



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** The Pain of Illiteracy

**Guest(s):** John Corcoran

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**Dr. James Dobson:** Welcome everyone to Family Talk. It's a ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute, supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson, and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.

**Roger Marsh:** Well, welcome to Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh. Imagine sitting in a classroom every single day knowing that you can't read a single word on the page and really having no idea why that is the case. Well, that was the reality for our guest today here on Family Talk, John Corcoran. John was a man who somehow graduated from college, actually became a teacher, and reached the age of 48 before he finally learned to read. His story is a powerful window into the hidden pain of illiteracy in America and the hope that's possible for millions still living in silence. On today's edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, we're going to get into that conversation. Let's do that right now.

**John Corcoran:** Well, I recall, you know, in second grade, and remember, children are innocent. We go to school with an open slate, in a sense, innocent, looking to learn to read, write, and spell. And I didn't know what reading and writing was. In the second grade, I was put in the dumb row because I had a problem processing language.

**Dr. James Dobson:** Surely the teacher didn't call it the dumb row.

**John Corcoran:** No, the teacher did not call it the dumb row, but everyone else called it the dumb row. And it's the beginning of your, you know, a low self-esteem. If you can't read or write in school, basic fundamental skill to survive in school. Fortunately, I had some math skills and I had some social skills and some athletic skills. But when it came to reading, writing and spelling, I had no skills and didn't know what I was supposed to do. But I definitely knew that, you know, in the second grade, the third grade, the fourth grade, the fifth grade, the sixth grade, I was in the dumb row or I was in the buzzard group. You know, we were in a group, but I didn't know why or how I got there. And I'm sure the teachers set up that system to motivate the kids in the dumb row so they could work towards the smart row. But I didn't know what the rules were. I didn't know how to perform.

**Dr. James Dobson:** Were you embarrassed in school, John?

John Corcoran: I did a lot of things as a child. One of the things a teacher would do orally is to say "A-B-C," and then he'd point to a student, like he'd point to me, and I was expected to say "D-E-F." I didn't know the alphabet. I couldn't recite. I couldn't compete. I couldn't participate. And we were given demerits. And then at the end of the week, we would have to go to the front of our desk or the row, roll up our pants, legs to our knees. And everybody in our row would come by with a yardstick and hit us on the calves or hit me on the calves.

Dr. James Dobson: Come on, John. Really?

John Corcoran: That's absolute truth.

Dr. James Dobson: That really happened.

John Corcoran: That really happened. And if the student didn't hit you hard enough, then they would have to take your place. And they got whacked. And so it was a lose-lose situation. As they were coming up to give me my whack, I gave them a good look to say, you hit me, you hit me hard, you're getting it outside. And if they didn't hit you hard enough, they had to get hit. So it was just a situation. And people say, well, those situations don't happen anymore, John." And I say, I believe they still are happening. differently in the classroom. The same kinds of situations happen in classrooms.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, certainly there's still a great deal of emotional pressure on kids who can't read, write, and spell.

John Corcoran: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: And it is very difficult to imagine an academic setting where you're trying to teach those skills without a child figuring out there's something wrong with me. What's wrong with me? The natural conclusion is that I'm stupid.

John Corcoran: Well, that's the tragedy is that I now as an adult, I say that illiteracy in America is a form of child neglect and child abuse. And it is a traumatic experience to not to learn how to read, write or spell. And you are sentenced to failure in the academic environment. You can't make it. And people say, "Well, John, you've made it. You're successful." And I would say, "I never beat the system. The system beat me every single day, and it beats you every single day. This is a dominant literate society, and you have to know how to read, write, and spell."

Dr James Dobson: I think I read that you were in 35...

John Corcoran: I lived in 35 houses, which would be 35 neighborhoods, but I went to 18 schools. But I do not think that is, and Kathy and I have discussed this, I think that's a contributing factor. But in my own personal experience, and I was the one that was there. I think it was the thing that saved me. They had to know. I mean, they were the adults. They were the educators. I wasn't fooling anybody in elementary school. In college, yes, I take responsibility, but I was the innocent

one. And it's the adults that are supposed to. teach me. And my teachers knew I couldn't spell one single word. I didn't know why they even had me stand up on spelling bee day. I mean, they never saw me spell a word. They never saw me write a word. They never heard me read. And it's true today. It's like we're in denial that we have children in our schools today. Like it's a surprise. Any adult that ask a child, read this page in front, we're going to know. We got to get, as part of our problem, we've been in, this nation has been in denial for such a long time about this issue.

Dr. James Dobson: Kathy, you did not know that John was illiterate when you married him, right?

Kathy Corcoran: He told me before we were married that he couldn't read, but he was already teaching three years, so I thought he meant he couldn't read well. I had no idea that he meant he couldn't read.

Dr. James Dobson: How'd you find it out?

Kathy Corcoran: When our daughter was about three years old, I heard him trying to read a very simple child's book to her, and I was cooking in the kitchen, and it was just a real...it was a sad moment.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah, did your heart break for him?

Kathy Corcoran: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: How wounded has this man been?

Kathy Corcoran: I didn't know how wounded he was until he learned to read. He was very functional as a father, even as a teacher and business person, he appeared together. And I didn't have a clue how much pain he'd been in until he learned to read. And it has really been... a revelation to me. And I've seen, it explains so many things in our marriage. It explains so much of the rage and anger that was inside of him.

Dr. James Dobson: You love this man?

Kathy Corcoran: Yes, I do.

Dr. James Dobson: You wish that you could have reached out to him in earlier days and prevented some of that pain?

Kathy Corcoran: I wish I could have, but I really don't think I was ever the right person to teach him to read.

Dr. James Dobson: So where did you go to find this assistance?

John Corcoran: I, people ask that, what day did I, you know, did I decide I wanted to do something about my illiteracy? And I say, I wanted to do it the day I went to the

second grade. I mean, that's when I wanted to do something about it. But I went into a volunteer program, a 65-year-old volunteer tutor with less than 20 hours of teaching broke the code for me. She started me on the journey to literacy. She didn't have any educational psychology or philosophy. I think that was probably a benefit to her in our relationships.

But she was a second grade teacher that I never had. And I was 48 years old when I went into that program. And I didn't believe that I could learn to read and that's one of the problems for adults. And it comes early. It comes about the third or fourth grade in reality. We think something is wrong with us and we're told directly or indirectly you asked me if I was told directly that I was in the dumb row. We're told indirectly even with the use of language today when we refer to another human being as somebody that has learning disability a child that...it implies that something is wrong with them, and this is why we can't teach this person. And that's a lot of baggage to carry into your life.

And so that's the other piece of this, the emotional healing and the spiritual healing. And I would say, when I was a child, I used to pray that, God, please give me this miracle, the one miracle that I prayed for. And sometimes I'd get up and turn on the light after I'd say my prayers in bed. And I'd pick up a book and try to read because I was looking for that zapper miracle. And I didn't get that zapper miracle. But what God has sent me is a lot of miracle workers for me. And my volunteer was that that was the beginning of my journey to literacy and also coming home. And Kathy says that she didn't realize the damage, you know, and America doesn't realize the emotional damage, baggage that we carry. And it truly is coming home when you learn to read. And there's only one cure for illiteracy, and that's literacy. There's nothing else. That's what has to take place. And it's hard work for some of us, and it's hard work to teach some of us to read. But the good news is that we can teach people how to read, write, and spell.

Dr. James Dobson: John, what a wonderful message. Describe sitting down with that volunteer who began to convince you that you could read. That was her first task, wasn't it?

John Corcoran: Yes, yes.

Dr. James Dobson: Because you didn't believe it.

John Corcoran: I didn't believe it. It was the first 30 days, I really didn't believe it because I had tried different things, informal kinds of things. I used to watch the nightly news and take the headlines and try to figure out the words. And so I really didn't believe that I could learn to read. And she loved the language. She read all the time. And she was able to...to sort of set aside. It was really interesting. I was 48 years old. This woman is my second grade teacher. I have all these worldly experiences and all these worldly accomplishments, but what I had to really do is to tell the truth. And that was hard for me to deal with that. And sometimes

she wouldn't let me talk about my emotional problems or, you know, how hard things were. She just focused on read, you know, read. And this is what we're going to do. She started me on the journey.

Dr. James Dobson: Kathy, having been a support person for John, you're the closest to him and you love him and you've seen his struggles. Speak to the parent or to the wife or the husband of a person who's gone through this. How have you encouraged him? You obviously have stood by him in this. What can you say to them that'll be helpful?

Kathy Corcoran: I, because I really didn't understand the pain until he learned to read. I really feel that if there was anything I could do, it would be to go back and to have understood where he was at. Because a lot of times...

Dr. James Dobson: You really didn't comprehend it?

Kathy Corcoran: No. I think I poured salt...

Dr. James Dobson: You're married to a man and didn't understand the most basic thing about his emotional apparatus?

Kathy Corcoran: No, because he had defenses up. He had a wall up about this all the time, and we didn't really discuss it. I just did the writing or the reading, and we didn't really discuss his not being able to do those things.

Dr. James Dobson: You kind of became an enabler for him.

Kathy Corcoran: I was, and sometimes I used that to gain power or control in the relationship. If I knew he needed something written, I could just not write it right then or go tend to something else. And now if I could do it all over again, what I'd really do is be much more sensitive to how much he was hurting. And I wouldn't have intentionally, and I did intentionally at times, pour salt into his deepest wound.

Dr. James Dobson: For the parent that's out there, you would strongly recommend, I'm sure, that they get whatever tutorial assistance is necessary to keep a youngster from going through this. Most of them can learn to read.

Kathy Corcoran: I see as a school nurse, I work on or sit in on student study teams all the time and frequently see the parents who I can see that there is as much pain as their child over their child's inability to succeed in school. And they're very frustrated. They're in a room with the supposed professionals and they don't know what to do for their child. But if there is anything that they can do, they ought to go out there and do it. I mean, if it means getting a tutor, if it means looking into other schooling situations, or, you know, I just think that if there's anything they can do for that child, John's a good example of how much pain is going on and will continue to go on in their life if they don't get that skill.

Dr. James Dobson: John, what do you recommend to the school?

John Corcoran: I'd like to add one thing to what Kathy said for parents. We are not dumb. You know, children that can't, and I say we, I still can't leave that. I'm still very much connected to that little boy that sat in that dumb row. And I feel that pain. Do not abandon your children. Do not give up hope with your children. Know that they can learn and reading is a skill that can be taught. It has very little to do with what... I mean, there's a separation between one's intelligence and one's skill. And this is a skill that we have taken the blame for as children. Do not blame us.

Dr. James Dobson: If I were a school board member, a local school board, I would come with that passion that the number one responsibility above all of the things of the school is to teach kids to read. That's number one. And of course, spell and compute.

John Corcoran: You have my vote.

Dr. James Dobson: And everything else is secondary to that. Everything else. You must, in a literate society, you must graduate literates or they're lost. And yet the school system is so burdened down with all these avant-garde politically correct things of environmentalism and multiculturalism and all these efforts to teach different languages, and I don't know what all is weighing them down now. But reading must not be squeezed out. And we must take the budget that the school district has and give the primary money right off the top to seeing that every child learns to read. And if you do have to get tutorial assistance for those kids who can't learn to read in a group, then we must do it.

John Corcoran: Yes. And I think also what I would like to, I would love to see every literate person personally take it upon themselves as a moral obligation to share their precious gift with others. That is, and certainly every teacher has to have. I don't care if you're a first grade teacher or a college professor, a teacher of teachers have to have a moral obligation to see that people know how to read, write, and spell. And we also have to teach teachers how to teach people how to read, write, and spell.

Dr. James Dobson: Who don't learn it easily.

John Corcoran: Who don't learn it easy. And we, in five years, if we took your... the comments that you just made in five years, if we, if we put literacy as 75% of the discussion, you know, reading, writing, basic skills, fundamentals, and set some of those other things aside for the next five years, we would see those issues would be dealt with because, you know, I think we've underestimated, you know, the gifts of literacy and all the emotional, you want to talk about gangs? You want to talk about gangbangers? I guarantee those folks can't read. They can't write. They can't participate in this society. And it's a lot more than reading, writing, and spelling. It's a sense of belonging. That was what I used to feel so alienated from this society. And it wasn't until, and one of the first things I ever wrote was a poem called "The Native Alien." I felt, even at 48, I knew

better, but I felt like I did not belong. And I came home you know, when I learned to read.

Dr. James Dobson: You know, schools in recent years have been concerned about self-esteem of students. My second book was on the subject of self-esteem, *Hide or Seek*. And so it is important that kids have a healthy self-concept. But it usually is not possible to go directly to that instruction. You look at what it is that's tearing self-esteem apart. You teach them to read and self-esteem goes up.

John Corcoran: Yes, that's what I say.

Dr. James Dobson: Hey, I'm going to get along well with this guy.

John Corcoran: Teach me how to read. I will get my self-esteem. And that's really, I mean, can you teach self-esteem? Give me some skills that will lift me up. and make me an equal.

Dr. James Dobson: Turn you loose.

John Corcoran: Yes, that's what we need. Yes, yes. You got it. You got it.

Kathy Corcoran: I just was going to say, John mentioned that 85% of the young people facing juvenile courts have deficiencies. And so do most of the pregnant teens that I work with. Most of them have deficiencies. And I just think that there's a lot of other problems in our society. I think a lot of probably drug use are kids who are doing poorly in school. And I just feel like doing well in school could improve a lot of the problems that our society has.

John Corcoran: 60% of our inmates in our prisons have deficiencies in basic skills, cannot read, write, and spell. It's all there. It's so obvious. And I know that teaching literacy and reading is not going to solve all our social and economic and educational problems, but it will go a long ways. And it's one of those issues that we can agree on. You know, we don't have to debate it. There's nothing to debate or discuss whether it's good or bad. It is good.

Kathy Corcoran: I love this story. John was, I guess he had lobbied for some funds for teaching inmates in prisons to read and got to go in and visit and talk to some of these inmates. And he was amazed at these tough lifers who were crying because they were reading it, had been taught to read, and now were reading at a third grade level. And they were so excited over there.

John Corcoran: They were weeping like babies is what they were doing. They weren't just crying.

Dr. James Dobson: I remember when I was a school psychologist, there was a group of kids that were just causing all kinds of trouble on the high school campus, and they were just real troublemakers. And we started a reading program for them, and they began to read for the first time. And to see those big, tough kids involved in

gangs and all kinds of stuff sit there and cry really touched me. And I saw the pain that was inside and how much of it was related to that failure. First grade, second grade, third grade, being the dummy, being in what you call the dumb row. John, when you taught school, were you particularly sensitive to that kid out there?

John Corcoran: Oh, very definitely. Very sensitive. And I knew who he was and who she was too. So I was on guard for those kids. And there were a lot of them.

Dr. James Dobson: And you still could not read yourself.

John Corcoran: I could not read.

Dr. James Dobson: You're standing in front of a class. What grade?

John Corcoran: 10th graders, 11<sup>th</sup> graders, 12th graders.

Dr. James Dobson: What subject?

John Corcoran: Social studies.

Dr. James Dobson: Social studies.

John Corcoran: Taught typing. But if you think about typing, typing is teaching the home row. It's a mechanical kind of thing. I mean, they're nonsense words. Social studies, taught one semester English. You know, we have more stories to tell about just in the classroom. And people say, how could you do it? And I have to say that I don't recommend that we have illiterate teachers. But I do not have any guilt in terms of delivering something to... I was a good teacher because I was a good learner. And a good teacher has to be a good student. That's part of what being a good student is about. But I cheated my class. I did exactly what I don't want anybody to do anymore. So I had to take responsibility for that.

Dr. James Dobson: Because you hid it instead of dealing with it.

John Corcoran: Right.

Kathy Corcoran: And he couldn't teach the ones that he knew couldn't read in his class.

John Corcoran: The thing that they needed the most, I couldn't give to them.

Kathy Corcoran: Those that were non-readers.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, that's a highly specialized skill in itself. And the volunteer who taught you, John, you love that lady?

John Corcoran: Oh, I love her, yes. She gave her time to do that?

John Corcoran: She gave her time.

Dr. James Dobson: Sat with you week after week?

John Corcoran: Yes, 13 months. And then I went on independent study for about four years, and I sort of hit that plateau or that brick wall, and I wanted some more. And I went into another program and had a professional teacher teach me about 100 hours. And I moved from the second grade level to the 12th grade level in my word attack and my spelling and really got me to another level.

Dr. James Dobson: John, did anyone ever call you dyslexic?

John Corcoran: Yes, people call me dyslexic now, and they ask me if I have learning disabilities. But my experience was that of a person that was illiterate. So I want to tell my story as an illiterate. And I don't want to get... Bogdan, in the argument of dyslexic, a learning disability, I want to try to avoid that. I share my experience. I do have a lot of the characteristics of a dyslexic. I have the characteristics of a person with learning disabilities. I have a severe auditory discrimination problem. But in spite of all of those things, I learn to read. And what I'm fearful of is that because of the labeling, we decide that we're not going to teach. So I don't want anybody to give up on anybody.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, we're not going to give up on you, John.

John Corcoran: Thank you. Thank you.

Roger Marsh: You know, you can hide almost anything from the world, but you can't hide from yourself. And John Corcoran knew that better than anyone else. On today's edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, we featured a deeply moving conversation featuring John and Kathy Corcoran about the hidden pain of illiteracy in America. Now, if you missed any part of today's broadcast, or if you'd like to share it with a friend, you can visit [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org), or if it's easier, [jdfi.org](http://jdfi.org). You know, broadcasts like this one are at the heart of what we do here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. Our mission is to preserve and promote the family and the biblical principles upon which it is based, also to introduce as many people as possible to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to stand for the sanctity of human life and righteousness in the culture. Now, we can only do that work through the generosity of listeners just like you. Please know that your prayers and your gift of any amount right now will help us keep bringing these conversations to families all across America. If you'd like to send your donation through the U.S. Postal Service, our ministry mailing address is Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, P.O. Box 39000, Colorado Springs, Colorado, the zip code 80949.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh, and on behalf of all of us here at Family Talk and the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, thanks so much for listening today. Be sure to join us again next time right here for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust for the family you love.

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