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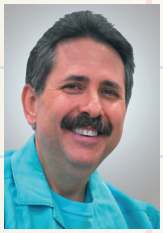
Untangling the words

Dealing with dyslexia

BY DON M. WINN



ONE IN 10 PEOPLE has dyslexia. That means more than 700 million individuals worldwide have lifelong literacy issues and the social, financial and self-esteem struggles that result.

First documented 130 years ago, dyslexia occurs when the brain develops. It is a neurological difficulty with decoding the written word, not an intelligence issue. It's often hereditary, and rarely gets noticed until a child enters school and begins to struggle with literacy.

As a dyslexic myself, I felt like an average kid until I was in first grade. I couldn't understand why I struggled with reading, writing, numbers, sequencing and directions. I felt ashamed and incapable of doing the work my teachers required.

Stories like mine are shared by thousands of fellow dyslexics.

Early diagnosis and intervention are crucial: There's a short window of time when children learn to read, and after that point they must be able to read with comprehension in order to continue learning. Indeed, literacy is key for a healthy self-concept, learning practical life skills and optimal psychosocial development.

While some dyslexics become adequate readers through traditional instruction, more than 50 percent require specialized instruction to overcome reading or processing challenges. These students respond well to a multisensory approach that includes visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile modalities.

While traditional instruction centers on memorizing the alphabet and each letter's individual sound, multisensory teaching methods allow children to gradually understand their particular learning styles and discover what lights up their brains. They discover what they are passionate about. And these teaching strategies for dyslexics benefit all beginning readers, not just the struggling ones.

If your preschooler has trouble identifying rhyming words, pronouncing words, calling things by the right names or following instructions with more than one step, or speaks less or uses fewer vocabulary words than his or her peers, screening for dyslexia is advisable.

If your school-age child struggles with reading, seek out programs through his or her school to optimize the learning environment. Help your child cultivate a love of story. Why? Reading will always be tremendously hard work for dyslexic children, but when they truly love stories, the fact that they can experience a great story makes the hard work of reading worthwhile.

I learned to love stories by reading exciting adventures about others who, like me, felt overwhelmed and struggled with confidence, but eventually overcame their challenges. Psychology calls this phenomenon discovering a hero of self-reference. Struggling readers need engaging stories with heroes of self-reference to develop a sufficient love of story to persist with their reading efforts. If they can develop tenacity and an identity as a reader, they may no longer think of themselves as a bad reader, but as someone who loves to read, no matter how much effort it requires. **C**

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Common misconceptions about dyslexia

"Children can outgrow dyslexia."
Fact: Dyslexia is a lifelong difference in the way the brain processes information.

"Dyslexia is about social anxiety or lack of maturity."
Fact: Dyslexia is not due to immaturity or social anxiety; it's a decoding problem in the brain.

"People with dyslexia see things backward; Therefore dyslexia is a vision problem."
Fact: People with dyslexia do not "see" things backward; their brains process language information differently.

"Kids with dyslexia are lazy and unmotivated. They just need to try harder."
Fact: People with dyslexia must work harder than most. They have an inherent brain difference that requires above-average efforts to read and write.—*DMW*