

## **HELP FOR DYSLEXICS!**

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### **Introduction**

#### **(i) Definition of Dyslexia**

Dyslexia is defined as 'a complex neurological condition which is constitutional in origin. The symptoms may affect many areas of learning and function, and may be described as a specific difficulty in reading, spelling and written language. One or more of these areas may be affected. Numeracy, notational skills (music), motor function, organisational skills may also be involved.' (British Dyslexia Association 1995:9).

Dyslexia occurs despite normal teaching and is independent of socio-economic background or intelligence. It is however, more easily detected in those with average and above average intelligence. Dyslexia is particularly related to mastering written language though oral language may be affected to some degree.

#### **(ii) Signs of Reading / Spelling Difficulties**

Dyslexics have difficulties in organising sounds and symbols into their correct sequence for reading and spelling (Ostler 1991:27). A dyslexic's difficulty in learning to read is due to poor perception of symbols and a weak sequential memory. He needs to be able to recognise and recall letters (visual perception) and give correct sounds to letters and letter clusters (auditory perception). In addition, there is a need to get the letters in the right order (sequencing) and letters have to be in a particular way (orientation). Another problem may be association of meaning with the written word. Speffing poses a greater problem for dyslexics since they have inefficient visual memories. Moreover, spelling requires 100% accuracy, whereas, reading doesn't. The following are some signs of reading and spelling difficulties among dyslexics:

#### Reading

- Underachievement in relation to age and intelligence
- Hesitant, laboured reading, monotonous reading tone
- Mispronunciation of words
- Faulty auditory sequence
- Tendency to miss or add words /lines or reading the same line twice
- Repeatedly losing place

- Confusion with similar looking words (e.g. on/no, saw/was)
- Difficulty in breaking long words into syllables
- Inability to blend letters together
- Poor comprehension (even if correctly read)
- Disregard for punctuation
- Dislike of books

## Spelling

- Poor written work in comparison to oral work
- Bizarre spelling (e.g. 'kss' - for 'snake')
- Cramped, illegible or very slow handwriting
- Messy work, many crossings, inability to keep to margin
- Persistent confusion with letters (e.g. b/d, n/u)
- Persistent reversals (saw/was) beyond the ages of 7-8
- Lack/indiscriminate use of punctuation
- Confusion of similar sounding words (e.g. accept/except)
- Omission of letters/syllables/words
- Inconsistent spelling of the same word (even within the same sentence)

(Source: Adapted from The British Dyslexia Association Handbook 1995; and Pavlidis 1990)

## Materials And Strategies To Help Dyslexics Read And Spell

When selecting materials/strategies for remediation, consider the strengths/ weaknesses of each dyslexic since remediation has to cater to individual needs. Reading/spelling programmes must be structured, sequential, cumulative and based on sound phonetic principles and multi-sensory techniques.

### (i) Multi-Sensory Learning

Augur (1985 cited by Ott 1997) defined multi-sensory learning as 'learning by the simultaneous use of the eyes, ears, speech organs, fingers and muscles.' According to Hickey (1977), multi-sensory learning enables the individuals to use their own approach to the tasks through utilizing their strong areas and at the same time exercising their faulty ones. They use their visual, auditory, tactile, kinaesthetic and oral-kinaesthetic perceptual systems to make learning secure.

Thus, multi-sensory learning is vital because it stimulates the dyslexic's learning process through all the senses. Since all the pathways to the brain are involved, the stronger areas of the brain are used while the weaker ones are exercised. By using the visual, auditory, oral and kinaesthetic pathways simultaneously, memory can be strengthened. The dyslexic can be helped to learn names, sounds and shapes of letters and combination of letters and be able to use them correctly and in sequence.

### (ii) Simultaneous Oral Spelling (SOS Method)

The Simultaneous Oral Spelling (SOS) Method is based on multi-sensory techniques. First, the teacher says the word which is repeated by the dyslexic, thus, reinforcing the sound and auditory component. Next, the dyslexic names the letters, reinforcing the idea that letters have both names and sounds. The serial, sequential aspect of letter combinations is also reinforced, making the dyslexic

aware of the detailed letter structure of words. Then the dyslexic writes the word, naming each letter as he writes. This step translates the sound into a written equivalent and as a motor, tactile or kinaesthetic programme. Naming each letter helps to map out the correspondences. Finally the dyslexic reads the word, reinforcing the visual and auditory component. This also helps to train auditory recall of sequence. The SOS Method is very usefully for teaching phonemically irregular and difficult words.

### **(iii) Programmes Based on Multi-Sensory Methods**

There are many language programmes based on multi-sensory techniques. *Alpha to Omega* (by Homsby & Shear 1976) is for teaching reading and spelling. Divided into three stages, this programme starts from basic alphabetic skills. At the end of each stage, there are assessment materials. In addition, worksheets, flashcards, activity packs are available. Phonic work can be further reinforced by using the *Edith Norrie Letter Case*. Based on multi-sensory techniques, individual letters are built to form words following the spoken sound sequences from the *Edith Norrie Letter Case*.

*Spelling Made Easy* (by Violet Brand) is especially useful for teaching spelling. This spelling-based programme has an interesting and continuing story line (Fat Sam). It teaches word families which are useful for dyslexics with problems in blending strings of letters. Worksheets and computer programmes are also available to complement the programme.

*Skill Teach* (by Kath Shelton) is very reading based and supplementary materials on spelling are necessary. This programme has a very good section on blends.

### **(iv) Modifying Materials (Card and Board Games)**

According to Pollock and Waller (1994:35), 'it is more important to select from a structured programme to fit the needs of the child, rather than to impose a rigid system that must be adhered to at all costs.' Hence, materials should be adapted and modified where necessary to ensure that they cater to individual needs. Materials from various sources can be used to add variety to lessons. However, when using materials from different sources, great care must be taken to ensure that all the materials complement each other.

Commercial games can also be modified to reinforce teaching. For instance, word games like Scrabble are designed for good spellers and are unsuitable for dyslexics. Hence, use a modified version of Scrabble instead. One way is to use the scrabble tiles and devise a simplified spelling game which is within the ability of the dyslexic. Modified versions of card and board games (e.g. Snap, Happy Families, Pelmanism, Snakes and Ladders, Ludo (see Appendix A) can also be used to present lessons in different ways. Besides being fun, these games help maintain the interest and attention span of dyslexics.

When modifying or devising games, consider the following:

- What is the aim/objective of the game?
- Is the game fair? Is it short? Interesting? Fun?
- Does it contain elements of both skill and luck?
- Are the rules simple enough to be easily understood?

### **(v) Reading and Spelling Strategies**

Reading and spelling strategies should be taught. For reading, word attack skills, syllables division, use of grapho/phonic and contextual clues are useful. Dyslexics who tend to skip words and lines should be encouraged to use their fingers or window markers to keep track of the words. High frequency words and spelling rules should also be taught. For spelling, the SOS method and other strategies are useful. For example, beat out the syllables and write out each 'bit' of word as you say it. Link new words to old words (mat - cat - bat; sound - round - ground). Change the look of the word (div ide - d ivi de). Find words within words (fat her; cap a city). Change the sound of the word by 'saying it funny' (be - ca-use). Say the names of the letters in rhythm (q-u e-u e). Trace letters as you say or visualise the word, learn to add suffixes/prefixes and use mnemonics (e.g. what - we have a tiger).

## **HOW TEACHERS AND PARENTS CAN HELP DYSLEXICS**

Teachers and parents may become rather emotional when discussing dyslexia. Blame is apportioned to 'poor teaching' 'poor parenting' 'heredity' and so on. Teachers become 'defensive, parents feel guilty and the children become confused, demoralized, withdrawn or disruptive' (Ostler 1991:20). None of this is helpful to the dyslexic child. Instead, teachers and parents should co-operate with one another. They should provide lots of praise, positive feedback, encouragement and empathy. Punishments, threats and labelling dyslexics as 'stupid,' 'slow' or 'lazy' should be avoided. However, teachers and parents should not allow dyslexia to be an excuse for not trying or misbehaving. Below are more suggestions on how teachers and parents can help dyslexics.

### **(i) Role of Teachers**

Teachers should not ask a dyslexic child read aloud in class if he is unwilling to do so. This causes him embarrassment, frustration and loss of self esteem. Teachers should realize that a dyslexic child needs pre-reading type of activities for much longer than is usually considered necessary. If his reading disability is severe, it may be necessary to get someone to read part of his material or instructions to him. If he needs to read for information, teachers must ensure that the books and goals set are within his reading ability.

If spelling is a major problem, avoid giving long spelling lists, especially if the words have different spelling patterns. Teachers should make some allowances when marking written work. If possible, grade for content rather than presentation and spelling. Avoid correcting all the mistakes (especially in red ink) as this can be very discouraging to the dyslexic. Instead of underlining the whole of the mis-spelt word, indicate where the omission or addition is. Try to give positive comments, praise for effort although the work maybe poor when compared to the non-dyslexic child. If possible, give him as much individual attention as possible. Consider grading him on his own effort and progress rather than rating him with the others in the class. Judge his ability more on his oral responses than his written answers. Always ensure that tasks are broken down into smaller ones and avoid over-loading. Do not expect him to use a dictionary to find how to spell a word unless he has mastered that skill. Teachers should allow dyslexics to use concrete tools for learning (tape recorders, calculators etc.)

Since dyslexics work more slowly than non-dyslexics, give the former more time to copy notes from the board or do classwork. By seating dyslexics in front of the class, the teacher could keep an eye on them and ensure that they understood what is being taught. Dyslexics should be encouraged to ask questions and participate in class discussions. Teachers should speak slowly and clearly (facing the dyslexics) and use as many gestures as possible. Avoid shouting at dyslexics as they are 'very

sensitive to loud aggressive voices' (Homsby 1995:85). When writing on the board or in the exercise books, the teacher's handwriting should be clear and legible. Be patient as many dyslexics are forgetful, clumsy, inattentive or even disruptive. Be aware that dyslexics have good and bad days, that the standard of his work will be inconsistent and erratic. Be supportive and understanding yet firm.

## **(ii) Role of Parents**

Parents can set aside a suitable time to read to the dyslexic child. As pointed out by Pollock & Wailer (1994:36), there is **'immense value to be gained by parents reading to their child.'** Parents could read nursery rhymes, poetry (nonsense poems), limericks, jokes, books or magazines to them. To encourage the child to read, interesting books with colourful illustrations and clear print or even story tapes should be provided. Paired reading could be done if the child is willing (i.e. parent reads, child joins in as and when he can or parent/child read alternate sentences/paragraphs).

Be patient when the child is stuck on a word that he had read correctly earlier. To avoid negative comments from the other children, keep them out of the room during the reading session. Make the reading session an enjoyable and interesting one. Talk about the pictures, discuss what the child can see and predict what may happen next; or ask him to describe events or mime actions. Pollock and Wailer (1994) stated that fluent reading with good comprehension is better achieved by encouraging a child to read books which interest him rather than pressurizing and pushing a child. Motivation is better when the demands are not so high and the child can enjoy reading.

Besides reading, parents can watch television together or take the child to places of interest. They can also play games to help the child improve his discrimination, perception, sequencing ability and memory. For example, to help improve auditory sequencing, play simple games like 'I SPY' (e.g. I spy with my little eye something beginning with the letter B); 'Simon Says' (Simon says, clap your hands and stamp your feet); or 'Guess the Sounds/Object' (e.g. put objects in containers or tape everyday sounds; ask the child to guess the sound). Teach them to tap or clap simple rhythms. Play sound discrimination games (tip tap bat tub) and blending games (c-a-t - what is it?)

To improve visual sequencing, dominoes, memory games, classifying/sorting things into shapes/colours/sizes (e.g. put all the things that start with 'a' in a pile) or arranging pictures in sequence are useful. To increase kinaesthetic awareness, encourage the child to trace large letters/words/shapes in the air/sand/salt, make things from clay / plasticine, feel and name plastic/wooden/sponge shapes/letters/objects etc. Parents can devise their own games /activities to cater to their child's needs. Matching letters/words/pictures, identifying missing items, finding similarities/differences, doing crossword puzzles/word mazes/jigsaw puzzles, reading and spelling are some possibilities.

However, these activities should be carried out only if both parents and children enjoy them. If there is any anxiety on the parent's part or resentment on the child's part, they should cease immediately. Otherwise the special needs teacher has to undo the resentment that has built up before the child is able to learn (Pollock & Wailer 1994:36).

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, dyslexics generally have problems in reading and spelling. Any remediation programmes for dyslexics must cater to their individual needs. Strengths should be emphasized and

weakness remediated. Dyslexics need structured teaching based on a multi-sensory approach, attainable goals, slow and careful explanations of new concepts, lots of repetition, overteaching and overlearning. New learning must always be related to previously understood materials, the same information presented in varied tasks and materials. Materials and games can be modified to make the lessons more fun and interesting. Teachers and parents should be patient, positive and persevering. Their continuing support and understanding is important if the dyslexic is to have the confidence to compensate for weaknesses and develop strengths.

There is a saying that:

***IF A CHILD DOES NOT LEARN IN THE WAY WE TEACH  
THEN WE MUST TEACH HIM IN THE WAY THAT HE LEARNS***

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## APPENDIX A

### Modified Card & Board Games

#### SNAP (reading)

2 players 30 cards 15 words - each word written on 2 cards

1. Player cries 'Snap' when any two identical words appear and he reads the word correctly.
2. Player with most cards wins the game.

#### PELMANISM (reading)

2 players 20 cards 10 words - each word written on 2 cards

1. Arrange 20 cards with words facing downwards on table.
2. Each player takes a turn to open 2 cards at a time.
3. If the words are identical and read correctly, he keeps the cards. Otherwise he puts the cards back, facing downwards.
4. Game continues till all the cards are won.
5. Player with the most cards wins the game.

#### OLD MAID (reading)

2 players 20 cards (each card with a different word, one has picture of an old maid)

1. Each player takes a turn to pull 1 card from the other player.
2. If he reads the word correctly, he keeps the card. Otherwise, he returns that card.
3. If he gets the old maid, he loses a turn.
4. Player with the most cards wins the game.

#### LUDO (reading/spelling)

2 players Modified Ludo Board 1)ice 8 tokens

1. Players take turns to throw dice and move tokens.
2. When a player stops on a particular marked spot, he picks up a card, reads/spells the word.
3. If the reading/spelling is correct, he remains there. Otherwise, he goes back to the original spot.
4. First player to move all 4 tokens 'Home' wins the game.

**SNAKES & LADDERS (reading/spelling)**

2-3 players Modified Snakes & Ladder Board Dice 3 tokens

1. Each player takes a turn to throw the dice and move.
2. When a player lands on a certain coloured square, he picks up the card with the corresponding colour.
3. If he reads/spells the word correctly, he stays there. Otherwise, he goes back to his original spot.
4. Ladders are for moving up (player has to read/spell correctly a word on another coloured card at the top of the ladder in order to remain there.)
5. Snakes are for moving down.
6. The first player who reaches the final square wins the game.

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