

What is Dyslexia?

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I think my daughter and/or son might have dyslexia. But what exactly is dyslexia? How do I know for sure? What symptoms would I see? Isn't dyslexia when you see words backwards?

When parents initially contact me for information, these are generally the types of questions they first ask. In this article, I will take some time to answer these questions. It is my hope that this information will offer more clarity on the subject and demystify some of the common myths that continue to be prevalent about dyslexia. First, let's take a look at how dyslexia is defined.

Dyslexia Defined

The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) defines dyslexia in the following way:

"Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge."

Put simply, dyslexia is an inherited learning disability that runs in families. Dyslexia literally means "difficulty with language." Dyslexia varies in severity and symptom from one person to the next and can affect reading, spelling, writing, handwriting, word retrieval, articulation, directionality, and the ability to remember rote facts.

Secondary problems may develop if the dyslexia is left untreated or if the dyslexia is more severe. Some of these problems include difficulty with reading comprehension, vocabulary, and written expression. Additionally, secondary conditions such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or speech and language impairments are often coexisting.

Characteristics of Dyslexia

Research has shown that there are three main characteristics that most individuals with dyslexia have. It is very common for someone with dyslexia to have the following struggles.

1. Difficulty sounding out individual words
2. Slow and inaccurate reading fluency (reading out-loud)
3. Poor spelling

This being said, there are many other symptoms of dyslexia. Seeing words backwards are not one of those symptoms. The following characteristics should give you a clear picture of what dyslexia looks like. It's important to note that dyslexia will not be exactly the same from one person to the next. Each individual can be affected in different ways. This means that some people will have more symptoms of dyslexia while others will have less. Additionally, dyslexia can be diagnosed as mild, moderate, severe, or profound. To add to this, symptoms will look different depending on the age of the person affected.

Below you will find general age ranges and symptoms of dyslexia that you might see within that age range. Professionals and parents need to look for clusters of symptoms – not just one or two symptoms. If your child has several of the characteristics listed below I would encourage you to pursue dyslexia testing and to get more information on reading interventions that work for individuals with dyslexia. If you read through these characteristics and your child only has one or two of the symptoms listed, it is likely that you don't need to be concerned about dyslexia.

Please note, the age categories and symptoms are meant to give you a general idea of what to look for and when to look for it. Individual symptoms and ages can and may vary. There may also be coexisting conditions. You should consult a trained professional when looking for diagnosis or screening of any kind.

Preschool & Kindergarten

- Difficulty pronouncing words correctly (mixing up the sounds or syllables)
- Delayed language and/or vocabulary development
- Left and right confusion
- Switching handedness (late choosing a dominant hand)
- Difficulty remembering the sequence of the alphabet or days of the week
- Can't remember how to tie shoe laces
- Can't create a rhyming word or doesn't have fun with rhymes
- Difficulty quickly naming familiar things or objects
- Chronic ear infections
- Difficulty remembering how to spell their name and difficulty memorizing their address or phone number
- Coloring, pasting, and using a scissors is frustrating

1st Grade – 4th Grade

- Delayed ability to connect letters to their sounds
- Reversals (b/d) and inversions (n/u) in letters or numbers beyond the end of 1st grade
- Can't remember sight words
- Difficulty sounding out unknown words

- Poor reading fluency – reading is choppy, slow, and full of mistakes
- Poor spelling ability
- Guessing at unknown words in stories either from the shape of the words, context clues, or pictures
- Comprehension is much better when information is read aloud to the child as opposed to the child reading independently
- Handwriting is difficult to read (dysgraphia)
- Math trouble – confusing math symbols, not understanding time and how to tell time, memorizing math facts, directionality
- Directionality confusion with positional words (before, after, left, right)
- Says the wrong words when speaking or makes up their own words
- Complains that reading is hard or avoids reading tasks
- History of reading problems in a close relative

5th Grade – 8th Grade

- Continued difficulty sounding out unknown words – especially multisyllabic words
- Oral reading fluency is weak – may leave off suffixes, omit parts of words, or skip smaller words (an, in, the) when reading out-loud
- Reading progress continues to be very slow
- Word problems are extremely difficult in math
- Difficulty recalling math facts despite years of practice
- Spelling strategies and patterns are difficult to learn
- Written expression is weak - especially punctuation, capitalization, organization (ideas and content may be fantastic)

High School

- Reading difficulties have persisted
- Continued directionality confusion without the use of coping strategies
- Inaccurate spelling
- Poor written expression skills – verbal expression is generally much stronger than writing skills
- Poor grades or may have to work twice as hard as peers to maintain grades
- Difficulty learning a foreign language
- Takes longer to complete work – especially reading and writing assignments
- Diminished vocabulary (due to a lack of reading throughout the years)
- Misunderstanding information that is read
- Summarizing is difficult
- Has to read text several times over in order to comprehend
- Doesn't read for pleasure, may become fatigued from reading
- Trouble pronouncing uncommon words such as names or locations

The Parent's Role

As parents and teachers, we have an incredible responsibility to raise our children to the best of our ability, striving to provide the best opportunities for their futures. Genes and past childhood experiences are things that can't be changed, but if you suspect or know your child has dyslexia there are three factors moving forward that you will have some control over.

1. First, you can select a reading program that is in line with what current research has found is best practice for students with dyslexia. These types of reading programs are Orton Gillingham based (also known as structured literacy) and are simultaneously multisensory, explicit, cumulative, and diagnostic in nature.
2. Second, you can support your children by ensuring they are treated fairly and with understanding by other adults in their life. This falls along the adage that fair does not always mean equal. In other words, ensure that children are challenged and held to high expectations but also supported. There are many simple accommodations that can be used so children are able to access materials and curriculum at their age level. There are also many technology tools that offer great benefits for children with dyslexia. One tool that is absolutely necessary when children are reading well below their grade level is audiobooks. When children can listen to books they get the benefit of learning new content, improving comprehension, and making new connections. Accommodations have the power to turn something frustrating into something that is engaging.
3. Third, you must take into consideration strengths and interests. Where there is a weakness, such as dyslexia, there will also be strengths. Strengths must not be ignored. Often children need help finding out what their strengths are. They also need help developing their interests, skills and talents. Many people with dyslexia show natural strengths in critical thinking skills, the arts, athletic ability, musical aptitude, being empathetic, having great people skills, showing leadership qualities, mechanical skills, and more. Make sure children are aware of their strengths and have avenues to pursue interests and activities they enjoy so they can experience success.

Parents and teachers can change the entire trajectory of a child's life by giving their children the gift of these three important factors. When these three factors are dialed in, the results are often very apparent. Children will show improved self-confidence, increased independence, willingness to learn, and improved skills.