

Helping children with dyslexia

The word 'dyslexia' comes from Greek and means 'difficulty with words'. It is a specific learning difficulty affecting a person's ability to read and write. It is estimated to occur in about 4–8% of the population and affects people who have an average or above average IQ. Children are either born with dyslexia or acquire the difficulty during early childhood due to hearing loss, for instance. The most common cause of dyslexia is difficulty in relating the visual form of a letter to its sound. It becomes a noticeable problem when school starts.

Is our brain to blame?

The left and right hemispheres of our brain process information in different ways. Generally, we use both sides of the brain but have a preference towards one of them. Being left- or right-sided affects the way people learn and the strategies they need to develop. The traditional school system focuses very much on the left side of our brain, with its emphasis on words, details, logical thinking and sequencing, whereas the right side of the brain, responsible for non-verbal, intuitive and creative ways of working, is often underused in the school context. People who are right-hemisphere dominant (and it is suggested that many learners with dyslexia are) will tend to be resistant to conventional teaching methods, which leave them with a feeling of frustration.

Indications of dyslexia

If a child has one or more of the following indications, they might be dyslexic. You should investigate whether the child is dyslexic by talking to their parents and sending them to a school psychologist for appropriate tests.

The primary school student:

- has particular difficulty with reading and spelling;
- puts letters and figures the wrong way round;
- has difficulty remembering tables, the alphabet, etc.;
- leaves letters out of words or puts them in the wrong order;
- often confuses 'b' and 'd' and words such as 'no/on';
- has difficulty telling left from right, the correct order of days of the week or months, etc.;
- has a poor sense of direction;
- has poor concentration;
- has problems understanding what they have read;
- takes longer than average to do written work.

What teaching methods/tools should be used?

A dyslexic person has to learn alternative approaches of learning if they want to be successful at school. These alternative approaches must be presented by the teacher. The VAKT (Visual, Auditory, Kinaesthetic and Tactile) teaching method is one that helps children remember words. Other multi-sensory methods (methods that use as many senses as possible at a time) make learning easier. Remember, children should look, listen, say and do things in the lesson in order to remember them better.

In order to help students with dyslexia teachers can try:

- not to give too many instructions at the same time;
- not to ask children to read aloud in class, unless they want to;
- to reduce copying tasks;
- to test students orally and eliminate/reduce spelling tests;
- to grade on content, not spelling or handwriting.

Dyslexic children experience failure at school much too often. Their self-esteem suffers and they start to think of themselves as stupid. It is important to recognize their efforts and praise them for their work, not only for the final product. Every child with dyslexia needs to do extra work at home. It is important to do more practice of what has been

done at school. Homework is then an effective and important tool that the teacher can use in order to help children learn more effectively.

Homework tips for teachers:

- Remember that the purpose of homework is to practise something that your students are already familiar with, otherwise it might become a highly demotivating task.
- If you write homework on the board, don't wait until the very last minute to do it, as it usually takes a dyslexic child twice as long as others to visually scan the words and write them down. It is much better to give them a ready-made note or use a highlighter and mark homework in their books.
- When copying from the board causes difficulties, a dyslexic child should be placed at the front of the class with a clear view of the board.

The following ideas are especially useful for students with dyslexia:

- guided writing – students only end stories that already have a beginning;
- writing a story – the teacher provides students with photocopied pictures and guides them with questions, e.g. Who? Where? Why?;
- reading and drawing – the teacher gives the text, and students read it and draw a picture;
- word families – the teacher gives a topic from the lesson and students write or draw as many words linked to it as they know.

Most importantly, do not allow dyslexia to be an excuse for laziness. Be understanding (the child's difficulties are not their fault) but also challenge your students and encourage them to work hard!