



Supporting children with Dyslexia

What is Dyslexia?

This is such an interesting question. The accepted definition of the 'specific (specific because it only affects a certain area of learning; it's not a global issue) learning difficulty' (I prefer 'difference to difficulty' but heigh-ho) was created in 2009 (yes, as recently as that) by the Rose Review (<http://www.thedyslexia-spldtrust.org.uk/media/downloads/inline/the-rose-report.1294933674.pdf>).

Sir Jim Rose and his Board decided, after extensive research, school visits and evidence from professionals that:

"Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling."

This is a really concise, simple and generally accurate statement – BUT, one that has maybe confused professionals, parents and those with dyslexia over the years. For example, those with dyslexia who are good at reading but can't spell for toffee, or those that can read and spell but 'can't get things down on paper, or those that are finding reading & spelling okay but simply can't seem to organise their thoughts. Do YOU recognise any of these? You may still be within the profile of dyslexia, but may have been told, or feel that you are not, as you don't 'fit' the definition. Maybe this led to a later diagnosis and this may have had an impact on your mental health, as you knew something was odd, you maybe felt out of control, different, but couldn't understand why.

The Rose Review also pointed out that, 'Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed'.

So what is 'phonological awareness?' I hear you ask. It's pretty simple really, it's the ability to break sounds down, into their simplest form according to their letters... 'Verbal memory' is the ability to remember those sounds to be able to assign them to the letters/group of letters they are presented with. 'Verbal processing speed' is the ability to 'find' those sounds easily and efficiently within one's brain to be able to say, read or write them down. Really this part of the definition could also include, 'Working Memory', which is the ability to retain information in one's brain whilst working on it, an essential skill for effective learning. (Susan E. Gathercole, Emily Lamont, Tracy Packiam Alloway, Chapter 8 - Working Memory in the Classroom, In Educational Psychology, Working Memory and Education, Academic Press, 2006).

The Rose Review also pointed out that, 'Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities'.

Now, this was a pioneering and marvellous statement; greatly appreciated by many. It led to the acceptance (kind of – there is still significant ignorance around) that dyslexic people can still be clever people. Fourteen years later, we still have a long way to go regarding true acceptance of this fact, but we are getting there.

Rose also pointed out that dyslexia, 'is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points. Co-occurring difficulties may be seen in aspects of language, motor co-ordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation, but these are not, by themselves, markers of dyslexia'.

*Ah, so here we are, the acknowledgement that there is far more to a dyslexic profile than it simply being a difficulty with 'accurate and fluent word reading and spelling' thank goodness, and yes, by themselves, a difficulty with co-ordination, concentration & organisation are not 'dyslexia' BUT, whilst no two dyslexic profiles are ever the same, these characteristics are **so** common in a dyslexic profile, that they surely have to be considered as a sign.*

Finally, Rose advised that 'A good indication of the severity and persistence of dyslexic difficulties can be gained by examining how the individual responds or has responded to well-founded intervention'.

Some dyslexic learners may respond to evidence-based interventions provided by Schools...if they are identified and if there is staff available to provide an intervention and if that teacher providing the intervention has been trained to provide an effective, suitable intervention and if that particular intervention suits the learners learning style and profile....MANY learners, unfortunately, will become what is classed as 'non-responders' and will be classed as 'severely dyslexic'. The teachers will struggle to find interventions to help, as the pupil's dyslexic profile runs much deeper than the simple definition of a difficulty with 'accurate and fluent word reading and spelling'. A School may try a phonics-based intervention over and over again, but it simply won't work. Why? Well, it's probably because of the 'co-occurring difficulties... of language, motor co-ordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation'. So whilst these are 'not, by themselves, markers of dyslexia', they are extremely important to consider.

So what is Dyslexia?

Well, a dyslexic brain type is many things. It is a Rocket Scientist with incredible insight and a naughty child running around in your head. It is the most confusing day you could imagine and the clearest clarity possible. It is so simple to teach but so hard to get that teaching right. It can cause the most terrifying anxiety; but it can create the most resilient souls.

Common Co-occurring Difficulties Check-List - Simply Ask the Right Questions!

Co-occurring Difficulties are those characteristics that contribute to a learner's difficulties and it is incredibly important that they are considered ALONGSIDE a screening or assessment for dyslexia as they can cause just as many barriers to learning. It's really quite simple to start with – just ask your dyslexic learner these questions:

1. Are words blurry when you look at them? Do words move around on the paper? Are you sensitive to bright lights? Do you get headaches when reading? Is reading uncomfortable?

If the answers to any of these questions are 'YES!' then get your child a colorimetry or Irlen Assessment for Scotopic Light Sensitivity (Irlen, H., & Lass, M. J. (1989). Improving Reading Problems due to Symptoms of Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome Using Irlen Lenses and Overlays. *Education*, 109). If your child/learner is struggling with these symptoms – how on earth will they ever be able to read? Overlays or glasses can really alleviate this issue, if not solve the issue. It's hard to consider that people all see differently from yourself – but it's true!

2. Do you find it hard to remember multiple instructions? Copy from the board? Recall facts? Dates? Prioritise important stuff from less important stuff?

If the answers to any of these questions are 'YES!' then consider that 'Working Memory' may be a difficulty. Lots can be done to help working memory difficulties, from barefoot running to enhance areas of the brain that are under-developed to visual note-taking as a helpful strategy.

3. Do you get distracted by noise around you? The ticking clock? The birds tweeting outside the window? The aeroplane flying overhead?

If the answers to any of these questions are 'YES!' then consider a referral via your G.P for an Audiologist to conduct an Auditory Processing Assessment (Geffner, D., & Ross-Swain, D. (Eds.). (2018). Auditory processing disorders: assessment, management, and treatment). Did you know that we all process sounds differently? I know it's hard to get your head around, but it's true! Sounds can be VERY distracting, but we can train brains to 'switch off' sounds with lots of hard work, leading to a more focussed approach to tasks.

4. Are you forgetful? Do you get easily distracted? Do you avoid doing tasks you find difficult? Do you have LOTS of activity going on in your brain (internal monologue)? Do you find it VERY hard to sit still?

If the answers to any of these questions are 'YES!' then consider Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder (*again I find the word 'disorder' very problematic, but I guess 'dysregulation' might be described as 'disorder'*

and attention is definitely either 'hyper' or 'inattentive' in body or brain or both!) The ADD/ADHDer can feel great - they have LOTS of energy, but they can also feel confused when they crash. G.P's can refer for assessment and provide medication to stabilise the situation, but do consider if your child/learner/you may be able to manage the symptoms through releasing cortisol & adrenaline with exercise, yoga and mindfulness. If this doesn't help, don't struggle, get a diagnosis & some advice – but be aware – waiting lists for referrals are VERY long.

5. Do you find it hard to 'find' words, particularly under pressure? Do you muddle similar words, causing hilarity amongst your friends? Do you panic when put on the spot?

You might be AMAZING at talking about topics you are knowledgeable about and comfortable with (many dyslexic people are), BUT this doesn't mean you don't relate to the above. You might benefit from accessing a Speech & Language assessment/professional, who can diagnose any difficulties and advise. Lots of School in the UK have access to these (Broomfield, J. and Dodd, B. (2011), Is speech and language therapy effective for children with primary speech and language impairment? Report of a randomized control trial. International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders, 46: 628-640. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-6984.2011.00039.x>).

Signs of Dyslexia to Look out For in Primary-aged Children

"I feel like something is stuck in my brain. Like it has cogs but they won't turn. I really want to read, I really want to be like the others. Why can't I do the things everyone else finds so easy? I feel a piece of my brain is missing".

(Charles, 7 years old)

- Your once enthusiastic, Nemo-esque, "It's the First Day of School! First Day of School!" pre-schooler, comes out of the gates in Year 2 looking dead behind the eyes.
- Even though you read the book they've sent home from school EVERY NIGHT, your child cannot recall even the simplest words, like 'said' or 'saw' or 'the', even though you know they are so bright.
- Your amazing child is incredibly observant.
- Your amazing child can recall things from years ago that you have forgotten and can describe them in detail.
- Your child cannot rhyme, rather than rhyming they probably word associate, so instead of 'brain-train' they may say 'brain-head'.
- Your child's teachers report that your child, 'lacks attention' or say they, 'must try harder' and 'listen first rather than ask questions'.
- Your child has a 'SuperPower' interest in the arts, nature, sports or sciences.
- Your child loves building (lego or Minecraft) or making things (mud pies or creating imaginative play).
- Your child feels excluded from their peers at school and friendships are hard to come by, they tend to like being with peers older or younger than them.
- But you think your child is such great company, and so do lots of other adults!
- Your child has 'melt-downs' or 'zones out' at home for no apparent reason, but you know they are exhausted and anxious over School.
- Your child may display some or all of the following: signs of visual stress, struggles to read, has illegible spelling, writes right to left, transposes b,d and spells words as they sound.
- Your child reports stomach aches or head aches and often doesn't want to go in to school.

What can I do?

1. TALK to your child. They are confused and sad and don't know what is going on. Prepare for the chat by writing a few questions about the symptoms to talk to them about. If you think their answers indicate they may have a dyslexic brain type and/or co-occurring difficulties, TELL them you think you know what is going on. Alleviate their anxieties and fears by showing them YouTube Videos (see recommended videos at the end of this Factsheet) about dyslexia and how it is something different but positive.
2. You could get a private dyslexia assessment (find a local assessor who is Level 7 AMBDA qualified to find out for definite. This is easy to do online, by typing in 'dyslexia assessors near me). But be warned, the typical cost is around £500. You can ask for an assessment to be done via school, but costs and availability of assessors may mean you are waiting a considerable amount of time.
3. You could access other professionals, via your School or G.P to ascertain the level of any co-occurring difficulties, such as ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) or APD (Auditory Processing Disorder) or visual stress, to gain access to strategies or support.
4. You could book an Appointment with the School Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator (SENCo) to discuss what provision the School could put in place for your child.
5. You could ask the SENCo to take your child's needs to the Local Authority LIFT (Local Inclusion Forum Team) Meeting to discuss their needs and get Higher Needs Funding to help the School pay for extra help or resources for them. They may gain additional funding for your child, however the school will be obliged to demonstrate that they have spent £6000 of their school's budget towards interventions for your child BEFORE they can apply for Higher Needs Funding. Be warned this does not mean that the schools have a pot of £6k that you can access for your child's needs, it is simply that schools have to prove they have used their own budget to provide support to SEN children before applying to the LEA for more. If they are successful this money may still not be ring-fenced within a schools budget for your child, it may go towards employing a Teaching Assistant to run small groups of children with SEN if deemed appropriate.
6. You could apply for an Education, Health, Care Plan (EHCP) where you and your child's school will need to provide extensive reason why your child should receive such support. An EHCP is extremely hard to come by and can involve parents taking the Local Authority to Tribunal if they feel their child is not being adequately assessed or that provision is not being provided. The good things about an EHCP is it holds schools accountable to provide the support that is named in the document – but in reality – teachers still go sick and pupils still often face an inconsistent approach in their interventions.

Signs of Dyslexia to Look out For in Older Children

"I would say that dyslexia is like an impossible puzzle. You try to connect things together – just like anybody else would...but you can't seem to find that one piece that finishes it all off. This is because our brains simply cannot focus on that one piece of the puzzle in order to start or finish. So...we ask for help...but the missing piece is in front of us the whole time, so we feel stupid and ashamed." (Morgan, 18yrs old)

- Withdrawn, confused or angry.
- Rarely remembers what you ask them to do, especially if you ask them to do a few things at once.
- Teachers say they are not trying hard enough; they say they struggle to 'put things down on paper' when it comes to written work, despite being able to tell you some great stuff about the subject verbally.
- Doesn't know 'where to start' if given a fairly 'open' task, particularly in English, or even writing a birthday card! They appear to be scared to get it wrong.
- Teachers report they act out in class and get sent out a lot, or sit quietly & do very little.
- Avoids reading or reads slowly. Even if they used to love stories as a kid, they avoid books now and are a Netflix zombie!

- Has a messy bedroom and even when you insist it's tidied, has the ability to make it look like a bomb has gone off 10 minutes later!
- Can be the centre of attention at a Party or one that friends turn to in a crisis (out of the box thinkers).
- Can read text but doesn't appear to have taken in any of the information and cannot comprehend what is written until they have read it several times.
- Writes as a 'stream of consciousness' with little punctuation or grammar.
- Struggles with concepts of time and tenses in writing.
- Has a great ability to solve problems.
- Has innovative ideas.
- Can excel in sports, public speaking, strategy games, such as chess/draughts, sciences, arts.
- Learns best visually, doodles, fidgets and talks.

What can I do?

1. Choose a good time to broach the subject with your sensitive Teen. They are confused and sad and don't know what is going on. Prepare for the chat by writing a few questions about the symptoms to talk to them about. If you think their answers indicate they may have a dyslexic brain type and/or co-occurring difficulties, TELL them you think you know what is going on. Alleviate their anxieties and fears by showing them YouTube Videos (see recommended videos at the end of this Factsheet) about dyslexia and how it is something different but positive.
2. You could ask your child's school for a dyslexia assessment, or at least one that can assess for Examination Concessions. Many Secondary Schools pick up on dyslexia that has been missed in Primary education and may approach you to agree to an assessment, but if this doesn't happen, approach the SENCo with your concerns.
3. You could access other professionals, via your School or G.P to ascertain the level of any co-occurring difficulties, such as ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) or APD (Auditory Processing Disorder) or visual stress, to gain access to strategies or support.
4. Once you have a diagnosis, discuss with the SENCo what provisions the School can put in place for your child, i.e. extra time (25%) OR 25% less work expected by teaching staff. Mind-Map note taking rather than traditional note form. Access to a reader/scribe for exams, or a laptop. All Secondary Schools are aware of what they may provide, but they may need a bit of prompting!
5. You could apply for an Education, Health, Care Plan (EHCP) where you and your child's school will need to provide extensive reason why your child should receive such support. An EHCP is extremely hard to come by and can involve parents taking the Local Authority to Tribunal if they feel their child is not being adequately assessed or that provision is not being provided. The good things about an EHCP is it holds schools accountable to provide the support that is named in the document – but in reality – teachers still go sick and pupils still often face an inconsistent approach in their interventions.

Signs of a Being a Parent/Carer of a Dyslexic Child

"I just felt so frustrated, we would be reading a book and we'd just read the word and he wouldn't be able to tell me. What was so frustrating was I remembered doing that when I was a child, but it just made things worse! The teachers denied there was anything wrong and said he would 'catch up, give him time,' but he didn't and finally I got an assessment and they couldn't deny he was dyslexic any longer. But that didn't change things, he still struggled at School."

(Danielle, 43yrs old)

- Frustration – with your child who can't seem to read the simplest of words or remember the simplest of requests.
- Frustration – with your child's teachers and school as they do not seem to understand or be able to help your child with their difficulties.
- Frustration – with yourself, as you do not seem to understand or be able to help your child with their difficulties.
- This may lead to going for long walks, screaming to an empty field, crying, blaming your child for their difficulties, shouting at teachers or curling up in a ball under the covers!
- Or it may lead to advocating & 'fighting' for your child's 'rights'. You may become known as 'that' parent/carer at the School Gates and start to be avoided by other parents and teaching staff.
- Or it may lead to over-compensating for your child. You know that they are struggling at school, so you try to make home-life as easy as possible. You know your child is becoming too reliant and this isn't helping their resilience or self-esteem, but feel you have no choice.
- You feel totally helpless, and don't know what to do, who to ask for help or where to turn

What can I do?

You must look after yourself. It is extremely stressful being a parent of a child who is struggling with school and possibly anxiety around their learning. Join online parent forums, such as [Operation Diversity](#) to blow off some steam with like-minded parents/carers and use their support. You will also find other local groups online to join. Don't under-estimate the power of support.

Learn all you can about dyslexia. Visit YouTube and watch videos, visit the websites and Facebook pages & Social Media platforms so that you can truly understand what your child is going through.

Be open to what your child tells you. It is so easy to presume things like: they have processed what you say; that they know what 'behind' means; that they know how to sequence putting on clothes and not miss putting on their tights before their shoes!

Despite wanting to help your child, and needing to be their advocate, remember at all times, being their parent comes first. They need your kindness, patience and understanding – but, be realistic, you will get frustrated, you will say the wrong things, but don't worry, or beat yourself up about it – we're all human!

Do book a meeting with your child's Head Teacher, SENCo & Class Teacher after you have armed yourself with all the information you need and after you are clear about what you want for your child. Look at any policies that your child's school has signed up to as Codes of Practice, look at their SEN pledges on their websites, talk to your child and ask what they think would help them in the classroom. In the meeting, go armed with a wish list of 'reasonable adjustments' that may be made for your child, (see Core Standards document link in Recommended Websites for advice on what you should expect) with a tick box by each and ask what the school professionals will sign up to. Get a signed copy.

If you think it helpful, ask for School to help with referrals for assessments (outlined in the Common Co-occurring Difficulties Check-List). Do not worry too much about getting diagnostic assessments unless they are for a purpose, such as medication or to get the child formally recognised as having areas, such as working memory or processing difficulties that require understanding and concessions, or perhaps as part of an EHCP application for a certain, 'most suitable' school. Focus on what is important to you – your child's happiness and progression.

Signs of a Being a Teacher of Dyslexic Children

"I really do want to help, but I feel like I am failing a few children every year. I simply don't know what to do for them. I haven't had the training. The poor things can't keep up with the rest of the pupils, so they either go out of class for interventions or sit doing very little. It's not what I wanted to achieve as a teacher."

(Miss Hayes – Year 4 Primary Teacher)

- It may be that you feel the same as Miss Hayes but your reactions depend upon how comfortable you are to acknowledge that you cannot fix the fact that you have not received the necessary training and cannot fix every child's difficulties. So, when you are faced with a child who is struggling to read and spell, and you cannot fix it, you may look outwards to 'fix' things. Your first focus may be towards the child, "you need to concentrate more," then maybe the child's parents, "are you reading enough with your child at home?", you get negative responses from the child and the parent and don't know what to try next.
- Remember, for some pupils, you simply will not be able to 'fix' their learning difficulties in your classroom alone. You have around thirty children to deal with, all with their own needs. You are not a qualified specialist in teaching dyslexic learners and you do not know how best to support their significant needs. But you can observe the child's difficulties, you can raise these to the SENCo and decide how best to support them in the classroom with simple concessions like; sitting the pupil at the front, printing off board work on specifically helpful coloured paper; instead of asking the pupil to copy from the board (particularly learning objectives). Allowing fidgeters to fidget with a small piece of blu-tac under the table or using multi-sensory equipment to aid learning as a whole class.
- You may feel like the parents/carers of the children who are struggling never seem satisfied. They are always complaining and don't seem to understand that you are doing this job because you care about children's learning!
- If you have not experienced having a child close to you with neurodiversity, you simply cannot understand the extreme emotions that parents go through. Their once happy, enthusiastic children appear to be being crushed, they come home angry and depressed and they have to 'pick them up' each and every night, after school. If you are their teacher – you are the only one they can turn to. Don't judge them as 'fussy' or 'paranoid' parents/carers, or tell them, their child will, 'catch up,' or presume that there must be something wrong at home or their parenting for the child to be struggling so much in the classroom. Dyslexia is labelled a **specific** learning difficulty because it is just that – **specific** to the classroom. The child or parent/carer is not the issue. So...

ACKNOWLEDGE parent/carers & pupil's feelings.

TAKE OWNERSHIP of the difficulties caused by the limitations of what you as a teacher and school can provide.

LISTEN – to parents/carers, they know their children better than you do.

DO WHAT YOU CAN to keep relations good with parents/carers, they are just scared for their child's future and current happiness, and this may come out sideways sometimes.

COMMUNICATE with parent/carers to give updates about progression and ask them for ideas if you are unsure about the best approach, whilst giving them yours too.

BE HONEST with parent/carers who may need to hear that their child needs more help than your school can provide so you will need to apply for funding via LIFT, Higher Needs Funding or EHCP, but more importantly, by advising about alternative provisions like Flexi-School Dyslexia or a specialist dyslexic tutor so that parents can use this pathway as an option too.

- Design your classroom to include the dyslexic pupils in your care.
- Make sure they are not sitting at the back of the room and that there are not too many distractions, such as a noisy clock, or sitting by a window.
- Help them by giving them access to blu-tac to fiddle with, give them pictures instead of text, allow them to mind map or story board or dictate ideas, rather than write a page of work.
- Empower all your pupils including the dyslexic ones, they hate feeling useless!
- Consider a dyslexic pupil's questions before dismissing them. They are 'out of the box thinkers', their questions or observations may at first appear a bit crazy, but if you take the time to consider them,

they can actually be quite brilliant, just a different way of looking at things. Great entrepreneurs, scientists and inventors started out asking 'stupid' questions.

- Design opportunities within lessons for your dyslexic pupils to excel. They will excel at any spatial, visual or kinaesthetic task. Celebrate their successes and celebrate that they probably got their successes due to having a dyslexic type of brain.
- Talk openly about the fact that brains are all different and all have their strengths and weaknesses. Be open about dyslexia, don't treat it like a hidden disease that can't be talked about. If you don't know much about it, empower yourself by going on <https://www.madebydyslexia.org/teachers/> and training yourself.
- Request an inset day with a training provider, such as Flexi-School Dyslexia, to train to gain knowledge, understanding and empower your teaching. Everyone wants to be 'that teacher' that inspires – you can be 'that teacher' that makes all the difference.

Recommended Websites

<https://www.flexi-schooldyslexia.co.uk/>

<https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/>

<http://www.thedyslexia-spldtrust.org.uk/>

<https://www.twinkl.co.uk>

<https://www.nessy.com/>

Recommended Reading

The Illustrated Guide to Dyslexia and its Amazing People – Kate Power & Kathy Forsythe

The Bigger Picture Book of Amazing Dyslexics and the Jobs they Do – Kate Power & Kathy Forsythe

Toe by Toe – Keda Cowling

The Dyslexic Advantage – Dr Brock & Fernette Eide

Mind Maps for Kids – Tony Buzan

Dyslexia; The Miracle Cure – Tony Buzan

The Gift of Dyslexia – Ronald Davis

Working Memory & Learning – Gathercole & Alloway

Creative, Successful, Dyslexic – Margaret Rooke

Dyslexia is my SuperPower (Most of the Time) – Margaret Rooke

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