

## Dyslexia and literacy difficulties

If you are reading this then you probably have concerns about your child's literacy development. Perhaps you are wondering whether they could be dyslexic. You may be wondering whether an Educational Psychologist is able to test for, or diagnose, dyslexia.

### What is dyslexia?

The term 'dyslexia' is used and interpreted in many different ways. Kirklees Educational Psychology Service uses the definition provided by the British Psychological Society (BPS):

*"Dyslexia is evident when accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling develops very incompletely or with great difficulty. This focuses on literacy learning at the word level and implies that the problem is severe and persistent despite appropriate learning opportunities."*

(BPS, 1999)

This definition is the most recently developed of the numerous definitions of dyslexia which are around. Older definitions included specific difficulties in phonological processing (i.e. processing speech sounds) and relied on there being a discrepancy between children's literacy skills and other abilities. As the definition advocated by the British Psychological Society, the definition above is the one which most chartered psychologists, including educational psychologists, will now use.

Dyslexia can be described, then, in simple terms, as a difficulty with word reading (i.e. decoding) and/or spelling which persists despite support and intervention given to the child. There does not have to be a discrepancy between a child's literacy skills and other abilities. According to the Rose Report (Rose, 2009, p. 9), dyslexia "is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points."

Reading comprehension is not included in the BPS definition, although of course children who struggle to decode words accurately and fluently are likely to struggle with reading comprehension too.

### Why might a child struggle with literacy?

There might be a number of reasons, including:

- Difficulties or delays with spoken language development, especially with phonological (speech-sound) awareness and processing (e.g. Snowling & Hulme, 2007)
- Inadequate, inappropriate or insufficient teaching and/or lack of opportunities to develop and practise literacy skills (e.g. Heaton & Winterton, 1996)
- Undetected problems with vision or hearing
- Short-term/working memory difficulties (e.g. Kipp & Mohr, 2008)
- Problems with visual processing/visual memory
- Difficulties with automaticity, i.e. matching sound/word to symbol quickly and automatically (e.g. Wolf & Bowers, 1999)
- More general learning difficulties/delays
- Speaking English as an additional language

- Lack of interest or motivation, or other social and emotional needs which create barriers to learning (e.g. Heaton & Winterton, 1996)
- Low self-confidence as a learner
- Fear of failure, leading to reluctance to try new things or attempt challenges

The BPS definition of dyslexia does not include underlying reasons for literacy difficulties. A diagnosis of dyslexia does not *explain* why a child is struggling with literacy, it only *describes* the fact that they are struggling. Dyslexia is not a 'cause' of literacy difficulties, merely a shorthand way of saying that a child has significant and long-standing literacy difficulties which have not responded to teaching and learning opportunities. Using the BPS definition, it is impossible to carry out a one-off 'test' for dyslexia, as a diagnosis would depend on looking at the learning opportunities and support a child had received and the extent of their difficulties combined with their progress over time.

### **What can help a child experiencing literacy difficulties?**

What is more helpful than a diagnosis is an exploration of what is getting in the way of a child's literacy development. A range of formal and informal assessment approaches can be employed in school to explore children's phonological awareness, vocabulary, ability to 'sound out' unfamiliar words, their sight vocabulary, the types of errors they make in their reading and spelling, how they respond to different types of teaching and different types of task, etc. It is important that school staff keep records of interventions used and the outcomes of these, in order for progress to be monitored and future planning and support to be as effective as possible. Depending on this ongoing assessment process and the child's individual needs, interventions and approaches could include things like:

- Paired reading/extra reading practice with an adult
- Additional structured support around oral language development, if this is where the primary difficulty lies (a Speech and Language Therapist may advise on this, if a child's need is very significant)
- Additional small-group phonics (e.g. Toe by Toe, Read Write Inc., Fresh Start)
- A short-term one-to-one intervention to boost basic skill retention (phonics, sight words, etc.) such as Precision Teaching
- ICT-based word reading/spelling practice (e.g. Lexia, Word Shark, Nessy)
- A more multi-sensory approach, i.e. including visual learning (recognition of whole words, common spelling patterns, units of meaning, words within words, etc.) alongside phonics teaching
- A greater level of rehearsal and repetition, teaching 'little and often', and the use of interleaved learning (e.g. mixing small amounts of new material with rehearsal of older, more familiar learning)
- Use of alternative recording methods when writing is not the main objective
- A higher level of differentiation so that a child can experience success and gain in confidence

For further reading on specific literacy interventions and the evidence supporting their efficacy, see Brooks (2013).

For many children, normal differentiation and high quality teaching are enough to ensure progress. Not all children develop at the same rate, and not all children develop specific skills such as literacy at the same rate regardless of their development in other areas. It is

also important to remember that children learn to talk, read and write, very broadly, in that order. Children's oral language skills strongly predict their reading ability, and reading ability then predicts writing skills (e.g. How & Larkin, 2013). However, some children do have very significant and long-standing difficulties with their literacy development, with or without other difficulties as well. If you are concerned about any aspect of your child's learning, in literacy or any other area, we strongly recommend speaking with your child's class teacher and/or the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) at your child's school in the first instance.

## Frequently Asked Questions

1. *Doesn't my child need a diagnosis in order to get support in school?*

Whether or not a child has a diagnosis of dyslexia (or anything else) makes no difference to the level of support they can access in Kirklees. Additional support and even additional funding are based on individual need, regardless of any diagnosis.

2. *Would a diagnosis of dyslexia explain why my child is struggling?*

No, at least not according to the BPS definition of dyslexia. This is purely a description of a child's observed difficulties and does not explain *why* they are struggling with literacy. What may help to explain why your child is struggling are the observations and assessments which can be carried out in school to explore the specific barriers to learning which your child may be experiencing.

3. *What about the other difficulties that can go with dyslexia, e.g. being clumsy and disorganised, struggling with maths, etc?*

Some children who experience literacy difficulties also have difficulties with their motor skills and coordination, as well as struggling with organisational skills or numeracy. However, so do other children who don't have literacy needs. The BPS definition of dyslexia only concerns literacy development, although of course some children do experience multiple difficulties. Co-occurring difficulties which are not literacy-related are not considered to be markers of dyslexia (Rose, 2009).

4. *Do children with dyslexia need different teaching approaches from other poor readers?*

There is no evidence that children described as dyslexic are different from any other poor readers in terms of the nature of their difficulties or the types of intervention approaches which benefit them, regardless of their broader cognitive abilities (see Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014).

5. *Does my child need a dyslexia diagnosis to get extra time in exams?*

A diagnosis of dyslexia will not affect whether or not extra time is allowed. School staff can assess need and apply for access arrangements for public exams (SATs, GCSEs, etc.) but these access arrangements are granted on the basis of individual need, the child's usual way of working and other specific criteria which do not include the presence/absence of a dyslexia diagnosis. Talk to your school's SENCO for more advice on this. See also [www.icg.org.uk](http://www.icg.org.uk) and <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/key-stage-2-tests-how-to-use-access-arrangements>.

## References

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