

The Dyslexic Child

Around 10% of children are affected by Dyslexia to varying degrees and four per cent severely. **Helen Donovan**, principal at Dyslexia Action's Bristol Centre and a trained Montessori teacher, offers advice and helpful tips for parents and teachers on recognizing and supporting the dyslexic child.

Dyslexia is a learning difficulty, sometimes referred to as a hidden (i.e. not visible) disability, that hinders learning, mainly affecting literacy skills. The current scientific evidence suggests that these difficulties arise from inefficiencies in language-processing areas in the left hemisphere of the brain which, in turn, appear to be linked to genetic differences. Such studies have shown that if one parent is dyslexic that there is a 50% chance that any one of their children could also be affected.

With very young children, before they are in a formal learning setting, it's important for parents to be aware of any dyslexia or literacy difficulties in the family. However, while there are early signs for dyslexia, we warn parents not to jump to any conclusions as children develop at such different rates.

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However, due to the individual way in which dyslexic children learn, traditional teaching methods do not always cater for them appropriately. In addition, the number, type and severity

of the difficulties will vary from child to child.

Assessment

Dyslexia is normally identified through a formal assessment, conducted by a chartered educational psychologist or a specially qualified teacher.

The assessment process normally takes approximately 2 – 3 hours and looks at all skills and abilities. Information from the child's parents/guardians and his/her school will be requested. The psychologist should be able to discuss his/her findings on the day of the assessment



Pupils taking lessons at Dyslexia Action's centres in the UK

and this should then be followed up with a full report that will include, most importantly, a list of recommendations based on the child's individual needs.

Getting the assessment is not always easy. If dyslexia appears to be presenting problems your school may be able to make a referral for assessment, paid for by your local authority. Your school may have excellent support and experts but you may feel that you need to take action yourself and pay privately for assessment. We suggest you always discuss your concerns with the school or nursery first.

Helping the dyslexic child

All the current research, in the UK and internationally, indicates that dyslexic children can achieve their potential if their dyslexia is identified and supported from an early age. Dyslexia need not be a barrier to achievement if the child's needs are assessed and he/she is supported with a programme of multisensory tuition provided by an experienced specialist teacher.

Children at a Montessori school where the method of teaching is child led and multisensory will already be receiving valuable support. In a multi sensory environment all the neural pathways to memory are utilised therefore weaker areas will be compensated for. As well as working with the tactile materials such as the Sandpaper letters and Large Moveable Alphabet which is a similar resource used by Dyslexia action as part of their own model of literacy teaching, sequencing, rhyming activities and memory games are all excellent ways for children to learn, particularly for children with dyslexic tendencies.

One of the most important things to understand about dyslexia is that it is a very individual problem and therefore each dyslexic child's difficulties should be dealt with at an individual level.

Tips for parents

Many parents/guardians worry that they are being over-anxious or are perhaps looking for an excuse for their child's slow progress. Trust your instincts. If your child is showing signs of a learning difficulty arrange to have him/her assessed. If your child does not

have a hidden disability at least you will have ruled this out.

Try not to get frustrated with your child. For example many dyslexic children will spell/read a word correctly and then later not be able to spell/read the same word. This often makes the child appear lazy but poor short-term memory causes this spelling/reading phenomena.

Emphasis on literacy skills tends to overshadow other talents and abilities that a dyslexic child may have. Dyslexic people are often creative, original, lateral thinkers. They devise their own, often highly successful, if rather unusual route to problem-solving. Try to be as encouraging as possible and focus on your child's strengths. This can help to build confidence.

It is very upsetting and frustrating for a parent to watch their child struggle and many feel that they have failed as a parent in some way. Dyslexia is no one's fault and with the correct help many of the difficulties it causes can be alleviated.

About Dyslexia Action

Dyslexia Action (formerly the Dyslexia Institute) is a national charity and the UK's leading provider of services and support for people with dyslexia and literacy difficulties. We specialise in assessment, teaching and training, we develop and distribute teaching materials and undertake research. Dyslexia Action is the working name of the Dyslexia Institute

For more information and advice about dyslexia please visit Dyslexia Action's website at www.dyslexiaaction.org.uk or call 01784 222300. ■

What to look out for

Dyslexia, or signs that can lead to a diagnosis of dyslexia, usually emerge with young children when they start to learn to read. As well as – or even before difficulties with reading and spelling, parents and teachers may notice their children experiencing the following difficulties which can give cause for concern:

- Poor sequencing or ordering skills
- Poor short-term memory
- Excellence at some things whilst having surprising difficulty with others
- Struggling to remember two or more instructions in sequence
- Struggling to remember nursery rhymes
- Appearing clumsy in some respects but good at manipulating things like Lego
- Uncertain of which hand to use for eating
- Confusion with names of objects
- Use of Spoonerisms e.g. par cark
- Difficulty in clapping or moving to rhythm
- Delayed speech
- Confusion about left and right

In addition, dyslexia and dyspraxia are often linked. Dyspraxia affects motor coordination and can impact on a child's fine motor skills. This may show up in activities such as the dressing frames (buttons and zips) and handling golden beads.

And as the child gets older, and starts to try to read, the following difficulties may be also apparent:

- Lack of phonological awareness – ability to break down words and recognise separate units of sound
- Problems with reading comprehension
- Difficulties with mathematics
- Difficulties with musical notation
- Poor handwriting
- Difficulties expressing thoughts orally
- Poor organisational skills
- As a child matures, his/her pencil grip and handwriting may be awkward, showing possible signs of dyspraxia

For parents or teachers who notice a number of these signs, it would be wise to seek further expert advice. The first port of call is the nursery, the school teacher or the school SENCO.