

# Dyslexia

People with dyslexia can have enormous difficulties in making sense of reading, writing and spelling. Nowadays there is much that can be done to help with these difficulties, but it must be recognised that it is a life-long condition and, as such, cannot be 'cured'.

Dyslexia is a recognised condition and, if identified early, people can generally be helped to find ways of coping with their problems and acquire the skills we all need to reach our potential.

It is estimated that around 4% of the population is severely dyslexic with at least a further 6% experiencing mild to moderate problems.

## **What is Dyslexia?**

The word 'dyslexia' comes from the Greek and means 'difficulty with words'. It is true that dyslexia causes difficulties in quite specific areas of learning, usually affecting reading, writing, spelling and sometimes influencing mathematical skills. However, to describe the condition in this way would be over-simplistic, as it often overlaps with other types of specific learning difficulties which affect spoken language and motor skills.

## **What causes Dyslexia?**

Until recently the causes of dyslexia were not understood, but, although there is no conclusive scientific proof, there is a growing body of evidence gathered from brain imaging and psychological techniques that the brain of someone with dyslexia operates in a different way to the rest of the population.

Our brains are pre-programmed to learn to speak and children possess a natural urge to communicate. Small babies hear the sounds that make up words and instinctively copy them. Unfortunately, there is no such instinctive way of learning to read, nor is reading necessarily a pleasurable or rewarding experience.

There is little dispute that to become fluent readers children need to connect the sounds they hear with the written symbols they see on the page. Children with dyslexia have persistent difficulty in making this connection.

Sufficient evidence now exists to suggest that there are important links between phonological skills (the expertise needed to process sounds), progress in literacy and dyslexia. Impaired phonological processing abilities affect the acquisition of phonic skills which are essential for reading and spelling. This also means that unfamiliar words may also be misread and comprehension affected.

It has also been suggested by some researchers that the poor language skills of dyslexic children may be linked to their sense of balance and could explain why some children with dyslexia are clumsy and uncoordinated.

## **Who has Dyslexia?**

Dyslexia used to be dismissed, by those who did not understand the condition, as a 'middle-class disease' - that it was being used by middle-class parents as an excuse for their children who were slow to learn. Research, however, is now showing that dyslexia is widespread, with the condition occurring in people of all social classes and abilities. It is easier to recognise in children who are otherwise making good progress than in those who are generally slow in learning.

Dyslexia does not affect intelligence and the vast majority of people with the condition can lead perfectly normal and successful lives, particularly if they are given the help they need.

## **Is it genetic?**

Dyslexia does appear to run in some families, with researchers discovering families in which reading difficulties have spanned several generations. It is likely that there is a genetic link which makes some family members more prone to the condition, but the link has not been conclusively proven.

## **How to recognise Dyslexia.**

It is important, first of all, to exclude a range of other reasons why a child is having difficulty in learning to read and write. These include poor eyesight, hearing problems, absence from school due to ill health, inadequate or very interrupted schooling or emotional stress at home.

Hearing problems are particularly important, with young children being particularly susceptible to ear infections. A minority of those affected may develop a condition called 'glue ear' which can significantly impair a child's hearing for a time. It has been found that restriction in hearing around the age of two (when they are acquiring spoken language very rapidly) or around five (when they are beginning to learn the skills needed for reading) leads to difficulties in learning to read.

Although there is disagreement about which is the most important, the following are generally accepted as causes for concern:

### **Pre-school.**

Does the child:

- have a short attention span compared to other children of the same age?
- enjoy stories, but show little interest in words or letters?
- have a poor memory for nursery rhymes?
- find it difficult to recognise rhyming words?
- find it difficult to do 'odd one out' games with words?
- have difficulties with skipping, hopping, jumping and balancing?
- have difficulties with throwing, catching or kicking a ball?
- find it difficult to put objects into a sequence eg. beads?
- confuse directional words eg. 'up' and 'down', 'in' and 'out'?
- jumble up letters or whole words in speech?

### **Primary school.**

Is the child:

- doing less well than expected?
- having marked and persistent difficulties with reading/spelling?
- writing letters/numbers the wrong way round?
- taking a long time to complete written work?
- confusing left and right?
- leaving letters out of words or putting them in the wrong order?
- over using the content of stories to guess at words?
- having difficulty remembering times-tables / alphabet?
- unable to put things into sequence eg. days of the week?
- unable to do simple calculations without using fingers to count?

### **Secondary school.**

Is he or she:

- still reading slowly or inaccurately?
- confusing times; dates and places?
- needing to have instructions repeated?
- finding great difficulty in planning work and writing creatively?
- having marked difficulties with spelling and in producing legible handwriting?
- taking much longer than normal to produce written work?
- working inconsistently with marked 'on' and 'off' days?
- under-achieving in classwork and examinations?
- unable to take notes?

### **Some Practical suggestions to help with teaching of pupils with dyslexia.**

- Always show patience, understanding and encouragement.
- Understand the intermittent nature of the pupil's performance and attention.
- Try to ensure that the pupil experiences "success" through the development of other areas of the curriculum.
- Computers/word-processors, spell-checkers and calculators often allow pupils with dyslexia the opportunity of succeeding in literacy tasks - thus enhancing confidence.
- Interest, involve and work closely with parents.
- Where possible teach individually or in small groups.
- Try to discover how the child learns best and, where possible, adjust your teaching style to match.
- Ensure that the work is at the correct level for the individual.

- Any “differentiated” work must stimulate the intellect of the child as well as catering for his/her literacy needs.
- There must be opportunity for elements of discovery and open-endedness to motivate and interest the creative element of the pupil’s mind.
- Try to teach reading and spelling strategies together through a structured phonic multi-sensory approach.
- Rewards should be frequent and important, but only given when they are deserved.
- The working environment within the classroom should be quiet, non-distracting and attractive.
- Try to avoid copying from the blackboard - this is particularly difficult for pupils with dyslexia.
- If copying from the board cannot be avoided - allow the pupil to sit close to the board and try using differently coloured chalks/markers.
- Encourage the use of cursive handwriting to encourage spelling, speed, neatness and fluency.
- When marking a pupil’s work always do so when he/she is present.
- Mark work for content rather than for presentation. Do not correct all the errors, but correct for a specific purpose.

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