

Dyslexia:

What's the problem?



*Most children learn to read with little or no problem. Judged purely on the number of people who can master the task we can say that reading is easy and nuclear physics is difficult. So, if reading is easy, why are there so many children who have enormous difficulty with it? How can this be explained? **This is the first problem.***

If most children find learning to read easy, then there must be something quite fundamentally wrong in the learning processes of those who find it difficult. Too often we hear worried parents fobbed-off with the words: "Don't worry, it will come eventually" or

"He is making progress, it's just a bit slow" or "It always takes longer for boys" or "Could you read with him more at home?". Pity the child whose parents allow themselves to be reassured by such wishful thinking. There is nothing in education more

important than learning to read and to deny that there is a problem, when the evidence suggests otherwise, is to put a child into an intolerable position. When, as often happens, experts cannot explain something purely in terms of proven research, they

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should seek the best possible explanation, based on what they do know, and make an educated guess, known as a hypothesis. Any respectable expert should be prepared to share their hypothesis in plain English to anyone with a good reason to ask. Indeed, professionals who work with children are signed up to a Code of Practice that requires them to explain their understanding of the problem and what they are attempting to do about it. It is perfectly reasonable for parents to ask questions of experts and to complain if no answers are forthcoming.

It is not that there is a lack of possible explanations; there are hundreds of them to choose from, but they are of more interest to academic psychologists than to classroom teachers and parents with a dyslexic child. Despite many years of intensive activity on the part of teachers, psychologists, educationalists, neurologists and linguists, there is no straightforward explanation as to why some children find learning to read so difficult. To say this is by no means disparaging of all this activity, rather it is to prevent parents expecting a straightforward explanation or, even worse, believing, unquestionably, an explanation given to them by someone who claims an understanding that is not supported by research. It would be comforting to be told that your child is dyslexic as if that is an explanation of the problem, but this is not possible with the current state of knowledge. Being told your child is dyslexic by an expert is an essential first step in obtaining help, but it is a description of the reading problem, not an explanation of why it is happening.

Don't seek a definitive scientific explanation of dyslexia; it doesn't yet exist

If you have a child who is not reading as well as other children in the same class, who do you turn to? Is it a medical problem that means you should take your child to a doctor, or is it an educational problem that needs to be sorted out by the teachers? Who are the experts with the skills to describe the difficulty and suggest ways of helping the child? **This is the second problem.**

Who, then, are the experts who work with children and who might be able to say if your child has a problem with reading? Teachers are experts who want to make sure that every child is reading as they enter school and continue to improve as they then progress through the school. Teachers know a lot about children; how they develop and what can be expected of them. It is teachers who are in the best position to spot children who are not progressing and to offer

support. Every teacher will know of children who are not reading as well as they might and it is teachers who one would expect to raise concerns before anyone else. If the teacher and the parent agree there is a problem, then action is likely to follow. There is a more difficult situation if the parent thinks there is a problem and the teacher says there is not or the teacher thinks there is a problem and the parent says not.

In difficult cases, or when there is a disagreement, teachers and parents have the right to call upon the services of an educational psychologist. It is educational psychologists who can describe a child's problem as dyslexia and to say if there is a problem that calls for extra help. Educational psychologists and teachers all work to the same code of practice and it is not difficult to obtain a free copy of this code from the government.

An educational psychologist should be prepared to say, in plain English, whether a child has a problem with learning to read or not. Doctors do not diagnose dyslexia; they rely on



educational psychologists to do this. A very unproductive debate has been going on for years about dyslexia and if it actually exists at all. The fact is that both the British Psychological Society and the Government guidelines on dyslexia do make use of the term and parents may well feel puzzled if they find a psychologist who is reluctant to describe the problem as dyslexia. The psychologist may prefer the term Specific Learning Difficulty, which is for all intents and purposes describing the same kind of difficulty.

Because educational psychologists may use different hypotheses as to the explanation of the problem, they may use different methods when gathering information about the problem. Whatever they do, they must be prepared to explain, in plain English, what they are attempting. There must be evidence that they are using their psychological skills and that the explanation they are giving is based on good psychology. Psychologists alone have access to a range of powerful psychological tests that only they can obtain and use. Parents are often puzzled by the reluctance of a psychologist to make use of tests in attempting to arrive at a hypothesis. It is true that teachers, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and paediatricians all use tests to help in the making of a hypothesis. When psychologists say tests are not useful to them, ask them what alternative methods they are using to find out about your child. Without including the psychological part of what they do, psychologists are not informing other professionals of the important advice that only they are qualified to give.

Ask the expert;

- Does my child have a problem?
- If there is a problem how is it best described?
- Does my child have special educational needs?
- How do my child's needs fit into the "Code of Practice"?
- Do the people who are going to help my child understand what needs to be done?
- Do the people helping my child have the required skills and expertise?
- How will I know if my child is making progress?
- How long will it be before we have a review of progress?
- What will you do if my child continues to have a problem despite all your best efforts to help?
- What is my role in helping my child?

Seek a clear description of what your child can and cannot do.

Having taken expert advice and been reassured by what you have been told, what can you expect to see happen and how long should you wait before you can expect results? **This is the third problem.**

The teaching of reading has become such a hot topic that you hear politicians claiming we must go back to traditional methods such as phonics, teachers saying that you need a variety of methods and you must suit the method to the child, grandparents saying there were no reading problems in their day, nutritionalists saying

increase the level of fish oil in the diet and the parent at the school gate claiming proudly that their child read fluently at three.

So how is reading to be taught to the child who has not immediately caught on?

There are three approaches that you might have described to you

- Phonics – which is essentially learning that the letters on the page have sounds associated with them and by saying the letter sounds you can read words
- Phonological approaches – which use bigger units of sound called onset and rime to identify the similarities between words
- Whole word reading, or reading by sight.

If you ask which is the best way, the simple answer is that they are all describing essential reading skills and you need to use all of them. The debate about methods is as unproductive as the debate about the existence of dyslexia.



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There are some words which can be read if they are broken down using a phonic approach. For example “cat” can be read as c-a-t and “hand” can be read as h-a-n-d.

However, both these words can be read another way, which uses a phonological approach. Cat can be c-at and hand can be h-and. By being taught to read the words this way, whole groups of words can be read because they look the same. C-at, gives rise to h-at, b-at, f-at, r-at and so on. Hand gives rise to b-and, s-and, gr-and, l-and and so on. Also, words which cannot be read phonically like “sight” give rise to m-ight, br-ight, fr-ight and even en-ough, r-ough, t-ough, which cannot be read using phonics. The onset is the first part of the word and the rime is the second part, which makes the word rhyme with other words.

And then there are words that cannot be read by using phonics or phonological approaches such as “the”, “so”, “because” and which must be learned by heart, using a whole word approach. Children are good at reading whole words. Ask any child to read the word “McDonald” if you require proof.

The child who has some idea that English is not a regular language and that to read it requires more than one approach is very fortunate. Just as the child who is told that it is possible to read by sounding out will become disillusioned when so many words cannot be read this way.

Look out for a teacher who uses a variety of approaches and explains why a particular approach is best for your child.

Parents will inevitably ask how they might best read with their child. First of all, do not be content with being told not to try reading at home. Many children learn to read before they get to school and many children have been taught to read by their parents reading with them. Parents and children reading at home and enjoying it is good news all round. There are some pitfalls to avoid and some simple rules to follow.

When reading with your child:

- Never say “no, in the sense that “no, that’s wrong!” Always say “good try, it says....”
- Never teach and test, such as “What does that word say? You read it yesterday!”; always give and observe. Ask the child to read a passage that contains the target word and observe if they can read it, without you saying anything.
- Always read the passage to the child first and then ask them to read it to you. This may sound as if it is making the task too easy and just relying on memory, but it is based on excellent psychology.
- Always “talk” through your index finger. Point to the words as you read them and as the child reads them. If the child falters, keep your finger still and only move on if the child reads the word. The split-second you know they will not read the word, tell them what it says and then move on.
- Keep the sessions short – between ten and fifteen minutes.
- Be business-like in your approach during the session with lots of warm praise and encouragement at the end.

Read with your child at home in a skilful, informed way.

Teachers can measure children’s progress in a variety of ways, all of which are useful. All teachers have access to reading tests, all children are tested by their teachers according to government requirements. Teachers can make detailed notes of what a child can and



cannot do when reading. Ask the teacher to use all these measurements to get a rounded picture of your child's progress. It would be reasonable to get some feedback on a monthly basis and detailed feedback every six months. If your child is making measurable progress that the teacher can show you, then be pleased that your child's needs have been recognised and effectively dealt with. On the other hand, a note of caution; "slow" progress is bad news, and is little better than no progress.

Ensure your child is making progress

As soon as you become aware that your child is not making real progress you must become assertive and ask what is being done. Being assertive (never aggressive!) is not easy and can lead to embarrassing situations, but learning to read is every child's birthright and is too important to delay.

There are some individuals who, despite expert help and

intervention, do not learn to read when they are at school. For such people there are classes at F.E. colleges and classes run by voluntary organisations. Dyslexic students can get extra support at university or from their employer. Dyslexia is a disability and it is against the law to discriminate against people with a recognised disability.

Be assertive on behalf of your child until you are satisfied the problem has been recognised and that your child's reading is progressing

Do's and Don'ts for tackling your child's reading problems

Don't seek a definitive scientific explanation of dyslexia; it doesn't yet exist

Seek a clear description of what your child can and cannot do.

Look out for a teacher who uses a variety of approaches and explains why a particular approach is best for your child.

Read with your child at home in a skilful, informed way.

Ensure your child is making progress.

Be assertive on behalf of your child until you are satisfied the problem has been recognised and that your child's reading is progressing.

Further Information

British Dyslexia Association

Helpline: 0118 966 8271

Website:
www.bdadyslexia.org.uk

British Dyslexics

Tel: 01352 716 656

Website:
www.dyslexia.uk.com

British Education Psychology Society

+44 (0)116 254 9568

<http://www.bps.org.uk/enquiry@bps.org.uk>