

Understanding Dyslexia

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This lesson concentrates on dyslexia and its effects, including social and emotional issues. The lesson describes the characteristics of dyslexia, dispels myths, and highlights realities of this learning disability. With a basic understanding of dyslexia, you can better serve anyone who struggles with it.

What is Dyslexia?

Dyslexia is a language-based learning disability — or learning difference. It refers to a cluster of symptoms, which result in people having difficulties with specific language skills such as spelling, writing, and pronouncing words.

Dyslexia continues throughout a lifetime; however, its effect can change at different stages in a person's life. Dyslexia is referred to as a “disability” because people who have dyslexia may have normal or above normal intelligence, but find it hard to succeed in the classroom.

Dyslexia occurs in people of all backgrounds and intellectual levels. People who are very bright can be dyslexic. They are often capable or even gifted in areas that do not require strong language skills, such as art, computer science, design, drama, electronics, math, mechanics, music, physics, sales, and athletics. Many may thrive with outdoor activities such as hunting, fishing, or working with animals and livestock.

Myths about Dyslexia

What do most people know about dyslexia and its affects? Many people believe dyslexia means someone can read backward — and this couldn't be farther from the truth.

Other myths about dyslexia include:

- Dyslexia isn't real but rather an excuse.
- People with dyslexia cannot read at all.
- Dyslexia is rare and does not affect many people.
- There is no way to diagnose dyslexia.
- Gifted children do not struggle with dyslexia.
- Dyslexia affects more boys than girls.
- Dyslexia is a vision problem and can be corrected with glasses or contact lenses.

History

The term dyslexia, developed in the late 1800s, is derived from the Greek root *dys* meaning “difficult” and *lexicos* meaning “pertaining to words,” — in other words, “difficult words.”

Research into the condition developed in the early 1900s, but great strides in identifying and working with dyslexic children and adults started in the 1960s. Another surge in research and treatment continued from the mid-1990s to the present.

An estimated 15 to 20 percent of the population has difficulties due to dyslexia. Parents and educators still have a hard time identifying or



Characteristics of Dyslexia

Dyslexia is not related to a lack of intelligence or desire to learn. Studies show that with a basic understanding of dyslexia and appropriate teaching methods, dyslexics can learn successfully and succeed at almost anything they try.

There is a good chance that someone who is dyslexic also struggles with some other types of learning disabilities.

- Dysgraphia: (dis graf ē a) difficulty with handwriting.
- Dyscalculia: (dis cal que lē a) difficulty with math.
- ADHD: difficulty with attention. (Either inattentive or hyperactive, and sometimes both, depending on the individual.)
- Dyspraxia: (dis prax ē a) difficulty with motor skills.

Common characteristics:

- Difficulty in learning to write the alphabet correctly in sequence.
- Difficulty in learning and remembering printed words.
- Reversal of letters or sequences of letters.
- Difficulty in learning to read.
- Difficulty in reading comprehension.
- Cramped or illegible handwriting.
- Repeated erratic spelling errors.
- Delay in spoken language.
- Problems in learning the names of the letters of the alphabet.
- Difficulty in finding the “right” word when speaking.
- May be late in establishing preferred hand for writing.
- May be late in learning right and left and other directionality components such as up/down, front/behind, over/under, east/west.

understanding dyslexia in children. Therefore, the people who work daily with kids who struggle with dyslexia find it difficult to connect the dyslexic differences with the social and emotional problems related to dyslexia.

What Causes Dyslexia?

The exact causes of dyslexia are still not completely clear, but anatomical and brain imagery studies show differences in the way the brain of a dyslexic person develops and functions. Dyslexia is caused by biological factors rather than emotional or family problems.

Because researchers have linked dyslexia to areas of the brain, this means that dyslexics will not outgrow dyslexia. Dyslexia is both familial and heritable, which means it runs in families (and sometimes jumps a generation) and can be inherited.

If someone is diagnosed with dyslexia and enough research is done within that family, most may find that dyslexia was prominent throughout past generations despite not quite knowing what it was. Maybe there was a grandfather who didn’t read very well, or a great grandmother who struggled with handwriting, or even a cousin who “wasn’t a very good student.”

How Is Dyslexia Treated?

With proper help, many people with dyslexia can learn to read and write well. Early identification and treatment is the key to helping dyslexics achieve in school and in life.

Most people with dyslexia need help from a teacher, tutor, or therapist trained in using a multisensory, structured language approach, also called the Orton-Gillingham approach. It is important for these individuals to be taught by a systematic and explicit method that involves several senses (hearing, seeing, touching) at the same time. Many individuals with dyslexia need one-on-one help so they can learn at their own pace.

In addition, students with dyslexia often need a great deal of structured practice and immediate, corrective feedback to develop automatic word recognition skills. When students with dyslexia receive academic therapy outside of school, the therapist should work closely with classroom teachers, special education providers, and other school personnel.

How Do Dyslexics Learn?

Although learning in a regular classroom environment can be a challenge, it is not impossible. Research has shown that with the proper teaching techniques, all but 5 percent of students with reading trouble were taught to function at grade level.

Dyslexic children learn best by engaging multiple senses — visually (eyes), audibly (ears), and kinesthetically (muscles). In other words, see it, hear it, feel it. This is also called V-A-K learning.

Research suggests that 60 percent of children find reading challenging or extremely difficult. What most people fail to realize is that speaking is a natural process, but reading is a learned process.

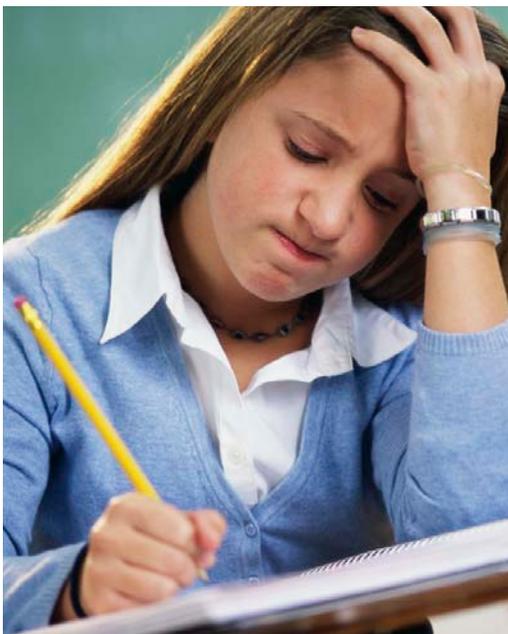
Dyslexia is the difference between a child's potential and actual achievement.

Is Dyslexia Really a Problem?

Yes! There are many adults in the world who have grown up believing "they just weren't smart enough" when in reality they really were. What they didn't have was the basic understanding of their learning difference or the correct tools to work with their difference.

The earlier a child is evaluated for dyslexia the sooner help can be provided. Dyslexia is one of the most researched and documented conditions that will affect children throughout their school careers and the rest of their lives.

Without the proper diagnosis and accommodations, children will fall through the cracks in the classroom and the results will be life altering. Not only will the child struggle academically, but will also struggle with self-esteem, the guilt of not meeting others' expectations, anxiety, and frustration.



Three main indicators seem to affect the chances for success, when a child has dyslexia:

1. Early in the child's life, someone has been extremely supportive and encouraging.
2. The child with dyslexia found an area of interest in which he or she could succeed.
3. Finally, people who have successfully dealt with their dyslexia appear to have developed a commitment to helping others.

Social and Emotional Effects

The effects of dyslexia reach well beyond the classroom. It can affect a person's self-image. Students with dyslexia often end up feeling "dumb" and less capable than they are.

After experiencing a great deal of stress due to academic problems, students may become so frustrated they begin to consider school and learning to be bad experiences. Once this has happened, it's difficult to change their perception of school.

Because students become frustrated, they may act out in class, become the class clown, or avoid doing assignments. They would rather be disciplined for bad behavior than admit they cannot do the work. Often teachers don't understand this avoidance behavior and soon the student is labeled as "lazy," or "doesn't try hard enough." Often parents will hear over and over again "...he/she is such a bright child; if only he would try harder." Ironically, no one knows exactly how hard the dyslexic is trying.



How to Help

Adults working with youth in any capacity — whether it be at church, through youth groups, 4-H or scout leaders, as coaches, as teachers, as grandparents, or as volunteers at school — need to understand that not all children learn in the same way. Assume the role of "educator" in order to bring out the best in kids affected by dyslexia.

Other suggestions to consider:

- Accept and value creative ideas. To understand what a child learned, accept an activity or project in lieu of a written report.
- Students should receive multisensory instructions from the adult that includes:
 - demonstrating
 - illustrating
 - showing
 - telling

- Don't make them memorize words or facts. Because kids with dyslexia have poor short-term memory, memorization is ineffective, especially for spelling tests or other rote memorization tasks.
- Don't assume they will want to read aloud. As volunteers, you have no way of knowing which kids are comfortable with reading out loud and which kids are not. This could be a deal breaker for some, and the reason they won't want to come back next time.
- Set them up for success: Quick, short lessons help the dyslexic learner process the information being taught. Brief review of the information will ensure that he or she will retain it.
- Behavior should be acceptable if it doesn't interfere with another student's learning. Some kids simply learn better when they are allowed to stand up and listen, or sit on the floor. Other kids learn better if they are allowed to doodle or gaze out the window.
- When the child does exhibit unacceptable behavior, adults must not inadvertently discourage the dyslexic child. Avoid words such "lazy," "stupid," or "troublemaker." Calmly pull the child aside and explain that the behavior is unacceptable. Then, explain your expectations and how you would like the child to behave — sometimes he or she just didn't know.
- Do not punish a child by taking away recess or another fun activity. More often than not, this is the outlet kids need to expend energy and recharge.
- Help children feel good about who they are. They should leave school, youth group, or a sports activity feeling they were successful with something. Praise and encourage them as often as possible.
- Teachers, parents, volunteers, and mentors need to offer consistent, ongoing encouragement and support. Be sure to listen to children's feelings. Anxiety, anger, and depression are all daily companions for dyslexics. However, their language problems often make it difficult for them to express how or what they are feeling. Adults must be patient and help them learn to talk about their feelings.
- Encourage reading. Despite having trouble reading, children with dyslexia may still enjoy the story in a book. Read out loud to kids, even older kids. Continue to foster their interest in books by allowing them to listen to books on tape, CD, or on their mp3 players or e-readers.

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