

Understanding Dyslexia

Information for Parents/carers Concerned that their Child might have Dyslexia

What is dyslexia?

Dyslexia is a very commonly used term taken to mean a lot of things such as:-

- Problems recalling instruction
- 'Scattiness' and disorganisation
- Poor concentration and attention
- Writing letters back to front.
- Seeing letters 'swimming' on the page.
- Problems writing thoughts onto the page.

Some or all of these problems can be spotted in the learning development of children with dyslexia. Some children could have one or more of these problems but not have dyslexia.

How do experts define dyslexia?

In a nutshell, a child has dyslexia if s/he has severe and on-going difficulties in learning to read and/ or spell despite having received quality teaching of a dedicated reading/spelling programme that is proven to accelerate progress in most children with reading and/or spelling difficulties.

Here is the definition of dyslexia provide by the Division of Education and Child Psychology of the British Psychological Society (1999).

'Dyslexia is evident when accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling develops very incompletely or with great difficulty. This focuses on literacy learning at the word level and implies that the problem is severe and persistent despite appropriate learning opportunities.'

"Identifying and Teaching Children and Young People with Dyslexia and Literacy Difficulties" is an independent report that was compiled by Sir Jim Rose to the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, June 2009. The report states that dyslexia is

". a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling."

Children and young people of widely varying intelligence can have dyslexia according to the definitions above. It is thought that children who have dyslexia have problems

with phonological awareness (realising how words are broken into separate sounds) short term memory problems especially regarding storing sound information and processing it.

Does my child need to be tested for dyslexia?

There are no special tests for checking whether a child has dyslexia or might develop dyslexia. However, we know that some children with speech and language difficulties, some types of visual problems, hearing problems and/or co-ordination difficulties might be at risk of developing dyslexia. Children with short-term memory and/or auditory processing difficulties might also develop dyslexia.

What matters is that children's difficulties with learning word reading and/or spelling are spotted as early as possible and that the school immediately targets the child with dedicated teaching to help him/her make progress.

Children's word reading and/or spelling problems should not be referred to as dyslexia unless the child has fully experienced a word reading and/or spelling programme that has been taught in a way that is known to help children with literacy difficulties to make good progress. This programme should be delivered over time. If the child continues to have persistent and severe difficulties in acquiring whole word reading and/or spelling skills then it is likely s/he has dyslexia.

Does my child need to see a specialist teacher or Educational Psychologist?

Schools if they need extra advice might wish to consult with a specialist teacher to find out if the programme provided for the child is suitable and is being taught appropriately. The specialist teacher or educational psychologist can then help to consider if the child has dyslexia and what sort of programme the child needs and how literacy based tasks in the classroom can be adapted to enable the child to participate and learn. In order to do this the specialist teacher will need to see school records of the child's reading and spelling performance over time and to check the quality of the programme and its delivery. It will also be important to find out about how the child has engaged with the programme and what his/her attitude and motivation to learning is like.

Does my child need to be taught by a specialist teacher?

Children with dyslexia should not require teaching from a specialist teacher. The majority of children with literacy difficulties are expected to make good progress if they engage with a word reading and spelling programme that is known to be successful and is taught well. As mentioned in Sir Jim Rose's report, such programmes can be taught effectively by a class teacher or a teaching assistant. It is important that the child's results are recorded over time to ensure progress is being made. Schools providing these programmes should check the quality of the teaching to ensure the programme is being delivered properly. This can be done by a teacher in the school observing how the programme is taught or by the school asking a teacher from another

school to do this if that teacher has more experience in delivering teaching and spelling programmes to children with literacy difficulties.

Does my child need an Education Health & Care Plan?

Children with dyslexia should not require an Education Health & Care Plan. EHCPs are likely to be necessary for children with the most severe difficulties and very few children meet this criteria. What is important is that the child's special educational needs are identified and provision helps the child to make progress. There is a clear process that schools follow from when literacy difficulties are identified.

Schools frequently record how well a child is performing in the curriculum. These records along with the observations of the teacher, should enable early identification of literacy difficulties. Information from parents about the about the child's reading and spelling at home but also about any medical information concerning hearing, speech, language development, and vision is important to the teacher in detecting whether a child is likely to have problems with literacy.

As soon as a child is seen to be struggling with literacy, the school should provide additional teaching support aimed at boosting the child's rate of progress. This stage is usually referred to as Wave 2 and consists of small group support with more opportunities than other children to learn letter-sound correspondence and to practice sound blending and whole word recognition.

If the child's progress continues to cause concern, then s/he should be supplied with what is usually known as Wave 3 support. This support should consist of:

- A highly structured programme for teaching phonics and whole word reading. The programme should have proven success in accelerating progress for children with word reading and/or spelling difficulties.
- The programme should be taught at least 3 times per week within short sessions of approximately 15 minutes.
- Children should not move through the programme until they have consolidated skills being taught in the present. Previously acquired skills should be revised often to ensure the child has secured them.
- A teacher or teaching assistant should teach the programme on a 1 – 1 or a 1-2 basis and the school organise occasional observation of how the programme is being delivered to ensure quality teaching.
- A base line of the child's reading and spelling skills should be taken and a re-test of those skills should be taken approximately six months later (or according to the programmes instructions) to ensure the child is making progress.
- The school should consider consulting with another professional, such as a specialist teacher or educational psychologist, in case progress records show

under performance. These other professionals might identify other learning difficulties that are restricting progress. They will also be able to advise on the programme and whether the child requires other forms of support, such as spelling aids, adapted reading material, peer reading support, in literacy based classroom tasks.

What is important is that the child's learning needs are identified and provision is put in place that enables the child to make progress. The rate of progress the child makes should be reasonable when his/her strengths (including attitude, motivation etc.) and difficulties are taken into account along with the measure taken by the school to reduce barriers to progress.

What can I do as a parent?

It can be a very worrying experience for parents (and carers) to notice that their child has literacy difficulties.

So that your child is as motivated and resilient as possible to deal with these difficulties, it is obviously beneficial to listen to your child's worries but to also encourage practice with word reading and spelling in small doses. Celebrate your child's progress, no matter how small and try to encourage good learning behaviour as a way of keeping tension and anxiety under control.

Keep in contact with your child's class teacher and the school's special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCo).

Ask questions about your child's progress. How often are his/her reading and spelling monitored and what are the results showing? You should ask about the extra help your child is receiving – is s/he following a Wave 3 programme and how often is this taught? How is your child helped to read and spell in every day class lessons?

If you continue to be concerned about your child's progress, ask for a meeting with the school's SENCo to discuss your child's learning needs and to ask if they are being met in the best ways possible. Ask if the school is following any advice provided by other professionals with good knowledge of dyslexia.