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Could Your Child be Dyslexic?

In **SPECIAL NEEDS** September 25, 2017



By Don Winn

Timing, as they say, is everything. Especially when it comes to detecting dyslexia in children.

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Why is early detection so important? Basically, children must learn to read, and from then on, they read to learn. Developmentally, kids have a brief, precious window of time during which they get to learn the mechanics of reading. Past that window, they must be able to read well to continue learning. The difficult truth of the matter is that 130 years after the first medical documentation of dyslexia, it is still missed more often than not. Estimates are that 1 in 10 people is dyslexic, and most never get diagnosed.

There are varying degrees of symptomatology and a broad spectrum of affected abilities that contribute to the difficulty of diagnosis. Dyslexia occurs when the brain develops and functions differently. It's a neurological difficulty with decoding the written word, not an intelligence issue.

The written word is a code that requires the brain to match seemingly meaningless marks on a page with the sounds we've heard from birth, and not all brains are structured or wired to do this effortlessly. Dyslexia is often hereditary, and rarely gets noticed until a child enters school and begins to struggle with literacy. A dyslexic myself, I felt like a normal, happy kid until entering first grade. Then things changed quickly. I couldn't understand why I struggled with reading, writing, numbers, sequencing, and directions. I was working as hard as I could, but nothing fell into place for me like it did for the other first graders. I fell farther behind year after year. My story is not unique.

To complicate matters, dyslexia has sibling conditions, and any or all of these symptoms can be experienced:

Dyscalculia (trouble with math, numbers, sequencing, sense of direction, and time management).

Dysgraphia (illegible handwriting or printing, incompletely written words or letters, poor planning of space [running out of room], strange contortions of body or hand position while writing, struggle or inability to take notes, which requires thinking, listening, and writing simultaneously).

Dysphonia (difficulty differentiating and interpreting the different sounds of spoken words).

Dyspraxia of speech (misspeaking words, and/or halting speech.

This aspect of dyslexia occurs when the brain has problems planning to move the body parts [e.g., lips, jaw, tongue] needed for speech. The child knows what he or she wants to say, but his/her brain has difficulty coordinating the muscle movements necessary to say those words).

Dyspraxia (an issue that involves the whole brain, affecting functions such as gross [large] muscle movements and coordination, fine motor skills [pen grip, unclear hand dominance, trouble fastening clothes and tying shoes, difficulty writing on the line on paper], clumsy, accident-prone behavior due to proprioceptive challenges [telling where the body is in space], trouble telling right from left, and erratic, impulsive, or distracted behavior).

What do all these aspects have in common? They are structural brain differences that mean that reading, writing, math, spelling, and more will never be automatic. A dyslexic person will never read or perform other affected tasks quickly. No matter how brilliant a dyslexic student may be, these tasks will always be laborious. Dyslexia robs a person of their time. Without accommodation in the classroom (such as extra time for reading and writing tasks), there can be a tremendous strain to keep up.

Dyslexia and its siblings are like having a dial-up brain in a high-speed world: Our buffer gets full quickly, and that buffer has to clear before anything else can get done, sorted out, or retrieved.

If a child or student is struggling with experiences like these, please don't assume that they are lazy, unmotivated, inattentive, or unintelligent. Dyslexia is not an intelligence problem, a character issue, a nutritional deficiency, or a lack of focus. Learning disabilities do not equate to thinking disabilities.

If your preschooler has trouble identifying rhyming words, pronouncing words, calling things by the right names, following instructions with more than one step, or if they speak less or use fewer vocabulary words than their peers, screening for dyslexia is advisable. Delayed language development is often the first sign of dyslexia in preschoolers. Is there a history of reading or spelling difficulties in the parents or siblings? Dyslexia is highly heritable.

Kindergarteners and first graders with dyslexia could exhibit frustration with reading, complaining that it is too hard. (They are good at disappearing when it's time to practice reading!) They often are unable to sound out even the simplest words because they can't easily connect a sound to its matching letter. Great problem solvers and guessers, they often supply their own narrative to an illustrated book based on the pictures. They may say "kitty" or "kitten" instead of "cat," for example, even though "cat" is used in the story.

Signs of low self-esteem and shame show up early for dyslexics. Children especially experience low self-esteem in situations in which they believe they are destined for failure. Thus, kids with learning problems feel most vulnerable in settings in which their learning difficulties are obvious and exposed, such as in the classroom. Low self-esteem can show up in a number of ways:

- * Quitting or outright avoidance of difficult tasks.
- * Being disruptive or clowning.
- * Poor eye contact, slumping posture, and reluctance to talk or engage in conversation.
- * Impulsivity.
- * Becoming aggressive or bullying.
- * Negative self-talk: *I'm stupid, I can't do anything right.*

When children with dyslexia understand what's going on with their brain and are taught how to make things better, the difference in their outlook is astounding. Early detection and intervention are keys to giving kids with dyslexia a good foundation in reading, but also a good foundation for developing coping skills that will give them hope and the ability to live up to their full potential.

Don M. Winn is an award-winning author and dyslexia advocate. He has written numerous articles about dyslexia and helping struggling readers. His blog archives are available at donwinn.com.

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