

## Understanding Dyslexia

By The Understood Team

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**Dyslexia** is a specific learning disability in reading. Kids with dyslexia have trouble reading accurately and fluently. They may also have trouble with reading comprehension, spelling and writing.

Raising a child with dyslexia is a journey. As you move through it, you'll gain a lot of knowledge about your child's challenges with reading—and about the many ways you can help her succeed at school and in life.

This overview can answer many of your basic questions. It can also lead you to more in-depth information about this common learning issue.

If you're concerned your child may have dyslexia, here are some steps you can take.

And if you've just gotten a dyslexia diagnosis or school identification, learn what you can do next.



Get a one-page fact sheet on dyslexia.

### Snapshot: What Dyslexia Is

Dyslexia is a lifelong condition that makes it difficult for people to read. It's the most common learning issue, although it's not clear what percentage of kids have it. Some experts believe the number is between 5 and 10 percent. Others say as many as 17 percent of people show signs of reading issues. The reason for the wide range is that experts may define dyslexia in different ways.

Dyslexia is mainly a problem with reading accurately and fluently. Kids with dyslexia may have trouble answering questions about something they've read. But when it's read to them, they may have no difficulty at all.

Dyslexia can create difficulty with other skills, however. These include:

- Reading comprehension
- Spelling
- Writing
- Math

People sometimes believe dyslexia is a visual issue. They think of it as kids reversing letters or writing backwards. But dyslexia is not a problem with vision or with seeing letters in the wrong direction.



Meet Elijah, a high school science whiz with dyslexia.

It's important to know that while dyslexia impacts learning, it's not a problem of intelligence. Kids with this issue are just as smart as their peers. Many people have struggled with dyslexia and gone on to have successful careers. That includes a long list of actors, entrepreneurs and elected officials.

If your child has dyslexia, she won't outgrow it. But there are supports, teaching approaches and strategies to help her overcome her challenges.

### **Dive Deeper**

- Try a unique simulation to see dyslexia through your child's eyes.
- Get answers to common questions about dyslexia.
- Explore a collection of dyslexia success stories.

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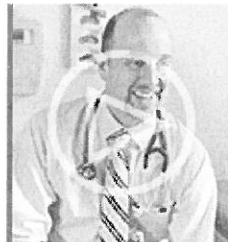
## **Dyslexia Signs and Symptoms**

Dyslexia impacts people in varying degrees, so symptoms may differ from one child to another. Generally, symptoms show up as problems with accuracy and fluency in reading and spelling. But in some kids, dyslexia can impact writing, math and language, too.

A key sign of dyslexia in kids is trouble decoding words. This is the ability to match letters to sounds and then use that skill to read words accurately and fluently.

One reason kids have difficulty decoding is that they often struggle with a more basic language skill called phonemic awareness. This is the ability to recognize individual sounds in words. Trouble with this skill can show up as early as preschool. Read about how phonological awareness, phonemic awareness and phonics are related.

In some kids, dyslexia isn't picked up until later on, when they have trouble with more complex skills. These may include grammar, reading comprehension, reading fluency, sentence structure and more in-depth writing.



Hear what a doctor discovered through his daughter's dyslexia.

One potential sign of dyslexia is when kids avoid reading, both out loud and to themselves. Kids may even get anxious or frustrated when reading. This can happen even after they've mastered the basics of reading.

Signs of dyslexia can look different at different ages. Here are some examples of signs of dyslexia:

### **Preschool**

- Has trouble recognizing whether two words rhyme
- Struggles with taking away the beginning sound from a word
- Struggles with learning new words
- Has trouble recognizing letters and matching them to sounds

See more signs of dyslexia in preschool.

### **Grade School**

- Has trouble taking away the middle sound from a word or blending several sounds to make a word
- Often can't recognize common sight words
- Quickly forgets how to spell many of the words she studies
- Gets tripped up by word problems in math

See more signs of dyslexia in grade school. Watch videos to see what reading fluency can look like in kindergarten and in grade 1, grade 2, grade 3, grade 4, and grade 5.

### **Middle School**

- Makes many spelling errors
- Frequently has to re-read sentences and passages
- Reads at a lower academic level than how she speaks

See more signs of dyslexia in middle school.

### **High School**

- Often skips over small words when reading aloud

- Doesn't read at the expected grade level
- Strongly prefers multiple-choice questions over fill-in-the-blank or short answer.

See more signs of dyslexia in high school.

Dyslexia doesn't just affect learning. It can impact everyday skills and activities, as well. These include social interaction, memory and dealing with stress.

## Dive Deeper

- Hear an expert explain how to choose books for kids with reading issues.
- Explore books to help young kids practice rhyming.
- Get strategies for building phonological awareness in your child.

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# Other Issues That Can Co-Occur With Dyslexia

Many kids have more than one learning and attention issue. There are a number of issues that often co-occur with dyslexia. There are also issues that have symptoms that can look like dyslexia symptoms. That's why testing for dyslexia should be part of a full evaluation that looks at all areas of learning.

Here are some issues that often co-occur with or may be mistaken for dyslexia:



Watch the inspiring story of Anya, who has dyslexia and ADHD.

- **ADHD** can make it difficult to stay focused during reading and other activities. Roughly 40 percent of students with ADHD also have dyslexia. But kids with dyslexia may fidget or act out in class because of frustration over reading, not ADHD.
- **Executive functioning issues** can affect different skills and areas of learning. Executive functions include organization, flexible thinking, and working memory.

Learn how executive functioning issues can impact reading.

- **Slow processing speed** can impact reading, as well as many other areas of learning. Kids who struggle with processing speed are slower to take in, process and respond to information. That can make it harder to master basic reading skills and get the meaning of what they've read.

Learn more about how slow processing speed impacts learning.

- **Auditory processing disorder (APD)** affects a child's ability to sort through the sounds she hears. This can make reading difficult. Kids with APD often have trouble recognizing the difference between letter sounds and sounding out new words.

Learn about the difference between dyslexia and APD.

- **Visual processing issues** make it hard to process what the eyes see. Kids with visual processing issues may complain of blurry vision or of letters "hopping around on the page." They may try to compensate by squinting or closing one eye. They often reverse letters when writing and struggle to stay within the lines.

Learn about the difference between dyslexia and visual processing issues.

- **Dysgraphia** can affect a child's ability to spell and to form letters and numbers. It can also make it hard to organize thoughts on paper. Many kids with dysgraphia also have dyslexia.

Learn about the difference between dyslexia and dysgraphia.

- **Dyscalculia** makes it hard to do math. Many kids have serious difficulties in both reading and math and may have dyscalculia in addition to dyslexia. Trouble learning to count is associated with both.

Learn about the difference between dyslexia and dyscalculia.

## Dive Deeper

- Find out how to help kids work through math word problems.
- Download free multisensory tools to help kids with reading and writing.
- See a list of children's books that feature characters with dyslexia and ADHD.

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## Possible Causes of Dyslexia

Researchers haven't yet pinpointed exactly what causes dyslexia. But they do know that genes and brain differences play a role. Here are some of the possible causes of dyslexia:

- **Genes and heredity:** Dyslexia often runs in families. About 40 percent of siblings of kids with dyslexia have the same reading issues. As many as 49 percent of parents of kids with dyslexia have it, too. Scientists have also found a number of genes linked to issues with reading and processing language.
- **Brain anatomy and activity:** Brain imaging studies have shown brain differences between people with and without dyslexia. These differences occur in areas of the brain involved with key

reading skills. Those skills are knowing how sounds are represented in words, and recognizing what written words look like.

The brain can change, however. (This concept is known as *neuroplasticity*.) Studies show brain activity in people with dyslexia changes after they get proper tutoring. And scientists are learning more all the time.



Hear Lola, whose son has dyslexia, open up about her own diagnosis.

### Dive Deeper

- Watch a video about dyslexia and the brain.
- Get tips on what *not* to say to your child about dyslexia.
- Download lunchbox notes for kids with dyslexia.

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## How Dyslexia Is Diagnosed

The only way to know for sure if your child has dyslexia is to have her fully evaluated, either at school or privately. School evaluations are free. Having a diagnosis (schools call it an *identification*) can allow your child to get supports and services at school. That includes specialized instruction in reading. Learn more about the difference between a school identification and a clinical diagnosis.

Before you go for the evaluation, however, it's important to rule out any medical problems that might be at play. Your child's doctor can check for vision or hearing problems.

There are a few types of professionals who can assess kids for dyslexia. These include school psychologists, clinical psychologists and pediatric neuropsychologists.

Your child's evaluator will give her a series of tests for dyslexia. He'll also assess your child in other areas to see exactly where her weaknesses lie.



Meet 11-year-old Ella, who teaches future teachers about dyslexia.

A psychologist will also look for other issues that might be getting in the way of her learning.

These include ADHD and mental health issues. ADHD often co-occurs with dyslexia. Some kids with learning and attention issues may also have anxiety or depression. (Read more about the connection between dyslexia and anxiety.)

You may be asked for a family history. You may also be asked to fill out questionnaires about your child's strengths and weaknesses. And your child's teachers may be asked to provide information on what they're seeing in the classroom.

The specialist (or the evaluation team at school) will look at all the results together to make a diagnosis. She'll also recommend ways to help your child. At school, this may result in your child getting an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or a 504 plan.

## Dive Deeper

- Find out how to decode teacher comments for signs that your child may have dyslexia.
- Learn how to request a school evaluation or a private evaluation.
- Get tips for talking to your child's teacher about dyslexia.

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## How Professionals Can Help With Dyslexia

There are a number of professionals who might help a child with dyslexia—both in and out of school. They focus on different things: instruction, intervention, school supports and services, counseling and diagnosis. There are no medications or medical treatments for dyslexia.

These professionals include:

- Reading specialists
- Speech-language pathologists
- Child psychologists
- Child neuropsychologists
- Special education teachers

There are specific teaching methods to help kids with dyslexia. You may have heard about an approach called Orton–Gillingham (OG). It was the first to use instruction that is highly structured, sequential and multisensory.

A number of research-based reading programs are based on OG. This type of instruction is known as multisensory structured language education (MSLE). Experts often consider MSLE the gold standard for teaching kids with dyslexia to read.



See a woman with dyslexia reunite with the teacher who inspired her.

One of the things this instruction focuses on is phonological awareness. This is an early language skill that's key to reading. Reading specialists and speech-language pathologists can work with kids on building this skill. They can also help with decoding, word recognition, spelling and reading fluency.



If your child is getting specialized instruction through an IEP, he'll likely be taught using these methods. An IEP or 504 plan may also include other supports, like accommodations and assistive technology to help with reading. These supports can "level the playing field," giving your child equal access to what's being taught.

If your child doesn't have an IEP or a 504 plan, the teacher may be willing to provide informal supports. Or your child may get instructional interventions through RTI.

Read more about treatment for dyslexia.

### **Dive Deeper**

- Explore a list of accommodations for dyslexia.
- Find out why audiobooks may actually help your child build reading skills.
- See examples of multisensory techniques for teaching reading.

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## **How You Can Help Your Child With Dyslexia**

You are your child's number-one source of support. From working with the school to working on reading skills, you can help give your child the tools and motivation to succeed in school and in life.

Here are just some of the things you can do:

- Get tips for teaching your child to learn sight words.
- Explore ways to improve your child's reading comprehension.
- Find ways to help your child connect letters to sounds in everyday activities.
- Discover software, apps and Chrome tools to help with reading.
- Look into where to find free audiobooks for your child.
- See what your child can say to self-advocate in grade school and middle school.
- Learn how to be an advocate for your child at school.
- Discover your child's strengths.

For more ideas, explore a collection of strategies to help with dyslexia. And be sure to visit Parenting Coach, where you'll find hundreds of age-specific, practical tips to work through social, emotional and behavioral challenges.

It's important for you to have support, too:

- Connect and trade tips with other parents in our online community.



- Reach out to experts through our free Experts Live events.
- Learn about Parent Training and Information Centers, a free local resource.

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## Key Takeaways

- Dyslexia is a lifelong, brain-based issue that makes it difficult for people to read.
- Signs of dyslexia can look different at different ages.
- There are many tools and strategies that can help your child with dyslexia succeed in school and in life.

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## About the Author



**The Understood Team** is composed of writers, editors and community moderators, many of whom have children with learning and attention issues.

## Reviewed by



**Guinevere Eden, Ph.D.**, is a professor at Georgetown University and director of its Center for the Study of Learning.

# Chat With an Expert



Expert

**Thu Sep 06 at 12:00pm ET**

# Beyond Spinners: Accommodations to Help With Focus

Keri Wilmot

RSVP

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(888) 575-7373  
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