

Dyslexia

Strategies, Supports & Interventions



by Sandra Rief

With the expansion of Response to Intervention (RTI) and other initiatives designed to identify and effectively address reading disabilities in our students, it is critically important for classroom teachers to fully understand the challenges of dyslexia. This reference guide provides valuable information, as well as practical classroom strategies and accommodations, to address the language and literacy needs of students with dyslexia.

What is Dyslexia?

The International Dyslexia Association defines dyslexia as:

“... a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterised 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.”

(adopted by the Board of the International Dyslexia Association, Nov. 2002)

- Poor metacognitive skills (monitoring one's own thinking processes and learning progress).

- Low self-esteem.

Children with dyslexia and other learning disabilities commonly have other coexisting disorders such as ADHD, dysgraphia or speech-language problems. Remember, each student has his/her own combination of strengths and weaknesses, and learning disabilities range from mild to severe.

What are the Key Instructional Requirements for Students with Dyslexia?

What Does the Research Indicate?

The following summarises current research findings on dyslexia:

- The problems of students with dyslexia most commonly stem from difficulty in processing speech sounds within words and making the connection between sounds and their written symbols (letters/letter combinations).
- There is a strong relationship between phonological awareness and the ability to read well. Deficits in this area that appear in prep are predictive of difficulties in learning to read.
- Dyslexia is the most common learning disability. Approximately 80% of students identified as having specific learning disabilities who qualify for special education services have difficulty reading and spelling.
- With appropriate early intervention, 75–90% of students who are at-risk readers can overcome many of their difficulties and increase reading skills to an average level.
- Dyslexia is the result of a brain difference in the “wiring” of the neural pathways and parts of the brain that are related to language functioning and reading.
- Instruction in phonemic awareness and reading skills that is intense, explicit and systematic is considered to have an impact on helping to “rewire” the brain of a student with dyslexia.

Direct language instruction in:

- **Phonemic awareness:** the sound structure of our language – how to recognise, manipulate, blend and segment individual speech sounds in words.
- **Phonics and decoding skills:** the correspondence of graphemes (letters) and phonemes (sounds); how to analyse unknown words through sounding out and other strategies.
- **Components of language:** vocabulary, word usage, prefixes, suffixes and other parts of words that carry meaning (morphemes).
- **Fluency:** reading words with speed, accuracy and expression.
- **Comprehension strategies:** deriving meaning from text.
- **Spelling skills and strategies:** using sounding-out skills and word structure awareness to encode, or put words students want to use into printed form.
- **Metacognitive strategies:** awareness of one's own learning processes (e.g. how one learns best; when/where/how to use specific strategies).
- **Study skills:** organisation, time management and learning strategies.

Research-validated curriculum that is:

- **Direct and explicit:** each skill, rule of language and strategy for reading and spelling words must be taught clearly and directly, without assuming that the student has even the most basic foundational skills or background knowledge about the English written language.
- **Systematic and structured:** follows a systematic scope and sequence of skills, starting at a beginning level to ensure mastery of foundational skills and filling in holes in a student's repertoire of skills.
- **Multisensory:** uses techniques that incorporate some combination of auditory, visual and tactile-kinesthetic input (learning through multiple channels).
- **Cumulative:** skill instruction and small amounts of new information taught in steps with constant review and practice.

Explicit teaching of reading and writing with:

- Greater intensity of instruction than is required for most students.
- Instruction provided either one-on-one or to small groups of students at the same skill level.
- Ongoing assessment (informal and formal) and careful monitoring of progress.
- New skill sets and concepts that are broken into small, clear steps, and repeatedly practised with immediate corrective feedback and reinforcement.

What are the Key Areas of Difficulty?

Primary weaknesses associated with dyslexia are:

- Poor decoding of individual words (word attack and word recognition skills).
- Slow, inaccurate oral reading (poor reading fluency).
- Spelling difficulties (poor encoding skills).

Other common weaknesses include:

- Difficulties in other language and reading skills (reading comprehension, vocabulary and written language).
- Short-term memory and sequencing difficulties.