

Understanding Dyslexia

By Lorrie Wolf

Dyslexia is the leading cause of reading and spelling difficulties. It affects roughly 15-20% of the population regardless of color, creed, socio-economic status or gender. Dyslexia tends to run in families although the severity can vary even among siblings. Most dyslexics have at least average intelligence and many could qualify as gifted. In Kansas and Missouri, educators do not use the term dyslexia often. This is because it is a medical diagnosis requiring an educational treatment.

Dyslexia is a specific language-based learning disability and accounts for 80% of the students labeled as learning disabled. Dyslexia can be manifested in reading, writing, spelling, and sometimes in oral expression. It is unexpected in an otherwise bright person who has received adequate educational opportunities. It has been referred to as "a weakness in a sea of strengths". Dyslexia is often complicated by associated disorders such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

The brain of a dyslexic is anatomically different than a non-dyslexic brain. There have been numerous research studies done using modern brain imaging techniques to show that a dyslexic uses less efficient areas of the brain for language based tasks. With proper remediation using a multisensory, phonemic based program of direct instruction, a dyslexic brain can be made more efficient in the areas of reading, spelling, and reading comprehension. Undiagnosed dyslexics are often described as lazy, or unmotivated. The opposite is generally true as a child tries so hard to master the letters on a page. They simply do not seem to be able to easily learn to read, write, and spell despite their best effort or the best of traditional teaching methods. Granted, frustration and self-esteem issues become factors after the child has given his best effort and seen no gain or praise. While these behavioral disturbances may contribute to the situation in a classroom, it is not the cause of the learning disability.

As with any disability, early intervention is the best. Phonology and phonological awareness can be assessed without using letters or paper and pencil. Ask a young child how many words are in a sentence. Ask him how many syllables are in a word. Ask him how many sounds are in a word like cat. Play rhyming games with a child. If any of these tasks are troublesome for a child and not his peers, it may be time for some direct instruction.

However, it is never too late to provide remediation that is individualized to the strengths and weaknesses of the person with dyslexia. Remediation needs to move at the fastest pace possible, but slow enough to ensure mastery of the complexities of our language.

The national reading Panel has determined that the following five elements need to be part of ANY effective reading program. A dyslexic needs all the elements listed above, but with direct instruction versus the implicit teaching done in many classrooms.

- **Phonemic Awareness** - Explicit instruction in phonemic awareness improves a child's reading and spelling skills. A child needs to be able to segment the individual sounds within a word or syllable.
- **Phonics** - Instruction in systematic phonics produces significant benefits for students in K-6th grade, and for children having difficulty learning to read.

- **Fluency** -Guided oral reading is more beneficial than reading silently without feedback. Fluency also suggests the reading is done nearly effortlessly.
- **Vocabulary** – Words and their meanings need to be taught both directly and indirectly, using several methods. A student needs information about words’ definitions and to see examples of use in context.
- **Comprehension** -Reading comprehension improves when children are taught strategies such as determining the main idea, sequencing events, and drawing inferences. Lack of fluency appears to decrease reading comprehension.

The International Dyslexia Association has been bringing the methodologies of Samuel Orton and Anna Gillingham to teachers for over 50 years. These multisensory, sequential methods are often referred to as the Orton-Gillingham technique. The basic tenets of the Orton-Gillingham approach are that an effective program for teaching dyslexics must be systematic and logical. It must teach to the intelligence of the individual. The program must explicitly teach the structure of language and simultaneously use all the learning pathways; these pathways are visual, auditory, and tactile-kinesthetic. Using these pathways simultaneously ensures memory and learning to automaticity.

Many dyslexics have an amazing sight vocabulary of words they have memorized. But by the third or fourth grade, they just cannot store any more whole words in memory especially when the words they are encountering are longer and longer. Learning the rules of dividing words into syllables prevents the avoidance of multisyllabic words they encounter all too soon.

Many dyslexics can read but with more effort than their peers. The goal of reading is to do it automatically and with good expression and comprehension. Dyslexics need to be taught the relationship between letters and sounds, (especially in combinations involving vowels), the relationship between sounds and syllables, and syllables and words, words to sentences, sentences to paragraphs, and onward to comprehension and automaticity.

Spelling is often the biggest hurdle for dyslexics because it is a more complex task than reading. Please do not assume that a spell checker will get them through this hurdle. Spell checkers are designed to be used with someone who spells at a sixth grade level or above. You also have to recognize the word you want out of the many listed by the machine. Spelling and reading need to be taught simultaneously to our dyslexic population.

There are no quick fixes for dyslexia, but there will always be someone out there trying to sell you one anyway. Before you invest your family’s dollars and your child’s time, please check with a reputable organization such as the International Dyslexia Association (www.interdys.org), the Learning Disabilities Association (www.lidaamerica.org), the Academy of Orton-Gillingham (www.ortonacademy.org) or the International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council (www.imslec.org). Other sites of interest may be www.ldresources.com, www.schwablearning.org and www.ldonline.org .

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