

Overcoming Dyslexia

Learning disabilities that are diagnosed early are much easier to remediate.

By Sally Shaywitz

A substantial number of well-intentioned girls and boys, including very bright ones, experience significant difficulty in learning to read, through no fault of their own. Their frustrating and persistent problem in learning to read is called dyslexia.

Dyslexic children are generally in grade 3 or above when they are first identified by their schools. Unfortunately, reading disabilities diagnosed after grade 3 are much more difficult to remediate.

Early identification is important because the brain is much more plastic in younger children and potentially more malleable for the rerouting of neural circuits. Moreover, once a child falls behind he must learn to read thousands of words to catch up to his peers who are continuing to move ahead.

Equally important, once a pattern of reading failure sets in, many children become defeated, lose interest in reading, and develop what often evolves into a lifelong loss of their own sense of self-worth.

If a child is dyslexic early on in school, that child will continue to experience reading problems unless he is provided with a scientifically-based, proven intervention.

Many parents and teachers have become experts at recognizing the signs of dyslexia. The earliest and perhaps most important clues to a potential reading problem can be found by listening to a child speak.

The first clue to dyslexia may be **a delay in speaking**. As a general rule, children say their first words at about one year and phrases by 18 months to two years. Children vulnerable to dyslexia may not begin saying their first words until 15 months or so and may not speak in phrases until after their second birthday.

Once a child begins to speak, **difficulties in pronunciation** — sometimes referred to as “baby talk” — that continue past the usual time may be another early warning. By five

or six years of age, a child should have little problem saying most words correctly.

Most preschoolers love to play games with sounds and with rhyming words and, indeed, much of the humour in books geared to this age level exploits the young child’s fascination with rhyme. Dyslexic children, on the other hand, have trouble penetrating the sound structure of words and as a result are **less sensitive to rhyme**.

Parents may notice that at age four their son is still not able to recite popular nursery rhymes and he may confuse words that sound alike. Regardless of intelligence or family circumstances, the children who are the most familiar with nursery rhymes are also the top readers three years later.

When researchers compared a group of children with reading difficulties to a group of younger children who read well, the reading-disabled children’s troubles with rhyme became apparent. Although several years older, the poor readers experienced much more trouble. It is not a matter of intelligence, just an insensitivity to sounds.

Not infrequently, an incorrect sound is accessed. A child may look at a picture of a volcano that she has seen many times, and the word she pulls up is *tornado* — close in sound but not in meaning. As a result, dyslexic children may **talk around a word**, using vague words like *stuff* or *things* instead of the actual name of the object.

It is important to remember that the problem is with expressive language and not with thinking. She knows exactly what she wants to say: the difficulty is with pulling out the right word.

Given a choice, the dyslexic can almost always recognize the correct word. For example, if asked whether a sudden ghostly appearance is an “apparition” or a “partition”, a dyslexic will invariably choose the correct response.

Finally, and perhaps most critically, a difficulty with sounds means that beginning readers have **difficulty learning the names and the sounds of the letters of the alphabet**. By about age four, most children begin to recognize and name individual letters. By the time they are ready to enter kindergarten, they know the names of most, if not all, of the upper- and lower-case letters. Failure or delay in acquiring this knowledge is an early clue to a potential reading problem.

All children can be taught to read. In the case of dyslexic children, they need both early diagnosis *and* effective treatment.

A child with dyslexia is in need of a champion, someone who will be his support and his unflinching advocate, someone who will not only believe in him but will translate that belief into positive action by understanding the nature of his reading problems and then actively and relentlessly working to ensure that he receives the reading help and other support he needs.

Our knowledge of what works in teaching reading has come to us through science. This new information can be put to use to provide a sensible and successful approach to teaching children to read — children without any reading difficulties, children who are at risk for reading problems, and children who are already known to be dyslexic.

There is now an evidence-based guide to teaching children to read entitled *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read*. Single copies of this booklet can be obtained free of charge by visiting www.nifl.gov/publications.html or e-mailing edpuborders@aspensys.com.

(Adapted from Overcoming Dyslexia with permission from Knopf Books — see our review on page 3. Dr. Shaywitz is a neuroscientist and professor of pediatrics at Yale.)