

DYSLEXIA

Dyslexia is a Greek word that means 'difficulty (dys) with the written words (lexia)'. In November 12, 2002, the International Dyslexia Association Board of Directors adopted this definition that states:

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and / or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.

Most people assumed that by the time children start school, they will be competent users of their native language and second language. Many children are expected to learn oral, reading, spelling and writing skills through frequent exposure to the languages and guidance at school. However, there is a group of students that find reading, writing and spelling a difficult task. Some of these poor readers and spellers have dyslexia. Dyslexia is not due to lack of intelligence or desire to learn. Most dyslexics can learn successfully with appropriate teaching methods.

Usually, students having dyslexia are looked down by their peers because of their low academic achievement and inability to read aloud in class. Although there are successful individuals with dyslexia in our society such as Lee Kuan Yew, Tom Cruise, Richard Branson and Cher, many individuals with dyslexia do not make it to college or acquire the necessary skills that help him/her to cope with adult life challenges. In fact, some of them develop social problems. According to a recent local newspaper article by Loh (2008), there are 204 out of 556 juveniles in prisons and detention centres with learning difficulties and they are taught the basics again in 3M classes. They are taught reading, writing and Mathematics. These juveniles might have a better opportunity in life if they were given early intervention, remediation and support from teachers and parents in schools and at homes.

Most international bodies such as the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) and the British Dyslexia Association (BDA) claim that about 10-15 percent of the population is affected by dyslexia. Dyslexia can range from mild to severe. Right now there is an estimated 314,000 dyslexics in Malaysia according to a recent article in The Star (Wong Li Za, 2009). That means many more dyslexics are not getting the help that they need or they have not been assessed by schools. Individuals with dyslexia in a multicultural context such as Malaysia usually exhibit more difficulties in reading, writing and spelling since they are expected to master more than one language. Students having dyslexia need trained teachers as well as a supportive school community that are willing to provide specialized teachers and a dyslexia friendly environment. In general, educators need to know about research based intervention and remediation approaches that have been proven successful in remediating students having dyslexia or reading, writing and spelling difficulties. Concerned parents, teachers and individuals need to make informed decisions. In addition, remediating dyslexics is a specialized field in education that has not received much attention from the Malaysian community in general.

What are the signs of dyslexia?

Some common signs of dyslexia related to oral, reading, writing and spelling skills include:

- poor phonological awareness
- significant difficulty in reading, writing and spelling
- poor sequencing skills (poor in organizing letters and their sounds)

- confusion of letters with similar shape (d/b, u/n, p/q)
- reversals (reading was as saw / on as no)
- odd pencil grip
- difficulty pronouncing long words and finding the right word to say
- mispronouncing some words: remember (remember), spaleti (spaghetti)
- difficulties with punctuations (omission of punctuation and confusion over punctuation)
- unable to retell an event in the correct sequence
- word finding deficit (unable to retrieve words needed for a certain context or situation)
- difficulty in copying from the board

Other signs include:

- late in learning to speak
- confusion between left and right
- difficulty in repeating long words (hippopotamus and comfortable)
- difficulty in learning tables or doing mental arithmetic
- poor concentration and poor short term memory
- difficulty in understanding concepts such as yesterday/tomorrow, before/after
- genetic

What causes dyslexia?

The causes for dyslexia are neurobiological and genetic. The exact cause of dyslexia is not clear but brain imagery studies show that there are differences in the way the brain of a dyslexic person develops and functions. Dyslexia often runs in families. A strong predictor of reading disability is an assessment of phonological skills of students at risk. Most dyslexics are poor in phonological awareness tasks such as phonemic manipulation, phonemic segmentation, syllable splitting, blending, rhyming and deletion of sounds.

How is dyslexia treated?

Most experts recommend a research based approach such as the Orton Gillingham approach to treat dyslexics having reading writing and spelling difficulties. This is a multisensory structured language approach that emphasizes systematic, cumulative and organized teaching that follows the logical order of the English language. This approach requires the direct teaching of all concepts with frequent student-teacher interaction. Swanson (2008) synthesizes previous research studies examining reading instruction for students with learning disabilities and found that;

- a) students benefit from explicit and systematic instruction;*
 - b) foundational skills such as phonemic awareness and phonics are essential elements of instruction;*
 - c) higher processing skills such as fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension are essential from the beginning of reading instruction and are continually beneficial to struggling readers; and*
 - d) students who have difficulties benefit from smaller group instruction that provides support from the teacher*
- (p.2)

How can family members help a dyslexic child?

Educate Yourself: It is important for parents to know more about dyslexia and learning difficulties so that they know how to tackle issues, teach the child at home and make informed decisions. Information can be gathered from conferences, books, informed parents and specialists.

Acceptance: It is important that the child feel accepted despite their difficulties and inability to meet parents' expectations. Most dyslexics are frustrated and anxious because they are not able to meet parents' and teachers' expectations. There will be good and bad days especially for a child with learning difficulties. Try not to compare your child with others. It is important to know your child's strengths and weaknesses so that you can have reasonable expectations.

Prioritize: Many dyslexics have difficulties mastering more than one language. Therefore, it is important to focus on a language that has high utility so that the child can stay competent in school and in a future work setting. Some students need a longer time to master several subjects. Therefore, parents will need to make informed decisions. Possible questions that parents need to answer can be:

1. Which schools is more suitable for the child?
2. What subjects to focus on?
3. How much time should be allocated to each subject on a weekly basis?

Siblings Need to Understand: Usually, a child having dyslexia gets more attention from parents because of their special needs. His or her siblings may get jealous or feel that their parents are being unfair. It is important for parents to spend quality time with the other children and try to create a competitive yet loving environment at home.

Dyslexics Need Individualized Program: The child should be free from measuring themselves against peer without learning difficulties. They should work at an individualized pace which directly addresses his/her needs. Many dyslexics are able to close the gap with appropriate help.

Set Attainable Goals: It is important to help dyslexics to set attainable goals for themselves. It is also important for parents to be a constant support when the going gets tough by helping them to organize their daily activities and manage their feelings and anxiety.

Help Others: It is important for dyslexics to help others as well. Parents can find opportunities for them to help a friend or a relative in need or a younger dyslexic child who may need assistance in reading and writing. This will help them to feel more positive about themselves.

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Prepared by:

Ms Tan Sun Sun

Educational Therapist

SEED Literacy Solutions

12-2-1, Jalan Setia Prima (P),

Setia Alam Seksyen U 13,

40170 Shah Alam,

Selangor Darul Ehsan

www.sunreadingsystem.blogspot.com