



## **Newsletter January 2009**

For teachers, SENCO's, Learning Support Assistants and Teaching Assistants.

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### **Identifying Dyslexia**

Dyslexia is a complex condition to diagnose. Through research and new technology we now know that dyslexia is a difference in the neuro-pathways in the brain. This affects the way information is received and processed by the brain causing some data to be processed in a part of the brain that is not designed to analyse and store the information.

We also know that dyslexia is biological as it can impact on muscle memory affecting automaticity and complex co-ordinated movement.

We know too that it is genetic as scientists have identified the gene and corresponding DNA on chromosome 15 in two out of three cases. In one out of three cases dyslexia is acquired by stroke, head injury or trauma.

However, what defines the effect of dyslexia from one person to another are the accompanying characteristics because these vary in severity and they all do not necessarily affect dyslexics. These characteristics: poor processing skills, sequencing, memory, organisation, and concentration and motor skills affect

the underlying ability to learn and can present unexpected difficulties.

Ten percent of the population, irrespective of culture, creed, socio-economic background or intelligence, are dyslexic: 6% mild to moderately so and 4% severely so. It is a hidden condition for which there is no cure.

Common to most dyslexic individuals is a poor memory and identifying this gives the individual the greatest chance of finding or being taught appropriate coping and learning strategies.

When a learner displays learning difficulties they can now be screened for dyslexia, assessed by a specialist teacher with a practicing certificate or by an Educational Psychologist. In reality there are pros and cons relating to each of these options.



With screening or an Educational Psychologist report this is only the beginning of the journey towards identifying appropriate support. The reports in both instances need to be interpreted and the interventions extrapolated – the quality and effectiveness of support really depends upon an accurate analysis of the findings and this depends on the knowledge and experience of dyslexia and its effects on the person doing the analysis and their ability to translate this into where the breakdown in



learning has occurred and what learning support is required to address this.

In my opinion a specialist teacher with a practicing certificate in specific learning difficulties is by far the most appropriate person to undertake the task of this analysis as they will be well schooled in identifying an appropriate course of interventions and monitoring progress to ensure learning is embedded and the difficulties remediated.

A specialist teacher in specific learning difficulties (SpLD) is able to assess strengths and weaknesses and set a course of appropriate interventions, but is not qualified to formally diagnose dyslexia.

However, the specialist teacher would through using a mix of diagnostic and criterion referenced tests and a battery of informal tests be able to pin point the breakdown in learning accurately and effectively help a dyslexic learner access the curriculum through teaching them strategies that enable the learner to use their strengths to boost their weaknesses.

Furthermore, the specialist teacher in SpLD is able to teach using multi-sensory techniques designed to accelerate learning achievement giving the learner confidence in their own ability, which in turn raises their motivation, determination and self-esteem.

If you would like to receive dyslexia awareness training for your staff team or your learning support team Dyslexia Awareness UK can deliver bespoke training either as an Inset Day or at a

time that fits around your school time table.

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## The Role of the Parent

The first thing a parent is faced with is the fact that their child is failing to acquire new skills at the same pace as either their siblings or peers. This might be obvious as early as two years old where the child is having difficulties with speech and language skills or reaching their developmental milestones.



This isn't always the case, sometimes it doesn't become obvious until the child has reached the age of six or seven and is experiencing difficulties in acquiring literacy and numeracy skills. At this stage the mainstream teacher (who is not trained to identify dyslexia or cope with it in the classroom), may begin to alert parents to the problem. The more dyslexia aware teacher will have picked up on the fact that the difficulties are in line with the characteristics of dyslexia but might be reluctant at this stage to suggest it is dyslexia and might use terms such as learning difficulties. By the age of eight the child will now be falling behind their peers by as much as two years. In some cases they will be

receiving additional help with their difficulties but identifying the specific difficulties might still not be recognised.

Dyslexia experts such as Beverly Hornsby and the British Dyslexia Association recommend early intervention to give the child the best chance of overcoming their difficulties to reach their potential. However, evidence suggests that local education authorities through their policies on SpLD seem not to adhere to this recommendation. In Ott, 1997 Hornsby states that if a child is identified and receives interventions at the age of seven they will need just one hour a week of short, frequent, structured support over an academic year to bring them up to their expected attainment level, yet if that child is left until the age of eight they will need eight hours a week of short, frequent, structured support over an academic year. The affects of not receiving support are accumulative requiring much more support as time goes by.

The effects on the unsupported child are seriously damaging to their self-esteem and motivation to learn. It is believed that evidence for this can be seen in the criminal justice system where there is an over representation of dyslexic young people.

Parents can make all the difference in the overall outcome of this failure of the education system. It is noticeable in anecdotal evidence and research being done by Prof Bob Burden et al that where a child's self-esteem is maintained their achievements and aspirations to succeed in the workplace and in society are greater.

Parents can play a significant role in supporting their child's self-esteem

through recognition of what the child can do and positive feedback on day to day achievements even in the minutiae of life. This in itself is a skill – one that many parents overlook.

I would recommend that parents observe and monitor their child both in purposeful activities and in leisure. The objective being to see what their does well and what they do not so well with each particular task. By deconstructing the task performance in this way the parent is able to identify strengths and weaknesses. They should also discuss with the child to find out what the child felt they did well and how they achieved this element of success. They can then help the child to understand how to apply this relative success to the area they didn't do so well in to achieve better result overall. This form of analysis helps both the parent and child recognise talents and skills that have possibly been over looked presenting the opportunity for positive development and occasion for real praise – if superficial praise is given the child will see through this and be even more disappointed with themselves and almost as equally destructive with their trust in the parent.

We, as a society, are very quick to point out people's faults and where they go wrong, often damming the whole pursuit as rubbish. When praised for doing something well and asked how did we achieved such a good result we often down play our achievement by pointing out what we felt we did wrong or could have done better and we are oh so slow at accepting, self effacingly (of course), that the praise is justified and that we are worthy of it.



The child who experiences failure at an early age and continues to experience failure will find ways of escaping those feelings. This can lead to mental ill health, depression or experimenting with substance misuse. Whereas the child that is helped to recognise that they do have talents and are able to acquire new skills albeit not necessarily in the classroom and who is helped to understand their dyslexia tendencies and difficulties grows in understanding and acceptance that they might do things differently to others, they might take longer to achieve the skills they need to accomplish certain tasks but, importantly, it is okay to be different. They grow to take control of their dyslexia and often become independent learners and focused on learning things that they are interested in rather than what they are being told they must learn.

## Employers

Supporting a dyslexic employee need not be as daunting as you might expect. In ninety percent of cases dyslexic individuals require no more than an understanding that they are dyslexic.

When more than this is required the most effective way to support a dyslexic individual is to discuss the issues with them in the first instance and workout what is practical and reasonable.

Dyslexic individuals are entitled to reasonable adjustments in the work place and there is funding available from the government to support any specialist equipment that maybe required. The funding is proportionate

to the effect of dyslexia on the individual's ability to carry out their day to day job related tasks.

In most cases the adjustments need not be expensive and can be achieved easily.

It is important to realise that each individual's dyslexia comes with a unique set of difficulties and the dyslexic individual will have already learned a number of coping strategies and compensate well for their difficulties. Employers need to be aware that their policies and practices are equal and fair to all their employees – this might sound like stating the obvious but in fact most employers who follow best practice principals find that they are already compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act and this is reflected in the relationship with their employees.

The following suggestions are areas where employer can be supportive particularly when an employee has raised certain issues:

If your office space is open plan and the dyslexic individual finds it difficult to cope with tasks that require a deep level of concentration and the ambient office noise is a distraction it would be reasonable to offer the opportunity of working in perhaps a meeting room (if available) for the duration of the task involved. If this is not an option perhaps it could be agreed that the individual work at home for the specified (and pre-agreed) amount of time. Some dyslexic individuals find listening to music on their iPod or MP3 play is sufficient to enable them to block out the distracting noise.



If as part of their role they are required to attend a lot of meetings there are a few things that could really improve their performance. When arranging the meeting ensure that you communicate the time and place both verbally and in writing with a follow up reminder either by telephone, text or email. It is also recommended that any papers being presented at the meeting be circulated in advance so that they have the time to read them and digest their content prior to the meeting. This will enable them to listen fully – dyslexic people find it difficult to do more than one thing at a time well. If they are required to read papers at the time of the meeting the chances are they will not be able to fully take on board what is being said at the same time.

Help the dyslexic individual manage their time well by ensuring that they are given sufficient information about their day-to-day tasks. This should be mapped on a wall planner and visible when they are seated at their workstation. Some dyslexic individuals find it helpful to colour code their planners so that they know at a glance their priorities. A note book is useful and here again colour coding can help, for example: write down everything that they are required to do as the task hits their desk. Highlight in red that are top priority i.e. drop everything and do this now, highlight in orange those things that need to be completed by the end of the week and highlight in green those things that have no deadline. As each task is completed score through with a blue highlighter so that it is easy to identify what has been done and what still needs to be done.

In order to manage workflow the traffic light system works well with all employees. When the red sign is showing this is equal to do not disturb, please take my calls and emails will only be replied to twice that day. The amber sign is equal to you may interrupt me if it is work related and the green sign is equal to my door is open if you require me.

If an employee is promoted or switched to another job for whatever reason where the vocabulary is significantly different or where a more technical language might be used the provision of a glossary of terms would give the individual the opportunity to get fully up to speed more quickly and if spelling is an issue (and it most frequently can be) they will have a reference point to help ensure they spell the technical words correctly.

Dyslexic individuals often use visualisation techniques to help them spell accurately the words they most commonly use, or they use mnemonics to remember how to spell a tricky word – the latter can also be used to remember a correct sequence of a task.

A diary, mobile phone or Blackberry are useful pieces of equipment and most dyslexic individuals are extremely competent at using a computer or laptop. Some use assistive technology software to help them overcome certain difficulties. The provision of a voice activated PC can be one of the most useful items you can provide. In all cases, I stress, it is crucial that you discuss such provision to ensure that it is helpful or you could be wasting money.

The expectation for the employee to be able to utilise assistive technology software can sometimes be unrealistic especially if they already have a perfectly good strategy that they already employ. We all know how difficult it is to learn new methods of doing something and dyslexic individuals can find this particularly daunting. If through a job move it is a requirement to learn new processes it is important to remember that the dyslexic individual may take longer than usual to learn the new skill. It would be considered a reasonable adjustment to allow extra time for them to become proficient.

All of the suggestions above would not only be good for dyslexic individuals but all of these systems and techniques are good for everyone.

If you would like help in understanding dyslexia in the workplace and especially if you require help in supporting a dyslexic individual Dyslexia Awareness UK can provide you with step by step solutions and support you through the implementation process.

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