My dyslexic grand-niece, Zoe, who is now in high school, read the graphic novel edition of *The Odyssey* and loved the story so much that she read the original book as well. Quite an accomplishment, I'm sure you'll agree!

Parents who make time to read to their child daily help create in that child a love of good stories, and a paradigm of reading as a fun, enriching experience. This daily positive conditioning will do a tremendous amount of good towards offsetting the stress of the distance-learning environment. Reading is fun, stories are fun, and learning is fun when done right! Even for dyslexics, or should I say, especially for dyslexics!

5) How do comic or graphic interpretations of classic stories like those you mentioned differ from the Marvel-type superhero genre for the dyslexic?

While I'm not against a little pure escapism now and then as per the superhero genre, I favor the classics for one reason: these are stories that demonstrate that real people like you and me can learn to do the right thing, to do difficult things, without the benefit of superpowers. As I daily cope with the limitations of my dyslexia, decade after decade, not once have I had the benefit of a superpower to do so.

If a kid's only heroes are those who rely on superhuman powers to "get the job done," they won't have a frame of reference for life as a mere mortal.

6) What is the link for your blog?

My website/blog is <https://donwinn.com>, and you'll find lots of information about my books and resources for teachers and parents there.

My blog on Comics as a Coping Skill is in two parts and can be accessed directly with the following two links:

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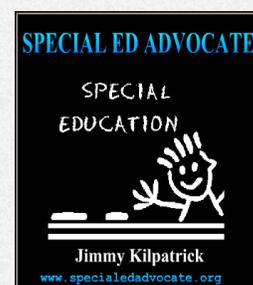
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[Helping Dyslexic Children Illustrate Their Feelings \(Comics as a Coping Skill Part 2\)](#)



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