Understanding Dyslexia

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Children each learn and develop at their own pace, and reading is no different from other skill building. It's common for kids to find reading challenging at one point or another. But if learning to read becomes an ongoing struggle that leaves a child falling behind his peers, it's possible that he has a learning disorder known as dyslexia.

What is dyslexia?

Dyslexia is most commonly associated with trouble learning to read. It affects a child's ability to recognize and manipulate the sounds in language. Kids with dyslexia have a hard time decoding new words, or breaking them down into manageable chunks they can then sound out. This causes difficulty with reading, writing and spelling. They may compensate by memorizing words, but they'll have trouble recognizing new words and may be slow in retrieving even familiar ones.

Dyslexia is not a reflection of a child's intelligence — in fact it's defined as a gap between a student's ability and achievement. Some youngsters with dyslexia are able to keep up with their peers with extra effort at least for the first few grades. But by the third grade or so, when they need to be able to read quickly and fluently in order to keep up with their work, they run into trouble.

With help and strategies for compensating for their weakness in decoding, students with dyslexia can learn to read and thrive academically. But dyslexia is not something one grows out of.

How common is dyslexia?

It is estimated that as many as one in five kids has dyslexia, and that 80 to 90 percent of kids with learning disorders have it. Dr. Sally Shaywitz, co-director of the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity, notes that many children go undiagnosed as struggles in school are incorrectly attributed to intelligence, level of effort or environmental factors.

Although experts used to say that dyslexia occurred more often in boys than in girls, current research indicates that it affects boys and girls equally.

Signs of dyslexia

A young person with dyslexia may:

- Struggle with learning even simple rhymes
- Have a speech delay

- Have trouble following directions
- Repeat or omit short words such as *and, the, but*
- Find it difficult to tell left from right

In school, children with dyslexia are likely to:

- Have difficulty sounding out new words
- Lack fluency compared to other children their age
- Reverse letters and numbers when reading (read *saw* as *was*, for example)
- Find it difficult to take notes and copy down words from the board
- Struggle with rhyming, associating sounds with letters, and sequencing and ordering sounds
- Stumble and have difficulty spelling even common words; frequently they will spell them phonetically (*hrbr* instead of *harbor*)
- Avoid being called on to read out loud in front of classmates
- Become tired or frustrated from reading

Dyslexia affects children outside of school as well. Kids with dyslexia may also:

- Find it difficult to decode logos and signs
- Struggle when trying to learn the rules to games
- Have difficulty keeping track of multi-step directions
- Struggle with getting the hang of telling time
- Find it especially challenging to learn another language
- Become incredibly frustrated, which can effect their mood and emotional stability

Social and emotional impacts of dyslexia

Dyslexia affects a lot more than reading — it can also impact a child socially. "A dyslexic person who has word-finding difficulties can have trouble with their expressive language," says Scott Bezsylko, the executive director of Winston Preparatory School, which specializes in teaching kids with learning disorders. "That has a social impact, in addition to your difficulties with reading and writing, that make you feel not so good about yourself."

Kids with dyslexia — particularly those who have yet to be diagnosed — often suffer from low self-esteem because they worry that there is something wrong with them, and are often accused of not trying hard enough to learn to read. "A lot of our work with dyslexic kids is to help them rediscover that they are smart and capable," notes Beszylko, "because they've stopped believing in themselves."

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How is dyslexia diagnosed?

If your child isn't meeting expectations for reading, as parents you can ask the school district to perform an evaluation and share the results with you. The evaluation will test your child's intellectual capacity and reading skills, to see if there is an achievement gap. It should also rule out other potential causes like environmental factors or hearing impairment.

The school should then make recommendations on how they can support your child and maximize her learning.

If you are unhappy with the quality of the evaluation, you can also secure a private evaluation by a psychologist, a neuropsychologist, a reading specialist, a speech and language therapist, an educational evaluator or a school psychologist. This external evaluation can also be used to advocate for your child and get the accommodations and services she might need.

When should a child be evaluated?

Dyslexia can begin to reveal itself at a young age, and there are preschool evaluations that look at the child's awareness of the sounds that make up words, and ability at word retrieval. However, Dr. Matthew Cruger, director of the Learning and Development Center at the Child Mind Institute, suggests waiting until kids are at least six years old and have had some formal instruction in reading to seek out a formal evaluation.

But Dr. Shaywitz notes that as soon as a gap between intelligence and reading skills is apparent — and evidence shows it can be seen in first grade — it's a good idea to get help. Schools sometimes encourage parents to wait until the third grade to see if their child truly needs an intervention, but Dr. Shaywitz argues that the earlier intervention is important not only to help kids catch up but to boost their fragile self-image, which is damaged by continuing struggle in school and comparisons with peers.

How to help kids with dyslexia

A dyslexia diagnosis does not mean your child will never learn to read. Dr. Cruger says there are a number of programs that can help, which might include these features:

- Multi-sensory instruction in decoding skills
- Repetition and review of skills
- Intensity of intervention — that is, more than being pulled out of class once a week for extra help
- Small group or individual instruction
- Teaching decoding skills
- Drilling sight words
- Teaching comprehension strategies, to help kids derive meaning from what they're reading

Reading programs that been shown to help kids with dyslexia include:

- The Wilson Method
- The Orton-Gillingham Approach
- Preventing Academic Failure (PAF)
- The Lindamood-Bell Program
- RAVE-O

Dr. Cruger points out that traditional tutoring may actually be counter-productive for a child with dyslexia, particularly if it is not a positive experience. "If the child hates the experience of reading help, it's not helpful," Dr. Cruger notes. "And it's not treating the source of the problem, the decoding weakness."

Instead, Dr. Cruger emphasizes that one of the most important ways to help kids with dyslexia is to make them more comfortable reading. This can be done in part by celebrating even small victories and accomplishments, while focusing less on correcting their errors.

> **Related: Preparing for College With Dyslexia**

Accommodations for kids with dyslexia

Kids with demonstrated dyslexia are eligible for accommodations in school. "Dyslexia robs a person of time," Dr. Shaywitz explains, "and accommodations give the time back to her." Accommodations may include:

- Extra time on tests
- A quiet space to work
- The option to record lectures
- The option to give verbal, rather than written, answers (when appropriate)
- Elimination of oral reading in class
- Exemption from foreign language learning

Other ways to support a child with dyslexia

One of the best ways to support a child with dyslexia — or any child who is struggling — is to encourage those activities that she likes and feels good at, whether it is music, joining a sports team or anything else that helps build her confidence.

To help reinforce that dyslexia is not a marker of intelligence, it can also be helpful to talk about successful people — like Whoopi Goldberg and Steven Spielberg — who have also been diagnosed with dyslexia.

Other things that may help your child with dyslexia include:

- Listening to audio books as an alternative to reading
- Typing on a computer or tablet instead of writing

- Apps that can make learning fun by turning decoding into a game
- Using a ruler to help kids read in a straight line, which can help keep them focused

Emotional support

Dyslexia can result in frustration, embarrassment, avoidance and low self-esteem as a result of difficulties performing tasks that seem to come naturally to others. Demystifying the learning disorder with your child can help him develop the tools — and resilience — necessary to manage it, both in school and in social circumstances. Some things you can do to help include:

- Discuss the specific challenges that result from dyslexia: "You know how you have a hard time reading signs or copying notes from the board? That's dyslexia."
- Acknowledge his effort and celebrate hard work, even if there are still mistakes: "I know how difficult that reading homework was. I am so proud of how hard you tried."
- Help him recognize his strengths: "You showed such great sportsmanship and teamwork in the soccer game the other night, and that was a great goal you scored!"
- Combat negative self-talk: If your child starts saying things like, "I'm just stupid," don't ignore it. Instead, check out these ideas for helping kids who are too hard on themselves.

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