

Dyslexia—What exactly is it?

Yes, parents can be trained to address their child's dyslexic patterns

By Suzanne Poulin-Day

Dyslexia is believed to be the most common of all learning difficulties. Too often, dyslexic people will be labelled as lazy, unmotivated, slow, and even stupid, thereby destroying a person's view of their worth and of God's given abilities. Contrary to what people think, dyslexia is more than just the reversal of letters. Dyslexia is NOT related to a person's intelligence. Interestingly it is estimated that at least one in six Canadians has dyslexia. Thomas G. West summarizes dyslexia in that it "signifies a problem with words: written or spoken words, words of speech, words that are recalled on command, the organization and memorization of words, and words that conform to complex rules which originate from foreign languages." Simply put, dyslexia is a problem with written symbols including letters of the alphabet and math signs.

The symptoms of dyslexia vary greatly from one individual to another. The dyslexic person can experience difficulties in many areas, including: forming and/or naming letters, appropriate sequence in individual letters which make up a word such as was/saw, finding the right word when talking, distinguishing left from right, telling time, days of the week, memorizing multiplication tables, difficulty memorizing non-phonetic words, and more.

There are three fundamental types of dyslexia shared by most dyslexics to some extent.

The first type of dyslexia has to do with a difficulty in developing memory for direction of the lines in the written symbols. The student will have difficulty as he writes "b" instead of "d" and writing in general will be painful.

The second type of dyslexia is a deficit with the memory of the sound and symbols and has to do with the ability to develop skills to analyse what is needed for syllabication and working with morphemes (root words, prefixes and suffixes). The student will read "house" instead of "home" and write "posaih" instead of "position."

The third type is a deficit in remembering the configuration of whole words. The student will read "ball" instead of "bell" and writes "enuf" instead of "enough."

Often a dyslexic person has a combination of these three types. Parents will be puzzled by the fact that their child may read some long words but be regularly stumbling on words like "the". The standard universal method of reading instruction is not effective for dyslexic

children. To learn to read, these children require a systematic, explicit, and sequential teaching method in order to efficiently retrieve the information. A program which is only focussing on phonics is helpful but not sufficient. They need phonemic awareness, in other words, the discovery that words in spoken language can be broken into small units of sounds called phonemes. These children's brain also require help in linking the information and in integrating the way each letter sounds, looks, and feels and how combination of these letters create pictures.

The International Dyslexia Association recommends a multi-sensory approach inspired by the Orton-Gillingham method. Among the best is the Simultaneous Multi-sensory Teaching, known as SMT, developed by Louise Ward of the Canadian Dyslexia Association. It is user-friendly as it includes detailed lesson plans that outline the pedagogical objectives and expected outcomes for each step. Each lesson incorporates twenty steps which allow a constant activation of the brain in the different visual, auditory and motor areas. I cannot express adequately my excitement in having a tool to train parents on how to teach their dyslexic child at home. In fact, although it was developed specifically for dyslexic students, this method can be used for the student who struggles with reading, in order to prevent reading failure and reduce the need for remedial help later on. As professionals specializing in helping home schoolers, we have prayed for such a powerful tool that would allow us to train parents in a relatively short period.

Here is one of many success stories. Sam was 7 years and 10 months old when he was first assessed. The grandfather offered to teach the child at home because the family situation did not allow the mother to do it. Following the training, the grandfather started the program with Sam, one hour per day, for a total 16 months, completing the 145 lessons of the program in June 2002. Here is a summary of Sam's amazing progress. Sam's reading at the first evaluation seems average for his age but he was greatly struggling in spite of his grandfather helping him in reading. I will show you the handwriting improvement.

SAM	First evaluation	9 months later	1 year later
Reading	Beginning grade 3	Beginning grade 4	Mid high school
Spelling	Middle grade 1	Middle grade 3	End grade 6
Math	Beginning grade 2	End grade 5	End grade 7

Here is another home schooled eight-year-old boy. John couldn't read or write some letters given to him in spite of his mother working on the alphabet almost daily for two years. The improvement over one and a half years is especially exciting considering that this home schooling family of eight people lives in a mobile home which includes a set of twins, with the older child being ten years of age. They had finished the fiftieth lesson at the time of the last evaluation.

JOHN	First evaluation	4 months later	1 year later
Reading	Beginning Kindergarten	End Kindergarten	End grade 3
Spelling	Middle Kindergarten	Middle grade 1	Middle grade 1
Math	Beginning grade 1	End grade 1	End grade 3

If your child is experiencing difficulty in reading, writing, spelling and reading comprehension, he or she may have dyslexic reading and spelling patterns. Home schoolers who are already putting the effort of teaching on one-on-one basis need to invest this time and energy efficiently. Too often parents wait and hope that the child "will grow out of it". Yes, these children often progress because of the individualized teaching, but they really learn to compensate and never reach their full potential in reading and writing. The parents must first recognize and accept the problem in order to better address their child's needs. The training is available for those who are willing to take one hour per day to be their own child's "reading therapist". If you cannot do it and know somebody else who has the time, send this person to take the training. The training is given each month in Barrie, Ontario. **Please contact us 705-726-5971 or wces@bconnex.net**

Copyright: Suzanne Day

Suzanne Day is a psychoeducational and neurodevelopmental consultant working with her husband David in their business, Wise Choice Educational Services. Suzanne conducts assessments for home school, Christian school, and public school students and adults. She worked as a school psychologist, teaching at the elementary, intermediate, secondary and college levels, and assumed the position of principal at the intermediate and secondary levels. David and Suzanne have been home schooling their two children for the past seven years.

*Suzanne Day can be reached at: Wise Choice Educational Services Psychoeducational Assessment, Consultation, and Tailored Programs 29 Albert Street, Barrie, Ontario L4M 3S7 Phone (705) 726-5971 * Fax (705) 726-5958 * e-mail: wces@bconnex.net*

This article originally appeared in the OCHEC Summer 2003 newsletter.

Permission to reprint must be obtained from the author and/or OCHEC office.