

It's Never Too Late

“Dyslexia” need not be a life sentence.

By Auriol Rapin

In today's public schools, one finds many so-called dyslexic or learning-disabled children. These students test out as above average on IQ tests but are found to be reading well below grade level.

In most cases, the schools' solution is to label the children “dyslexic” — that is to say, permanently unable to learn to read properly — then stockpile them on the shelf called Special Ed. This is outrageous!

The word dyslexia simply means ‘poor reading.’ It is neither a biological property of the brain, nor is it transmitted genetically. Learning to read involves many complex factors, such as vision, tracking, memory, hearing, speech, auditory processing, code knowledge, teaching methods and parental support. How could it possibly depend on a single inheritable gene?

A 13-year-old who is reading at a grade 4 level undoubtedly has weaknesses in one or more of these areas. By the same token, however, it would be ridiculous to write him off permanently. Unless he is brain damaged (in which case there would be additional symptoms of impairment), he can learn to read.

Naturally, sensory problems such as poor vision or hearing must be rectified before reading therapy can hope to be effective. Once these problems have been solved, however, an effective reading program must begin. Scientific research indicates that the most effective reading programs teach phonemic awareness.

A phoneme is the smallest possible unit of sound in language. Examples would be \b\ as in “bit”, \ow\ as in “cow” or \ough\ as in “bought.” Phonemic awareness refers to the ability to segment, blend and manipulate these sounds or phonemes.

As a reading therapist working with children aged five to 15, I have watched all of my students improve their reading skills dramatically. One student, as measured by both the school and myself, improved his reading to just below grade level in 10 sessions of reading therapy.

- One day, eight-year-old Anna discovered that her mother was not home to drive her to her reading therapy session; so she walked/ran all the way to my office, three blocks away. She was determined not to miss her lesson. How's that for enthusiasm?
- Nine-year-old Mitchell enjoyed a retest on decoding nonsense words; he asked me to give him the hardest words on the list. He decoded 4- and 5-syllable words perfectly; this was a child who had ‘auditory processing problems,’ according to his school.
- Seven-year-old Christopher knew French phonetics extremely well (from French immersion). However, he had scant knowledge of English sounds. He told me he wanted to learn to read ‘chapter books’ by the end of the summer. We're getting there!

I use a reading method called Phono-Graphix (PG). This method is the culmination of a six-year study by cognitive psychologists into the underlying causes of reading failure. As well as teaching phonemic awareness, PG teaches the English written code logically from sound (spoken language) to symbol (written language).

Do you remember all the old rules in phonics such as ‘i’ before ‘e’ except after ‘c’? Phonics had to invent all those rules for spelling because it taught the English code backwards. Phonics works from the written letters to the sounds, but problems soon arise

due to the fact that the 44 sounds in English are represented by only 26 letters. PG teaches the “whole” English code, without rules. As well, it teaches the sounds and symbols in context, in real words, in proper sentences, with real meaning.

PG has proven successful in teaching people of all ages to read. An analysis of the progress of 281 individuals after 80 hours of instruction in the Auditory Discrimination in Depth (a precursor to PG) at The Reading Foundation in Calgary showed an average gain of almost five grades in word attack skills. Forty percent of these students were aged 13 or older.

All 87 students at the Read America Clinic in Orlando were tested after a *maximum* of 12 hours of PG instruction. Aged six to 16, they made average gains of 1.5 years on the Woodcock Reading Mastery test.

PG works for these reasons:

- it is scientifically researched and developmentally appropriate;
- the diagnosis of the reading problem is done accurately; and
- the parents' active support is built in.

An older “dyslexic” student can learn to read quickly using this method because he already knows spoken English. He just needs to be taught the English code (how the sounds relate to the symbols) and given lots of practice!

The Phono-Graphix reading method can be taught to children by their parents at home. In some cases, however, intervention by a trained PG reading therapist may be necessary. More information is available at www.readamerica.net or by telephoning 352-735-9292.

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