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## Dyslexia traumatized Gavin Newsom as a child. Here's how aides say it affects him as governor

BY SOPHIA BOLLAG

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California Gov. Gavin Newsom was diagnosed with dyslexia early, but his mother hid it from him, worried knowing about the diagnosis would stigmatize him. BY SOPHIA BOLLAG



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When Gavin Newsom hired political consultant Garry South to work on his first campaign for governor, South tried to find an issue that would humanize the then-San Francisco mayor to voters who saw him as a privileged member of the Bay Area elite.

He learned from Newsom's family that the mayor struggled with dyslexia, a condition that makes it very difficult for him to read. South thought he had the perfect story. Newsom, however, wouldn't have it.

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"Like a lot of people who have a disability, he didn't want to be defined by that disability," South said. Newsom didn't want to talk about it publicly, and he didn't like it when South and other aides talked about it with reporters, either. "He was reluctant to make an issue out of it."

For South and other former advisers, [Newsom's story of dyslexia](#) is one of triumph, about a child who floundered in school but overcame a major learning challenge to lead the biggest state in the country. They point to his detailed memory, deep understanding of complicated policies and empathy for others as traits shaped by his struggle that make him a better governor.

For Newsom, who wrote a children's book about dyslexia that comes out next week, the trauma of going through school struggling to read still haunts him. Amid all his success, he continues to read materials as many as three times to master them.

Shortly after becoming governor, Newsom told a class of Sacramento elementary school students he remembers his heart beating hard while sitting in class in Hall Middle School as the teacher went down the row of students asking each one to read a paragraph.

He watched the clock, sweating, urging it to move faster so the period might end before his turn. His luck ran out. He stood up, stammering, unable to find the words, as his classmates laughed.

"People literally started laughing at me because I couldn't read," he said. "I'll never forget it the rest of my life."

## **DYSLEXIA IN SCHOOL**

Dyslexia is characterized by persistent struggles with reading, said Dr. Jason Yeatman, who [studies the condition](#) at Stanford University.

"Imagine what it's like to be a fourth grader when they're going around in a circle and everyone's reading aloud, and you know you're not going to be able to," Yeatman said. "It can be profoundly traumatic."

Children are typically not diagnosed with the condition until third or fourth grade, dyslexia expert Dr. Marilú Gorno Tempini said, after they've been suffering for years in school not knowing how to read and not understanding why.

Newsom himself was diagnosed with dyslexia early, but his mother hid it from him, worried that knowing about the diagnosis would stigmatize him. In an [interview he did with child actor Ryan Quinn Smith](#), Newsom described how he didn't know why he struggled so much in class and had to attend special after school and summer school programs until he found documents in his mom's room about his diagnosis years later.

"She didn't want me to give up," he said. "That's what she thought was the right thing to do."

He credits his mother for ensuring he was always in special learning programs, even though she didn't tell him why. Despite the extra help, his grades were so poor he says he wouldn't have gotten into college without the partial baseball scholarship he secured to attend Santa Clara University. In class, he says he was shy, always sitting in the back of the room with his head down.

At home, he remembers throwing his pen aside in frustration and calling himself stupid, which his mother hated.

"But I felt kind of stupid. I mean, I couldn't spell, I couldn't read, I couldn't write," Newsom told Ryan, who also has dyslexia. "It was hard."

When he was lieutenant governor, Newsom served as the honorary chair of the [UCSF Dyslexia Center](#), which Gorno Tempini runs. When he visited the center in 2016, she remembers him talking to her daughter, who is also dyslexic. She had just

transferred schools and was upset, so Newsom, who made a similar transition when he was a child, comforted her and told her it had worked out for him.

“It had such an impact on her,” Gorno Tempini said. “There is still a lot of stigma involved with the word dyslexia.”

Hydra Mendoza, Newsom’s education adviser during his tenure as mayor, witnessed similar exchanges between Newsom and kids he met. Every week, Mendoza would take Newsom to a school. He would really open up when talking to the students, particularly ones who also found school to be challenging.

“We had really wonderful opportunities to put him in spaces where kids who were challenged by the same issue were able to hear from him directly,” Mendoza said. “To hear his story and for students to go, ‘Wait, the mayor has dyslexia?’”

Through the state budget, Newsom has steered money toward research on the condition, including work Gorno Tempini and Yeatman are doing on early screening. Early detection is key, Gorno Tempini said, because it allows for intervention while the brain is young, and prevents kids from having to struggle for years without understanding why.

## **STRENGTHS FROM DYSLEXIA**

The trauma of having dyslexia can obscure strengths that come with the condition, Gorno Tempini said. Often, she finds dyslexics are better able to pick up on social and visual cues, something she observed when she watched Newsom comfort her daughter about changing schools.

“That was my impression, that he could read the room and people really naturally, and it is something we see in other dyslexic individuals, that they can pick up on social and visual cues more easily,” she said. “To me it was striking... picking up that my daughter needed exactly that in that moment.”

Former staffers also point to Newsom’s long, detailed budget conferences as evidence of his nearly photographic memory, which they attribute to his dyslexia.

When [Newsom unveiled his first state budget proposal in January 2019](#), he talked for two hours. As he recited a litany of facts about his [280-page proposal](#), he often cited specific page numbers from memory. Reporters in the audience grumbled about forgetting to bring snacks as the briefing stretched past lunch time.

Veteran Capitol reporters expressed surprise about Newsom’s detailed briefing, but longtime advisers like South didn’t.

“I’ve worked for some very smart politicians, including Rhodes Scholars, graduates of Stanford University and Harvard University,” South said. “Newsom has the most retentive mind of any politician I’ve worked for by far.”

South became accustomed to giving briefing books to politicians and then seeing them again the next morning, unopened. Not so with Newsom. When he got a

briefing book, he read every word, and covered it in Post-it notes and highlighter.

One day during that first governor's race, South came to San Francisco to see Newsom. He showed up at the mayor's office to find the door closed. South assumed Newsom was out and left. He returned more than three hours later to find the door still closed, so he asked Newsom's assistant if he was coming in that day. She replied that he had been in there the entire time, reading.

South knocked and entered to find Newsom sitting, sleeves rolled up, poring over a stack of documents half a foot high, painstakingly marking them up.

He would do the same to briefing books, compiled in binders three or four inches thick, on policies ranging from preschool education to women's issues.

"It's kind of painful to watch when you see the briefing book he read the night before and how much time he must have spent," South said. "I think his ability to absorb and process information is to some degree a product of his dyslexia because he has to put so much effort into reading. That's the only way I can really explain the awesome ability he has to absorb and process and synthesize information."

Newsom told Ryan, the child actor, that he typically has to read everything three times to understand it, but by the third time he knows it really well.

Mendoza, like several of Newsom's former aides, said his memory amazed her.

"He's not a skimmer, he's very methodical," said Mendoza, who now serves as chief of strategic relationships for Salesforce.

She and the other staffers would know if Newsom had read a document if he had marked it up. Papers that Newsom read never came back clean, instead filled with notes, underlined words, highlighted sections.

Newsom struggles to read speeches from a teleprompter, and says he has to practice for hours to prepare for even short ones. At most of his public appearances, he speaks off-the-cuff in meandering but detailed sentences.

While working for him, Mendoza learned not to interrupt or tell him to hurry up and get to the point.

"He can articulate really well without having notes," Mendoza said. "I know that this is in part because of his dyslexia... That's one of the things that we found amazing about him, his ability to review and retain."

Several of Newsom's former aides describe his abilities as perhaps a compensation for his dyslexia, a product of him having to work so hard to overcome his learning challenge. But Gorno Tempini said she's not sure that's always the case with dyslexics. Oftentimes, she said she thinks they are just naturally better at other skills, such as picking up social cues.

“He can understand what people need and their emotions more than others,” she said. “I don’t think that’s a compensation. I think that’s the superpower of his dyslexic brain.”

## NEWSOM’S CHILDREN’S BOOK

Next week, [Newsom will release a children’s book he wrote based on his experience with dyslexia](#). The book, “Ben and Emma’s Big Hit,” centers on a boy who struggles to read and uses his love of baseball to overcome challenges.

The book will be printed in OpenDyslexic font, designed to be easier to read for people with dyslexia.

[The governor was paid an advance for the book in 2019](#), which he used to pay the illustrator and fund other production aspects related to the book, spokesman Nathan Click said. He will donate additional proceeds to the International Dyslexia Association, according to a press release from the publisher, Penguin Random House.

The book is part of Newsom’s effort to help others who face the same challenges he does, as he did when he addressed the Sacramento elementary school class early in his term. After recounting his experience in middle school, Newsom gave the students some advice.

“Don’t ever laugh at someone or talk down to someone,” he told them. “No one’s stupider or smarter based on whatever pace. Everyone just learns at a different pace. It’s important that we remember that.”

Daniel Zingale, Newsom’s former chief strategist, says he thinks Newsom’s dyslexia has made him more empathetic. He says that was on display when the governor reviewed clemency applications.

Newsom would come into those meetings having carefully scrutinized the briefing binders on clemency applicants’ past convictions, their conduct evaluations and subsequent efforts at rehabilitation. Zingale said Newsom often felt torn about the decisions because he felt for the victims and their families, as well as the people seeking clemency.

“It’s our struggles and vulnerability that gives us empathy into the humans experience,” Zingale said. “Gov. Newsom looks on the surface like someone who has had a charmed life, and I think it’s actually the struggles in his life, dyslexia being the center of them, that make him a good governor.”

Mendoza saw that, too, especially when Newsom met with students at the Youth Guidance Center, San Francisco’s juvenile hall. He sat down with a group of boys in their young teens in a stark room, telling them about his dyslexia and listening to their experiences of floundering in school.

Afterward, he directed his staff to follow up to ensure the center screened the teens for dyslexia, having recognized some of his own childhood in their stories.

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