

Let's talk about Dyslexia

Our 'Let's talk about...' series has been designed to support parents in having conversations with their children about emotional health and literacy difficulties. Suspecting or finding out that your child has dyslexia is a difficult and emotive situation to navigate as a parent. This accompanying narrated presentation has been designed to help you understand what dyslexia is, how this might present at home and in the classroom and what steps you can take as a parent to support your child with dyslexia.

What is dyslexia?

The British Dyslexia Association explains that:

- It is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling.
- Characteristic features are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed.
- It occurs across the range of intellectual abilities.
- It is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points"

What this means is that Dyslexia is not an illness and there is no injury but it does involve a difference in the way the brain is structured. Dyslexia is a relatively common learning difficulty affecting around 10% of the population, 5% severely, which affects skills needed for reading and spelling. Dyslexia is a lifelong problem that can present daily challenges.

Terminology

Phonological awareness

Phonemes represent the smallest units of sound (like /p/ in pat or /ch/ in church. Phonological Awareness means being aware of the sound structure of words and using that knowledge to process what you see and hear. Learners with dyslexia struggle to distinguish between phonemes and therefore their reading may be slow and stilted.

Verbal memory and verbal processing speed

Verbal working memory is the short-term memory we use when we hear information and do something with it. Most people have around 6 - 9 seconds of working memory, but those with dyslexia may only have 2 - 3 seconds. This can affect their learning making it harder to:

- follow longer or multi-step instructions
- maintain focus.

Reading comprehension can also be tricky because when reading a long sentence or paragraph, it is the working memory that enables the person to hold on to and process the information read, but problems with working memory can mean that information retention is really hard.

What causes dyslexia?

The exact cause of dyslexia is not known but it results from individual differences in the parts of the brain relating to language and often processing and memory. The most common theory is the phonological deficit theory, which relates to difficulties in understanding and being able to manipulate sounds that are needed for reading and spelling.

Dyslexia does tend to run in families - if you have dyslexia there is a 40-50% chance your child will also have dyslexia.

What are the signs?

Reading is often slow and awkward, and students can lose their place and skip or repeat lines. Students with dyslexia often struggle when presented with new words as they struggle to break them down into the component parts so that they can understand them. This also impacts the ability to comprehend what is being read and therefore to extract relevant information from texts.

In terms of writing, this can sometimes be slow with poorly-formed letters because of difficulties with fine motor skills. A student's written capabilities can often appear poorer than their verbal abilities because they find it so much harder to put their ideas down on paper. Spelling can be phonetic (ie according to the sounds) and can vary - the same word may be spelled differently, even in the same piece of writing as the rules may be unknown or become muddled. Punctuation can also be forgotten as it gets lost amid all the other processes involved in writing. The organization of ideas and arguments in a piece of writing can also appear muddled for many of the same reasons.

Organisationally, dyslexic students can struggle organising themselves, so they might forget to bring in the correct sports kit or forget to go to a club at lunchtime. In terms of their work, this may also mean they struggle to organise their ideas and write them in an organised way and to finish tests on time. They might also be quite messy but having routines and checklists often help with this.

In terms of behaviour inside and outside school, constantly dealing with dyslexia and all the extra work and processing that this entails means that students can be extra tired and at times, frustrated. This can manifest itself in work avoidance and poor concentration. Students with dyslexia often struggle with low self-esteem and can think themselves less intelligent than their peers because it takes them longer to complete tasks or because they struggle with reading and comprehending texts even though dyslexia has nothing to do with intelligence. Using positive reinforcement, positive language and supporting them with strategies and technologies will also help.

What support is available?

Technology is a game-changer for any dyslexic learners as it allows students to access content in the best way for them. All of the main assistive technologies are available on school systems and through their school logins and include:

- Word - word processing software
- Text to voice - eg Immersive Reader in Word, OneNote and Chrome,
- Voice to text - eg Dictate in Word

Additional software is also available for free like Grammarly as well as online tools to help with the organisation of ideas like www.mindmapmaker.org.

Ultimately, the best way to learn is through a range of activities that address all the senses and which allow students to make connections between concepts. Supporting your child by helping them with their organisation and with revision strategies may also help.

Access Arrangements in internal and external examinations can also be granted following a formal assessment by a qualified dyslexia assessor. These can include extra time, use of a word processor or a scribe, however, there are very strict guidelines and any access arrangements have to be approved formally by the Joint Centre for Qualifications, the JCQ through school.

Where can you go for help?

If your child is experiencing literacy difficulties that is impacting their day-to-day life, we would advise contacting the school SENCo who can arrange for an assessment by a dyslexia specialist and for appropriate support to be given to your child in school. You can also speak to your child's form tutor or head of year for further support.

In addition there are a number of organisations that offer support and guidance to both parents and children about dyslexia which are listed below.

- Made by Dyslexia - <https://www.madebydyslexia.org/>
- The International Dyslexia Association - <https://dyslexiaida.org/>
- Understood.org - <https://www.understood.org>