

# A Dyslexic Child in the Classroom

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## A guide for teachers and parents.

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Proficient reading is an essential tool for learning a large part of the subject matter taught at school. With an ever increasing emphasis on education and literacy, more and more children and adults are needing help in learning to read, spell, express their thoughts on paper and acquire adequate use of grammar.

A dyslexic child who finds the acquisition of these literacy skills difficult can also suffer a lot of anguish and trauma when they may feel mentally abused by their peers within the school environment, because they have a learning difficulty. Much can be done to alleviate this by integrating the child into the class environment (which is predominantly a learning environment) where he/she can feel comfortable and develop confidence and self esteem.

Class teachers may be particularly confused by the student whose consistent underachievement seems due to what may look like carelessness or lack of effort.

These children can be made to feel very different from their peers simply because they may be unable to follow simple instructions, which for others seem easy. It is a class teacher's responsibility to provide an atmosphere conducive to learning for **all** pupils within their class.

Class teachers need to have an understanding of the problems that the dyslexic child may have within the classroom situation. Hopefully, with this knowledge, a great deal of misunderstanding of a child's behaviour can be prevented. In a positive and encouraging environment, a dyslexic child will experience the feeling of success and self-value.

Of particular importance is an understanding of the problems that poor auditory short term memory can cause, in terms of retaining input from the teacher.

Examples of poor auditory short term memory can be a difficulty in remembering the sounds in spoken words long enough to match these, in sequence, with letters for spelling. Often children with poor auditory short term memory cannot remember even a short list of instructions.

The following items should provide useful guidelines for teachers and parents to follow and support :

### In the class:

- Of value to all children in the class is an outline of what is going to be taught in the lesson, ending the lesson with a resume of what has been taught. In this way information is more likely to go from short term memory to long term memory.
- When homework is set, it is important to check that the child correctly writes down exactly what is required. Try to ensure that the appropriate worksheets and books are with the child to take home.
- In the front of the pupils' homework book get them to write down the telephone numbers of a

couple of friends. Then, if there is any doubt over homework, they can ring up and check, rather than worry or spend time doing the wrong work.

- Make sure that messages and day to day classroom activities are written down, and never sent verbally. i.e. music, P. E. swimming etc.
- Make a daily check list for the pupil to refer to each evening. Encourage a daily routine to help develop the child's own self-reliance and responsibilities.
- Encourage good organizational skills by the use of folders and dividers to keep work easily accessible and in an orderly fashion.
- Break tasks down into small easily remembered pieces of information.
- If visual memory is poor, copying must be kept to a minimum. Notes or handouts are far more useful.
- Seat the child fairly near the class teacher so that the teacher is available to help if necessary, or he can be supported by a well-motivated and sympathetic classmate.

### Copying from the blackboard:

- Use different colour chalks for each line if there is a lot of written information on the board, or underline every second line with a different coloured chalk.
- Ensure that the writing is well spaced.
- Leave the writing on the blackboard long enough to ensure the child doesn't rush, or that the work is not erased from the board before the child has finished copying.

### Reading:

- A structured reading scheme that involves repetition and introduces new words slowly is extremely important. This allows the child to develop confidence and self esteem when reading.
- Don't ask pupils to read a book at a level beyond their current skills, this will instantly demotivate them. Motivation is far better when demands are not too high, and the child can actually enjoy the book. If he has to labour over every word he will forget the meaning of what he is reading.
- Save the dyslexic child the ordeal of having to 'read aloud in class'. Reserve this for a quiet time with the class teacher. Alternatively, perhaps give the child advanced time to read pre-selected reading material, to be practiced at home the day before. This will help ensure that the child is seen to be able to read out loud, along with other children
- Real books should also be available for paired reading with an adult, which will often generate enthusiasm for books. Story tapes can be of great benefit for the enjoyment and enhancement of vocabulary. No child should be denied the pleasure of gaining access to the meaning of print even if he cannot decode it fully.
- Remember reading should be fun.

### Spelling:

- Many of the normal classroom techniques used to teach spellings do not help the dyslexic child. All pupils in the class can benefit from structured and systematic exposure to rules and patterns that underpin a language.
- Spelling rules can be given to the whole class. Words for class spelling tests are often topic based rather than grouped for structure. If there are one or two dyslexics in the class, a short list of structure-based words for their weekly spelling test, will be far more helpful than random words. Three or four irregular words can be included each week, eventually this should be seen to improve their free-writing skills.
- All children should be encouraged to proof read, which can be useful for initial correction of

spellings. Dyslexics seem to be unable to correct their spellings spontaneously as they write, but they can be trained to look out for errors that are particular to them.

- Remember, poor spelling is not an indication of low intelligence.

## Maths:

- Maths has its own language, and this can be the root of many problems. Whilst some dyslexic students are good at maths, it has been estimated that around 90% of dyslexic children have problems in at least some areas of maths. General mathematical terminology words need to be clearly understood before they can be used in calculations, e.g. add, plus, sum of, increase and total, all describe a single mathematical process. Other related difficulties could be with visual/perceptual skills, directional confusion, sequencing, word skills and memory. Dyslexic students may have special difficulties with aspects of maths that require many steps or place a heavy load on the short-term memory, e.g. long division or algebra.
- The value of learning the skills of estimation cannot be too strongly stressed for the dyslexic child. Use and encourage the use of estimation. The child should be taught to form the habit of checking his answers against the question when he has finished the calculation, i.e. is the answer possible, sensible or ludicrous?
- When using mental arithmetic allow the dyslexic child to jot down the key number and the appropriate mathematical sign from the question.
- Encourage pupils to verbalize and to talk their way through each step of the problem. Many children find this very helpful.
- Teach the pupil how to use the times table square and encourage him to say his workings out as he uses it.
- Encourage a dyslexic child to use a calculator. Make sure he fully understand how to use it. Ensure that he has been taught to estimate to check his calculations. This is a way of 'proof reading' what he does.
- Put key words on a card index system or on the inside cover of the pupils maths book so it can be used for reference and revision.
- Rehearse mathematical vocabulary constantly, using multi sensory/kinesthetic methods.
- Put the decimal point in red ink. It helps visual perception with the dyslexic child.

## Handwriting:

- Reasons for poor handwriting at any age can be poor motor control, tension, badly formed letters, speed etc. A cursive joined style is most helpful to children with dyslexic problems. Encourage the children to study their writing and be self-critical. Get them to decide for themselves where faults lie and what improvements can be made, so that no resentment is built up at yet another person complaining about their written work.
- Discuss the advantages of good handwriting and the goals to be achieved with the class. Analyze common faults in writing, by writing a few well chosen words on the board for class comment.
- Make sure a small reference chart is available to serve as a constant reminder for the cursive script in upper and lower case.
- If handwriting practice is needed it is essential to use words that present no problem to the dyslexic child in terms of meaning or spelling.
- Improvement in handwriting skills can improve self confidence, which in turn reflects favorably throughout a pupil's work.

## Marking of work:

- Credit for effort as well as achievement are both essential. This gives the pupil a better chance of getting a balanced mark. Creative writing should be marked on context.
- Spelling mistakes pinpointed should be those appropriate to the child's level of spelling. Marking should be done in pencil and have positive comments.
- Try not to use red pens to mark the dyslexic child's work. There's nothing more disheartening for the child than to have work returned covered in red ink, when they've inevitably tried harder than their peers to produce the work.
- Only ask a pupil to rewrite a piece of work that is going to be displayed. Rewriting pages for no reason at all is soul destroying as usually much effort will have already been put into the original piece of work.

## Homework:

- By the end of a school day a dyslexic child is generally more tired than his peers because everything requires more thought, tasks take longer and nothing comes easily. More errors are likely to be made. Only set homework that will be of real benefit to the child.
- In allocating homework and exercises that may be a little different or less demanding, it is important to use tact. Self-esteem is rapidly undermined if a teacher is underlining the differences between those with difficulties and their peers. However, it should also be remembered that far more effort may be needed for a dyslexic child to complete the assignment than for their peers.
- Set a limit on time spent on homework, as often a dyslexic child will take a lot longer to produce the same work that another child with good literacy skills may produce easily.

## Integration:

- A dyslexic child's ability to write down thoughts and ideas will be quite different from the level of information the child can give verbally. For successful integration, the pupil must be able to demonstrate to the teacher that he knows the information and where he is in each subject. Be prepared to accept verbal descriptions as an alternative to written descriptions if appropriate.

Alternative ways of recording should be looked at, such as :

- The use of computers for word processing.
- Audio tapes for recording lessons that can then be written up at a later stage.
- Written record of the pupil's verbal account, or voice activated software can be used.
- More time should be allocated for completion of work because of the extra time a dyslexic child needs for reading, planning, rewriting and proofreading their work.
- For a dyslexic child the feeling of being 'different' can be acute when faced with the obvious and very important need of 'specialist' help for his literacy and possibly mathematical skills. Some specialist methods can be incorporated into the classroom so all children can benefit from them, thus reducing the feeling of 'difference'.

## Conclusion:

In order to be able to teach, as far as possible, according to each child's educational needs, it is essential to see him or her as a whole person, complete with individual strengths and weaknesses.

An understanding of the pupil's specific difficulties, and how they may affect the student's classroom performance, can enable the teacher to adopt teaching methods and strategies to help the dyslexic child to be successfully integrated into the classroom environment.

Dyslexics have many strengths: oral skills, comprehension, good visual spatial awareness/artistic abilities. More and more dyslexic children could become talented and gifted members of our schools if we worked not only with their specific areas of difficulty, but also their specific areas of strengths from an early age. To do this we have to let go of outmoded viewpoints that a dyslexic child must first fail, in order to be identified.

These are the children of our future and they have a right to help and support before they develop the dreadful sense of failure which is so insidious.

Class teachers dealing with dyslexic children need to be flexible in their approach, so that they can, as far as possible, find a method that suits the pupil, rather than expecting that all pupils will learn in the same way.

Above all, there must be an understanding from all who teach them, that they may have many talents and skills. Their abilities must not be measured purely on the basis of their difficulties in acquiring literacy skills. Dyslexic children, like all children, thrive on challenges and success.

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