

# THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids: A Letter for Parents by the NYU Child Study Center



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## DEFINING DYSLEXIA

Cindy says that school was very frustrating this year, and she comments that "second grade is too hard." She talks about the kids in her class who are better readers than she is, and she wishes she could read chapter books just like her friends. Cindy can't sound out words, and when she reads aloud it sounds choppy and hesitant. Cindy has lots of ideas and information to share and to write about, but sometimes she writes an overly simple response to avoid using words that she can't spell, or she spells words using only the beginning or ending sounds.

### **What is dyslexia?**

Often, we hear that people with dyslexia "see words backwards"; for example, reading "was" when the printed word is *saw*. However, only a very small percentage of individuals who have dyslexia actually have this type of visual perceptual deficit. Primarily, dyslexia is a specific language-based learning disability that affects how an individual sequences and blends sounds into meaningful words, an ability also known as phonological processing or phonological awareness. Dyslexia is a specific type of reading disorder; individuals with dyslexia have difficulties recognizing, pronouncing, spelling, and writing words. As a consequence, they often have trouble in school because they can't read storybooks, literature, or their textbooks. They read much less frequently, which can limit the growth of their background knowledge and vocabulary. Despite difficulties with reading, most people with dyslexia have well-developed intelligence.

### **What do researchers tell us about dyslexia?**

Researchers who study brain structure and function have identified differences in brain activity in proficient readers versus dyslexic readers. These differences occur in three brain areas – the parietotemporal, occipitotemporal, and frontal regions.

Researchers have developed techniques to diagnose and treat dyslexia. An assessment that reviews a child's thinking ability, language development, motor and sensory motor skills, and visual and auditory memory is crucial to identifying a child's learning strengths and weaknesses. Academic skills should also be assessed to figure out whether a child is experiencing specific difficulties with sequencing sounds, reading, and spelling. Based on analysis of these results, dyslexia can be diagnosed and remediated.

### **Developmentally, what are the signs and symptoms of dyslexia?**

The signs and symptoms of dyslexia change as an individual grows and develops.

#### In early childhood and during the preschool years

- history of delayed acquisition of language
- difficulty pronouncing words
- difficulty rhyming
- difficulty recalling the right word (also referred to as word retrieval)
- difficulty learning colors, numbers, or the letters of the alphabet
- loves having stories read to him/her

#### During kindergarten and first grade

- difficulty identifying the separate speech sounds within a word
- difficulty mastering sound/symbol associations
- difficulty sounding out simple words
- strengths in higher-level thinking and reasoning
- excellent comprehension of stories that are read aloud to the child

#### In elementary or middle school

- speech may not be fluent
- trouble finding the right words to express a concept or name or object
- difficulty reading or pronouncing unfamiliar words
- continued difficulty acquiring reading decoding skills
- difficulty reading "function" words, such as *that* or *an*
- difficulty with spelling
- letter reversals (b/d), inversions (m/w), transpositions (felt/left) and substitutions (house/home)
- strength in conceptualization, imagination, abstraction
- strength in areas not dependent on reading, such as hands-on science experiments or math calculations

### In young adults and adults

- the mechanics of reading and spelling continue to require great effort
- mispronunciation of words
- difficulty retrieving words
- improved reading accuracy
- continue to lack reading fluency and speed
- persistent difficulty with spelling
- difficulty learning a foreign language
- strength in reasoning and in the ability to express ideas

### **How is dyslexia treated?**

Treatment of dyslexia involves modifications of teaching methods and careful choice of class or school placement. Early intervention is essential to ensure adequate instruction that allows a child to get enough practice with basic foundational reading skills. Dyslexic readers require frequent, high-quality instruction with a qualified teacher or learning/reading specialist and continuous guidance. Multi-sensory, structured reading, and spelling programs provide systematic, carefully sequenced instruction that is known to be successful. Multi-sensory instruction simultaneously combines hands-on learning, listening, visualizing, and feeling the mouth actions that produce sounds. Teaching a child how sounds blend together to form a whole and how the whole can be broken down into its component parts – word analysis and synthesis – is critical.

### **What are strategies that the student with dyslexia needs to develop?**

Systematic and direct training and instruction should include: phonemic awareness – identifying sounds of spoken language; phonics – correspondence of sounds with written letters; decoding – sounding out words; spelling; automatic sight word recognition – use of the principles of one word to read another; reading fluency; vocabulary development; reading comprehension strategies; and coordination of reading, spelling, handwriting, and written expression.

### **What are some tools that my child with dyslexia might need?**

Make sure your child receives all the necessary accommodations or modifications so she can demonstrate all that she knows: by utilizing recorded books that she can listen to while she reads the written text; by obtaining extended time on tests that require reading; and by using a reader or scribe on tests as your child develops the necessary skills for decoding and spelling.

### **How can I help my child who is dyslexic?**

Parents are important advocates, and home is an ideal place for practice and reinforcement. Parents can play a strong and active role in helping their children to become successful, fluent readers. Enjoy books together and have magazines and books readily available. Children need to be exposed to fiction and non-fiction books that are interesting, easy, and fun to read to enhance their motivation. Be a model yourself by making reading time a family activity. Support your child as he or she reads. Practice is essential to become a skilled reader.

**DO** let your child pick books he thinks might be fun to read, spend 15-20 minutes nightly reading aloud to your child and listening to your child read to you. When your child sees a difficult word, you can encourage him to sound it out or quickly read the word for your child so that the story is not disrupted. Make it easy for your child to gather meaning from the story or text. Support her by commenting about the different characters, situations, and illustrations. Summarize main ideas, make inferences, and generate questions as you read. Relate the story to your child's previous knowledge and experiences.

**DON'T** force your child to read aloud in class or in public.

Children with learning disabilities such as dyslexia have certain rights protected by law. Help your child by getting an extensive evaluation and treatment through your local school district. If that service is not available, find a child development center or reading specialist who can help you.

### **References**

Overcoming Dyslexia by Sally Shaywitz; Reading, Fluency and the Brain by Maryanne Wolf; To Read or Not to Read by Daphne Hurford; The International Dyslexia Association: <http://www.interdys.org>

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### **ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER**

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention, and treatment of child and adolescent psychiatric disorders. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with various disorders including anxiety, depression, ADHD, learning or attention difficulties, Autism, eating disorders, and trauma and stress-related symptoms. We offer a number of treatment studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916 or visit <http://www.aboutourkids.org/professionals/research>.

If you or your child needs immediate assistance, mental health professionals are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by calling 1-800-LIFENET (1-800-543-3638), a program of the Mental Health Association of New York City. Help is available in several languages: Spanish: 1-877-298-3373, Chinese: 1-877-990-8585. For other languages, ask for a translator.

For more information on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, [AboutOurKids.org](http://AboutOurKids.org).

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