

DEMYSTIFYING DYSLEXIA

JULIE T. STECK, PHD, HSPP
CHILDREN'S RESOURCE GROUP

As parents, we tend to watch our children closely as they approach critical developmental milestones—sitting, walking, talking and toileting. These milestones are generally achieved in the first three years of life. Once they are accomplished, parents generally relax until their children enter “real school” and start the process of reading. For the great majority of children (approximately 80%), the process of reading unfolds easily and by the beginning of first grade (around age 6) most children are recognizing familiar words, “sounding out” simple words and understanding simple stories. For these children, spelling tests are “easy A’s” with just a little bit of studying. Rhyming words, remembering telephone numbers and memorizing math facts come easily.

However, in each first grade classroom there will be several children (up to 20% of the class) for whom the task of learning to read is a daunting one. These children may be bright and intuitive in other areas. They may be quite social, have a good oral vocabulary, and quickly grasp math concepts. However, they struggle with phonics, memorize spelling words for a short time but then misspell the same words in their daily work, and avoid reading orally. Some of these children become behavior problems, others have frequent stomachaches or headaches, and others just tell their parents they are stupid. In fact, these children may have a learning disorder which is manifested in language arts. This learning disorder is known as dyslexia or a specific language disability. Dyslexia seems to be three times more common in boys than in girls, but it may also be under-identified in girls as they call less attention to themselves in the classroom.

While most people think that dyslexia involves reading from right to left or visually flipping letters, the difficulty actually lies in the language part of the brain. Research studies conducted over the past twenty years have demonstrated that persons with dyslexia have a deficit in phonologic processing. Persons with phonologic processing deficits have difficulty developing an understanding that spoken and written words can be broken into smaller units of sound. Children with dyslexia who are learning to read do not recognize that the letters in written words represent sounds in spoken words. Thus, these children struggle with the acquisition of phonics. While they may memorize some sight words, many of the sight words learned in the early grades “look the same” (ie. *howand now, where and when*). Reading through a sight word approach is very limiting as our visual-sequential memories do not hold adequate information.

Dyslexia tends to run in families. Many people with dyslexia have been quite successful outside of school or with adequate support in school. With our increased knowledge in this area, there are improved interventions which can assist with early reading. As with any condition, early identification and intervention improves the long-term outcome and minimizes emotional and behavioral responses to frustration and failure.

NOSEK, K. *THE DYSLEXIC SCHOLAR: HELPLING YOUR CHILD SUCCEED IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM.* TAYLOR PUBLISHING, 1995.

SHAYWITZ, S.E., MD. *DYSLEXIA.* SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN, 1996, NOVEMBER, 98-104.

SHAYWITZ, S.E., MD. *DYSLEXIA.* THE NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE, 1998, 338: 5: 307-311.