
Supporting Children with Dyslexia

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What is dyslexia?

The Rose Review (2009) defines dyslexia as "a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling." Its characteristic features are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory, and verbal processing speed.

Phonological awareness is the ability to break sounds down into their simplest form. Verbal memory is the ability to remember and assign those sounds to letters. Verbal processing speed is the ability to retrieve those sounds efficiently. Working memory — retaining information in the mind while working on it — is also closely linked.

Dyslexia is best understood as a continuum rather than a distinct category. Co-occurring difficulties may appear in language, motor co-ordination, mental calculation, concentration, and personal organisation. No two dyslexic profiles are ever the same.

Co-occurring difficulties — questions to ask

The following questions can help identify co-occurring difficulties that may be creating additional barriers to learning alongside dyslexia:

- **Visual stress:** Are words blurry or do they move on the page? Is the child sensitive to bright lights or do they get headaches when reading? If yes, consider a colourimetry or Irlen assessment for Scotopic Sensitivity.
- **Working memory:** Does the child find it hard to remember multiple instructions, copy from the board, or recall facts and dates? If yes, strategies such as visual note-taking and structured routines can help.
- **Auditory processing:** Is the child distracted by background noise — a ticking clock, birds outside, an aeroplane overhead? If yes, consider a GP referral for an auditory processing assessment.
- **Attention:** Is the child forgetful, easily distracted, or does their mind feel very busy? Do they avoid difficult tasks or find it very hard to sit still? If yes, consider whether ADHD may also be a factor.
- **Speech and language:** Does the child struggle to find words under pressure, or muddle similar words? A speech and language assessment can identify difficulties and advise on support.

Signs of dyslexia in primary-aged children

- Previously enthusiastic about school but now appearing disengaged or anxious.
- Unable to recall even simple words despite nightly reading practice at home.
- Highly observant and with a strong long-term memory for detail, but struggles with reading and writing.
- Cannot rhyme — tends to word-associate instead (e.g. "brain-head" rather than "brain-train").
- Teachers report that the child lacks attention or must try harder.
- A "superpower" interest in the arts, nature, sport, or sciences.
- Loves building or making things; imaginative and creative.
- Finds friendships at school difficult; tends to connect better with older or younger peers.
- Has meltdowns or zones out at home — often exhausted and anxious from the school day.
- May display signs of visual stress; struggles to read; has illegible spelling; writes right to left; transposes b and d.
- Frequent stomach aches or headaches; reluctant to go to school.

Signs of dyslexia in older children and teenagers

- Withdrawn, confused, or angry.
- Rarely remembers instructions, especially multiple steps given at once.
- Teachers say they are not trying hard enough; struggles to "get things down on paper" despite being able to discuss subjects confidently.
- Does not know where to start with open-ended tasks; appears scared of getting it wrong.
- Acts out in class, or sits quietly and does very little.
- Avoids reading or reads slowly; cannot recall information after reading without going over it several times.
- Writes in stream of consciousness with little punctuation or grammar.
- Struggles with concepts of time and tenses in writing.
- Strong ability to solve problems and generate innovative ideas.
- Can excel in sport, public speaking, strategy games, sciences, or the arts.
- Learns best visually; doodles, fidgets, and talks through ideas.

What parents can do — primary age

- Talk to your child. They are often confused and anxious. Explain that you think you understand what is going on, and frame dyslexia as a difference, not a failing.
- Request a meeting with the school SENCO to discuss classroom support — this can begin before a formal diagnosis.
- Consider a private dyslexia assessment from a Level 7 AMBDA-qualified assessor. Costs are typically around £500, though school assessments may also be available.
- Ask the SENCO about referrals for co-occurring difficulties such as ADHD, auditory processing disorder, or visual stress.
- If needed, ask the SENCO to raise your child's needs at the Local Inclusion Forum Team (LIFT) meeting to explore Higher Needs Funding.
- If appropriate, consider applying for an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). This is a significant process but holds schools accountable for named provision.

What parents can do — older children

- Choose a calm moment to raise the subject with your teenager — prepare questions in advance and frame dyslexia positively.
- Ask the school for a dyslexia assessment, or at minimum one that can establish eligibility for exam concessions such as extra time or a reader/scribe.
- Once a diagnosis is in place, discuss with the SENCO what provisions can be put in place: extra time, reduced written output expectations, mind-mapping, laptop access in exams.
- Ask about referrals for co-occurring difficulties if these have not already been assessed.
- Consider applying for an EHCP if the level of need warrants it.

Looking after yourself as a parent

Parenting a child who is struggling at school is genuinely stressful. Seek out online parent forums and local support groups — the shared experience of other parents in the same situation is valuable. Learn as much as you can about dyslexia, and try to stay open to what your child tells you about their experience.

When meeting with school, go prepared with a clear list of concerns and a "reasonable adjustments" wish list. Ask what the school will commit to and get any agreed actions in writing. Remember that being your child's advocate and being their parent are both important — they need your kindness and patience first and foremost.

Guidance for teachers

- Observe difficulties carefully and raise concerns with the SENCO early — you do not need to solve everything alone.
- Simple classroom adjustments make a real difference: seat the child near the front, away from distractions such as a noisy clock or window.
- Print board work on appropriately coloured paper rather than asking the child to copy from the board.
- Allow the child to fidget discreetly; use multi-sensory resources across the whole class.
- Offer alternatives to written work: mind maps, storyboards, diagrams, or verbal responses.
- Acknowledge and celebrate the dyslexic child's strengths — spatial, visual, and kinaesthetic tasks are often areas where they excel.
- Talk openly with all pupils about the fact that brains are wired differently, each with their own strengths.
- Do not dismiss unconventional questions — dyslexic children are often out-of-the-box thinkers whose observations, though they may seem odd at first, can be genuinely insightful.
- Communicate honestly and regularly with parents. Acknowledge what the school can and cannot provide, and work collaboratively rather than defensively.

Recommended resources

Websites:

- British Dyslexia Association: bdadyslexia.org.uk
- The Dyslexia-SpLD Trust: thedyslexia-spldtrust.org.uk
- Made By Dyslexia (teacher training): madebydyslexia.org/teachers

Recommended reading:

- The Illustrated Guide to Dyslexia and its Amazing People — Kate Power & Kathy Forsythe
- The Dyslexic Advantage — Dr Brock & Fernette Eide
- The Gift of Dyslexia — Ronald Davis
- Dyslexia is my Superpower (Most of the Time) — Margaret Rooke
- Mind Maps for Kids — Tony Buzan