

Is Your Child A Struggling Reader?

Do You Think They Could Be Dyslexic?



DYFFeRENCE
makers

In 2019, our son was diagnosed with dyslexia.

As a mother, I learned first hand how overwhelming this whole process can be. As a former teacher, I couldn't believe how helpless I was. I needed to know as much as I could to help my son. I have spent hundreds of hours researching anything and everything to do with dyslexia. Ultimately, this lead to me becoming trained and certified in the Orton-Gillingham method of instruction.

By no means do we have everything figured out. We have had lots of trials and still continue to have them. But, we want to help you help your child. To save you from some of the struggles we endured simply because we didn't know any better.



First of all: What is Dyslexia?

According to the International Dyslexia Association, dyslexia is a neurological condition caused by different wiring in the brain. The Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity defines dyslexia as “an unexpected difficulty in reading for an individual who has the intelligence to be a much better reader. This difficulty on phonological processing (the appreciation of the individual sounds of spoken language) affects the ability of an individual to speak, read, spell and, often, learn a second language.

Understood.org is a great website and has a simple explanation when talking to children about dyslexia...*“I know you really struggle with reading and sometimes the words just don't make sense. This difficulty is called dyslexia — a big word to explain why some kids and adults find it hard to read, write and spell. You're just as smart as other kids, if not smarter, but your brain just works in a different way. With the proper instruction, dyslexia won't keep you from being successful.”*

While there is no cure for dyslexia, with appropriate teaching methods, students with dyslexia can learn successfully. Research indicates that dyslexia has no relationship to intelligence. However, some say the way people with dyslexia think can actually be a benefit in achieving success.



Here is a fascinating video explaining the differences between a dyslexic brain, and a brain without dyslexia.

<https://www.understood.org/articles/en/video-dyslexia-and-the-brain>





Dyslexia Facts

- People with dyslexia have trouble decoding (matching the letters they see on the page with the sounds those letters and combinations of letters make).
- While people with dyslexia can be slow readers, they often, surprisingly, are very fast and creative thinkers with strong reasoning abilities. Dyslexia occurs at all levels of intelligence—average, above average and highly gifted. There are many gifted, successful people with dyslexia who are at the top of their fields.
- One in five people have some form of dyslexia (affecting 20 percent of the population and representing 80 – 90 percent of all those with learning disabilities). Dyslexia affects a comparable number of boys and girls.
- According to The Barbara Bush Foundation, “More than half (54%) of American adults read below a sixth-grade level. About 43 million Americans—nearly one in five adults—read below a third-grade level, and only 10 percent of all adults in need of literacy support are currently receiving services.”
- It’s not uncommon for a child with dyslexia to have an immediate family member who also has this condition. It’s estimated 49 percent of children with dyslexia have a parent with dyslexia. It’s also not unusual for two or more children in a family to have dyslexia.
- According to Reading Rockets, “Research suggests that 35-40% of students will learn to read relatively easily or even effortlessly with broad instruction, but that the majority (60%-65%) of students require explicit and systematic instruction to learn how to read.” (For more information see Nancy Young’s Ladder of Reading).
- Children at risk for reading failure can be identified even before kindergarten. Shortfalls in phonological awareness, rapid automatized naming (naming numbers, colors or shapes quickly), verbal working memory and letter knowledge have been shown to be precursors of dyslexia in children as young as age three.
- Research has shown that brain plasticity decreases through childhood. It takes four times as long to intervene in fourth grade as it does in late kindergarten (NICHD) because of brain development and because of the increase in content for students to learn as they grow older.
- Dyslexia exists all over the world and in all languages. But it often takes longer to pick up on reading issues in kids who are bilingual than in their peers.

Our Struggle with Dyslexia

For us, one of the biggest signs of our son struggling in school was him becoming overcome with anxiety. We knew something was going on, but we just didn't know what.

Our son became great at “faking it” until the 3rd grade. In the 3rd grade, there is a transition from learning to read, to reading to learn. This is where “faking it” no longer helped him in school. Looking back, there were so many “red flags.” If we had been aware of them then, we would have saved numerous days of dread and despair.

Below are some common characteristics of dyslexia compiled from a few different sources. Most people have one or two of the following characteristics, however, a person with dyslexia usually has several of these that persist over time and interfere with their learning.

Oral Language Difficulties Associated with Dyslexia

•Learning to talk and pronounce words later than peers their age

Our son, Stapleton was very difficult to understand until he was 2 ½-3 years old. Our pediatrician at the time said it was probably because he got his teeth in late, and your tongue works together with your teeth for you to be able to talk.

•Struggles with acquiring vocabulary or using age appropriate grammar

An example would be talking like a baby past the age of appropriateness, not because you want to, but because you can't pronounce the words correctly. Stapleton was in speech therapy for almost 3 years.

•Trouble with following multi-step directions

Stapleton could never get past the first step in a set of directions, he still has to do one task at a time. Before we knew Stapleton had learning differences, we would get so frustrated with him for “not following directions.”

•Confusion with before/after, right/left and the concept of time

Stapleton almost always had trouble with his shoes being on the correct foot.

•Learning the alphabet, nursery rhymes, songs, telephone numbers and address can be difficult

Stapleton was not able to learn our phone number until he was in the fourth grade.

•Understanding concepts and relationships

Stapleton struggles in not only reading, but other subjects as well. When kids get to third grade, everything changes. You go from learning to read, to reading to learn. This is the age when teachers want you to do more independent work, read your textbook and answer the questions to go along with the subject. You need to be able to read to understand every subject at this age. Which all proves very difficult if you cannot read in the first place.

He also has severe ADHD, so everything compounds on itself. Sometimes his brain is going so fast, he can not concentrate on the task at hand to be able to understand the concept. Which of course, makes everything worse.

•Word retrieval or naming problems

Stapleton always uses the wrong words and calls people the wrong names. His cousin Carson is now also known as “Carlos.” So next time you get called the wrong name, don't take offense, that person could be dyslexic.

Reading Difficulties Associated with Dyslexia

•Learning to read

Stapleton had/has no interest in reading and often complained it was “boring” and he “hated” it. Which, I don’t blame him; I avoid things I’m not successful at.

•Identifying or generating rhyming words, or counting syllables in words (phonological awareness)

Stapleton could tell you that two words rhymed, but couldn’t produce a rhyme. Example:

Me: Do fox and box rhyme?

Stape: Yes

Me: Can you tell me two words that rhyme?

Stape: What about sock and hop?

•Hearing and manipulating sounds in words (phonemic awareness)

This is very difficult for our son, as well as most others with dyslexia.

An example of phonemic awareness would be ...the word is mat, change the /m/ (sound) to /c/ (sound), which would change the word to cat.

•Distinguishing different sounds in words (phonological processing)

For some, it is hard to differentiate sounds they hear.

For Example: Think ship vs. chip or van vs. fan, they sound very similar but obviously have completely different meanings.

•Learning the sounds of letters (phonics)

This is especially difficult for our son to remember the sounds of the letters when he is spelling.

•Remembering names and shapes of letters, or naming letters rapidly

It takes my son awhile to process names of letters. If he is under pressure, he gets them incorrect. Remembering math facts is also extremely difficult for my son as well (dyslexia affects more than “reading”).

•Transposing the order of letters when reading or spelling

When our son would read sometimes, he would tell us the words were moving on the page. Think of the word “left” being read as “felt.”

•Misreading or omitting common short words

Our son frequently skips small words such as “the.” or sees the “th” and says a different “th word” such as they, them, or this. Which obviously changes the meaning of the sentence, resulting in poor fluency.

•Stumbles through longer words

This is when our son would look at the picture or make up a “creative” word to use instead. Now he utilizes his decoding tools he has been taught to try to figure out a word.

•Poor reading comprehension during oral or silent reading, often because words are not accurately read

Through the years, I bet our son spent hundreds of hours pretending to read during “stamina reading” time at school. Now he is able to utilize audiobooks (Learning Ally) which has been life-changing!

•Slow, laborious oral reading

Reading out loud can be absolute torture for those with dyslexia. One of Stapleton’s biggest meltdowns was the day his third grade class was supposed to “buddy read” with a kindergarten class. He knew he would be humiliated and was worried the kindergarten student would know how to read better than him.

Written Language Difficulties Associated with Dyslexia

•Putting ideas on paper

Writing in itself is a very complex process. One has to not only gather their thoughts, but then decide how to express their thoughts into a complete sentence. You have to put these thoughts into words in a way that makes sense, all the while spelling the words with the symbols that represent the sounds in each word.

• Proofreading

Our son has a terrible time reading what he has written, let alone deciding if it is correct or not.

•Frequent spelling mistakes

Spelling (encoding) is especially hard for our son, as well as most dyslexics. He still confuses b, d, p and q, he often spells "dad" as "bad".

It is also hard for him to remember all the spelling rules. Did you know, in the English language, there are 9 different ways to say long /e/ sound (decide, breeze, peach, these, happy, key, brief, and receipt)?

Other Common Symptoms That Occur With Dyslexia

- Difficulty naming colors, objects, and letters rapidly, in a sequence (RAN: Rapid Automated Naming)
- Weak memory for lists, directions, or facts
- Needs to see or hear concepts many times to actually learn them
- Distracted by visual or auditory stimuli
- Downward trend in school performance
- Inconsistent school work
- Teacher says, "If only she would try harder" or "He's lazy."
- Relatives that may have/had similar problems

Common Coexisting Disorders

Dyslexia is different for every individual; it ranges in severity. Our son has multiple coexisting disorders with his dyslexia. However, other individuals may only struggle in one area.

•Dysgraphia (Handwriting)

Poor or slow handwriting; difficulty copying

•Dyscalculia (Math)

Difficulty memorizing and retrieving math facts; frequent calculation errors

•ADHD (Attention)

Variable attention; distractibility; impulsivity; hyperactivity

•Dyspraxia (Motor Skills)

Difficulty planning and coordinating facial muscles to produce sounds

•Executive Function/Organization

Misplaces items; poor sense of time; messy room



Should I Get My Child Evaluated For Dyslexia?

When we finally got a diagnosis, we were almost relieved! As crazy as it sounds, after months of struggling to know how to help our son, a diagnosis was a crucial step in the right direction.

It is hard to come up with an effective solution if you don't know the extent of the problem. When a student is having difficulties with reading and spelling, an evaluation is important for three reasons.

1. Diagnosis

An effective evaluation identifies the likely source of the problem. It rules out other common causes of reading difficulties and determines if the student's strengths and weaknesses fit the definition of dyslexia. The evaluation report should be conducted by a licensed professional to provide the documentation necessary to determine eligibility for special services, including special education. The specific guidelines for determining eligibility are based on federal regulations set forth by the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). A good place to start research for a licensed professional (for evaluations) in your area is through Decoding Dyslexia (www.decodingdyslexia.net).

My son is dyslexic, when my daughter was making similar mistakes, I had her evaluated as well. She had different strengths and weaknesses and the psychologist was able to determine she didn't have dyslexia, but a Language Processing Disorder.

2. Intervention planning

An effective evaluation is helpful in deciding what the student's exact needs are. Students who are diagnosed with dyslexia need a specialized approach to reading instruction to be successful.

Since dyslexia affects everyone differently and there are differing severities, the remediation may be different for each individual.

It is crucial that the instruction begins at the student's current reading level, rather than at the student's current grade level. It would be pointless to have started my son on a third grade reading level, when he was diagnosed since he was only at a Kindergarten level of reading. Most reports from a psychologist will have recommendations on where to start your child.

3. Documentation

An effective evaluation documents the history of the student's learning disability. This helps to determine eligibility for special services, including special education. If your child is in school, documentation would be necessary for an IEP (Individualized Education Plan).

A student who receives special education services is entitled to modification of curriculum, classroom accommodations, specialized instruction, and related services such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy and/or counseling. An appropriate IEP can be a "game changer" and level the playing field.

Documentation can also be important for obtaining accommodations in college or in the workplace.

A photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, a child with light brown hair is seen from behind, sitting at a wooden desk with a white sheet of paper. To the right, another child's hands are visible, holding a pen. In the background, several other children are seated at desks. One child in the middle ground has their right hand raised high. The classroom has a wooden wall and a green chalkboard on the left. There are plants and a shelf with books on a table in the background.

Be the Squeaky Wheel

While dyslexia can not be cured, with appropriate instruction you can promote reading success and alleviate many difficulties associated with schoolwork.

Early intervention is key. Children who are poor readers at the end of first grade almost never acquire average-level reading skills by the end of elementary school (Overcoming Dyslexia; Shaywitz). The longer you wait, the further behind your child will get.

Throughout this process, we were told numerous times “Let’s wait and see how he does in the next few months and then we can go from there,” or, “He’s still improving, he’s fine,” or even, “dyslexia isn’t really a thing anymore.” Don’t wait!! Ask questions, be the “squeaky wheel!”

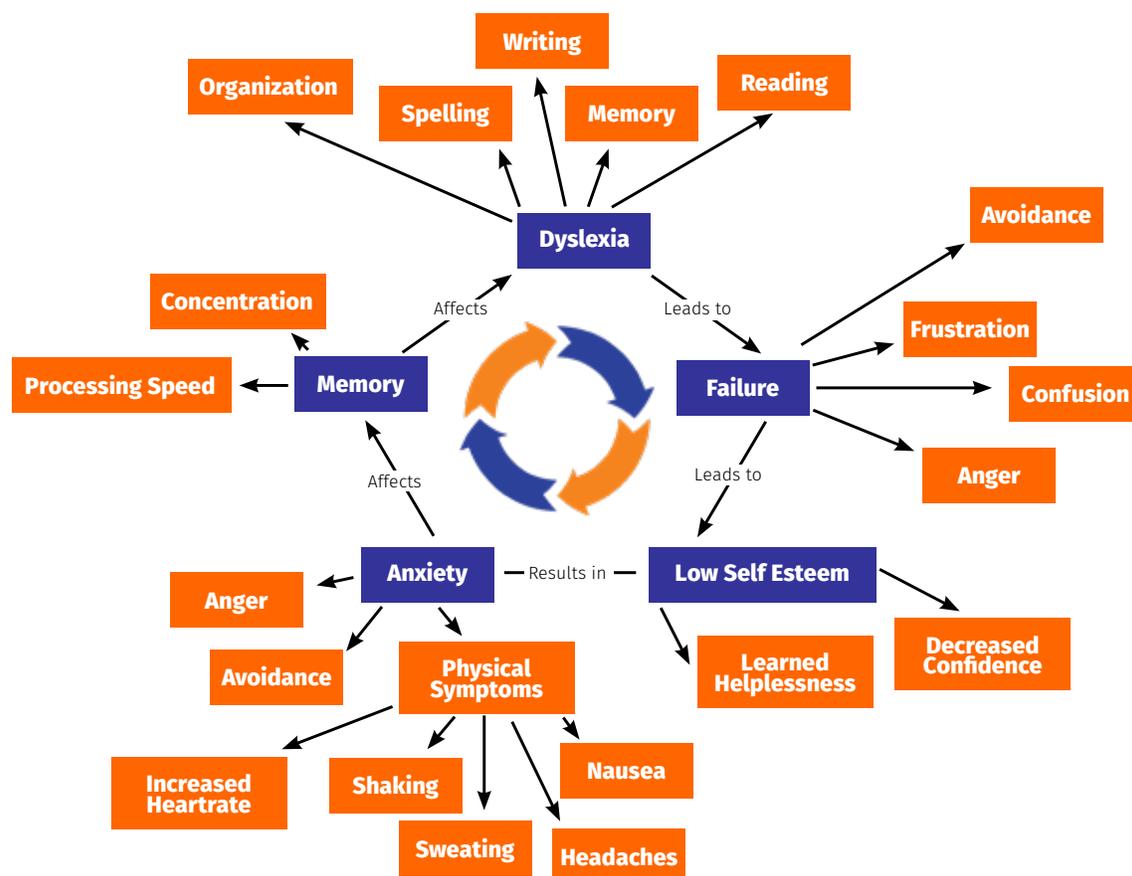
Undiagnosed dyslexia (as well as other related learning disabilities) can lead to emotional distress, frustration, and low self-esteem.

In turn, this can result in learned helplessness, (the belief a bad situation is unchangeable or inescapable) anxiety, and/or depression. The graph below perfectly shows the vicious dyslexia/anxiety/self esteem cycle.

J.C. Abrams stated, “The vast majority of children with learning disabilities have some emotional problem associated with the learning difficulty,” and, “Constant failure and frustration may lead to strong feelings of inferiority, which in turn, may intensify the initial learning deficiency”.

This is very true for our experience with dyslexia. This graph perfectly represents my son’s lowest of lows. The cycle of constantly feeling like he was failing, becoming anxious, frustrated, confused and exhausted. No wonder he wanted to avoid school at all costs. Now think of all the undiagnosed kids who are acting out, what are the underlying causes? (graph from ready4success.com.au)

Dyslexia-Anxiety-Self Esteem Cycle



Common Strengths Associated with Dyslexia

•Great problem solvers...thinking outside the box... seeing the “bigger picture”

We were redoing our flower beds in front of our house and the bags of mulch were too heavy for Stapleton to carry. He disappeared for a while and came back with a contraption he had created using his snow sled and some rope. He put the mulch on his contraption and was able to drag it through the yard to the flower bed. He was so proud of himself!

•Terrific imagination in writing

Writing is a trigger for Stapleton. It takes him a long time to write out a sentence, and he absolutely hates it (even more than reading). When we discovered he could write stories using talk to text, the narrative changed. His stories are endless, creative and imaginative.

•Strong memory for stories

Stapleton can remember all of the Star Wars Characters, knows which movie they are in, and can tell you everything about the series. We often wonder how he can remember something so complex, but can't remember common words.

•Excellent vocabulary and creative ideas

I feel like Stapleton's vast vocabulary was one the biggest barriers to getting him properly diagnosed. We heard numerous times, "He's so smart," or "He's very bright," so dyslexia didn't even seem to be considered.



There are so many times my husband and I have said, “You don’t know, what you don’t know,” throughout the past three years.

We have gone through so many emotions and “if only” statements (if only the schools were able to help my child; if only he was identified earlier, if only ALL teachers were aware and trained in the Science of Reading, if only the school system would stop using ineffective teaching practices, etc.).

Maya Angelou said, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” This is a very common quote in the literacy world, but it is so true. I want to advocate and help others know, so we can all do better! As the parent of a dyslexic child, I want to help as many people as I can. I want to help parents know what to look for. I want to help teachers get trained in the Science of Reading. And most of all, I want ALL children to have the same opportunity to read so they can be successful in whatever adventure they choose.



After many years of struggling to find help for our son, Stapleton, we decided to create a non-profit called Discover the Dyfference, Inc. Through our non profit and our program, Dyfference Makers, we will help provide the necessary tools for struggling readers and families of children with dyslexia to help them in all areas of life, including

education, family, mental health and well being. We offer an online education platform and support group. **We invite you to join our free private Facebook community at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/dyfferencemakers/>.**