

Reading Comprehension & Dyslexia

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Why is my child struggling with reading comprehension and what will help?

Scenario

Kim is an 8th grade student who has just been diagnosed with dyslexia. Kim has always been very bright and curious. She asks thoughtful questions and has excelled in science. She is great with hands on projects, experiments, and big picture thinking. Kim is also a natural leader and enjoys being actively engaged in many activities outside of her school day. Even though Kim loves to learn, she has never enjoyed reading because it takes her a long time to read. Kim also spends a lot of time on schoolwork. She tries her best but can't help feeling frustrated at how long it takes her to complete tasks when reading and writing is involved. Kim notices that her siblings and friends don't spend nearly as much time doing homework. Additionally, Kim doesn't always understand what she's read the first time she reads something. She usually has to read material two or three times to remember and make sense of what she's read. Even then, sometimes she has to ask for help understanding what she's read. Kim's parents don't recall her having these problems in elementary school. Why is she beginning to struggle now? What will help?

Difficulty Reading Can Lead to Difficulty Comprehending

This statement may seem like common sense, but is often something that is misunderstood. It's always important to consider why someone is having difficulty with comprehension. There are students who can read beautifully with very smooth fluency, yet not comprehend anything they've read. This is often the case with someone who has autism. This is not a characteristic of dyslexia.

Recently, I've received more questions about reading comprehension. I work with children and adults who have dyslexia. The three main characteristics of dyslexia are difficulty when reading words in isolation, poor spelling ability and poor reading fluency. There are many other signs and symptoms of dyslexia, but these are the big three. If you would like a more comprehensive list of the characteristics of dyslexia, please request the, "Characteristics of Dyslexia Resource Guide" through my website.

If you look at a list of dyslexic characteristics, you will notice reading comprehension further down the list. Characteristics are generally grouped by age/grade level, so further down the list would mean the symptom is more likely



to show up during later elementary, middle, or high school years as opposed to early elementary years. Why is this?

Dyslexia doesn't inherently cause reading comprehension problems. In fact, one way to tease out a true comprehension problem versus a decoding problem, with a young child, is to test the student's listening comprehension and compare this to their silent reading comprehension. Parents and educators are often surprised at the discrepancy between these two skills when working with dyslexic students. Listening comprehension is typically very strong because, at this point, there is nothing wrong with a child's understanding of language. Silent reading comprehension is often below grade level because the student is struggling to read words accurately and fluently enough to understand what they have read. As you can see, what appears to be a reading comprehension issue is not always a true reading comprehension issue. Instead, it is a decoding problem – the inability to read words on the page with enough fluency to comprehend what was read. Reading fluency is an important indicator of comprehension. This is important to know because text can't be understood if a child takes too long to read the words on the page. This is compounded if the words read are mostly inaccurate. As a child matures and reaches upper elementary grades and beyond, a true comprehension problem may develop as a secondary issue because of the effect of the dyslexia on their inability to read at the same pace as their peers. Let's take a look at what this means.

Less Reading, Less Comprehension

Difficulty reading leads to less reading, which in turn can lead to reading comprehension trouble. This is one reason comprehension may suffer for dyslexic readers.

This makes a lot of sense. When reading is hard it becomes a chore. When reading is a chore, reading for pleasure doesn't happen. The more a student experiences difficulty reading, the less they are motivated to read. This cycle only gets worse if the student is not given reading instruction that works to improve reading. Dyslexic readers are weak in phonological processing skills, which are necessary for sounding out unknown words. Without being taught the right skills to sound out words, students will not become better readers, they will read less and this can affect comprehension.

On the flip side, it's important to note that more reading does not always beget better reading. Just like more phonics instruction does not help a dyslexic reader become better readers if they don't have phonemic awareness skills and the auditory discrimination necessary to make sense of phonics. Current neurological research is very prescriptive when it comes to reading methodology



for dyslexic students. A structured literacy or Orton Gillingham approach is the best approach and will improve student progress the quickest. When decoding and fluency improves, often so does comprehension.

There are three main areas that are negatively impacted by a lack of reading. These areas are background knowledge, vocabulary, and reading fluency.

Background Knowledge & Vocabulary

If students limit their reading by only reading what is necessary, then year after year this lack of exposure compounds and can create problems with reading comprehension. After several years of minimal exposure to text, students miss out on different types of vocabulary and expanding their background knowledge on various topics.

Believe it or not, vocabulary and reading comprehension may also be negatively affected if a student solely reads fiction books. In these books, the type of vocabulary used tends to be very general. In non-fiction text, the vocabulary includes academic and technical vocabulary. This is a different type of vocabulary that is important for children to build their understanding of because it is often topic specific or supportive to a topic. This is especially true beginning in the middle school years.

The Remedy

Use Audio-books. Students with dyslexia should be encouraged to listen to books at their grade level and above so they are exposed to rich content and higher-level vocabulary. This is called, "ear reading". When students get older, audio books can be set to read at a faster rate so students can hear more information in a shorter period of time. Audio books open the door to knowledge and continued learning when books are too labor intensive to read by eye (eye reading). In saying this, I'm not suggesting your student stops reading books altogether. I am suggesting that if your student is not reading at grade level or is taking too long to read, try using audio-books so their knowledge and vocabulary is not limited to text below their grade level. Two good sources for audio books are audible.com and learningally.com.

Students should also be encouraged to use new vocabulary when speaking and writing. You can make vocabulary cards or word journals to keep track of new words and their meaning. It will help if students hear and use higher level and technical vocabulary in conversation. In order to truly expand vocabulary, try to use all four methods of communication with the targeted words – speaking, reading, listening, and writing.

Reading Fluency

Slow fluency and poor accuracy can make reading unbearable and will negatively affect comprehension. There are research-based guidelines for how many correct words per minute a student should be able to read by the end of their grade level. If your student is extremely slow and/or very inaccurate when reading, you should consider reading instruction steeped in Orton Gillingham based methods. It is never too late to learn reading and spelling methods that will improve student reading fluency, resulting in better comprehension. If these skills are in place and fluency continues to be an issue, then targeted fluency practice may be in order.

The Remedy:

Make sure your student has the skills necessary to break words into meaningful parts in order to sound them out and read them. If these skills are in place then you can work on fluency using repeated reading and fluency drills. One way to do this is to use oral reading fluency recordings. Voice-record your student as he/she reads a passage. Afterwards, have the student listen to the recording while they follow along with the text. This draws their attention to what they are doing well and what they need to improve upon. They can hear their prosody, mark reading errors and make goals for their second and third reading of the text. Repeat this process two or three times until you are both happy with the level of fluency attained. These readings can also be timed. With each reading, you should push the student to beat their time yet maintain accurate word reading.

Sometimes students have received all the right instruction, yet when reading they skip small words (of, but, as, if, etc.), skip or change suffixes or substitute similar looking words for the actual word on the page. You can draw attention to these types of errors with a highlighter, a word/sentence window or simply by telling them what their errors are and asking them to slow down and read exactly what is on the page.

Memory & Attention

This article would be amiss if it didn't mention memory and attention. Memory can also cause trouble with reading comprehension. Often dyslexics have trouble remembering what they read, just moments after reading something. This might be due to a lack of attention/focus. It could also be due to memory retrieval issues or slow processing. Many people can relate to having a wandering mind while reading material that is not interesting or emotionally engaging. These problems may occur alongside dyslexia. Forty percent of dyslexics also have attention deficit disorder with or without hyperactivity.



Closing

There are other reasons individuals may struggle with reading comprehension, but when you are dealing with dyslexia the struggles are often found in the details. This article briefly describes some of the most commonly used strategies for improving comprehension when it is a result of having dyslexia.

About Kelly

Kelly Steinke, M.A. Ed., NBCT is the founder of READ Learning Educational Services, LLC. Kelly taught special education, primarily to students with learning disabilities, for over 15 years in the Midwest, East Coast, and Pacific Northwest. During this time she became a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT) in Exceptional Needs, earned a Master of Arts Degree in Education (Administration and Leadership), and founded her company, READ Learning Educational Services, LLC. For the past six years, Kelly has served the community as a dyslexia specialist. Kelly is also the creator of Silver Moon Spelling Rules™ instructional materials.

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