

Supporting the Supporters: Ideas and Strategies for Parents

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Some key points:

1. Dyslexia can be seen within a continuum from mild to severe.
2. It is important to identify and recognise the strengths shown by children with dyslexia and to attempt to incorporate these strengths into a teaching programme.
3. The degree, and the impact of dyslexia on the child can vary according to the nature of the task and the nature of the learning context.
4. Early identification is important for effective intervention.
5. Children with dyslexia can show different characteristics and therefore their needs should be addressed on an individual basis.
6. Although the principal difficulties associated with dyslexia relate to literacy - reading, writing and spelling, children with dyslexia can also show other difficulties relating to memory, co-ordination and organisation.
7. Knowledge on how children learn, and how to make learning more effective through for example, study skills, can be extremely beneficial for children with dyslexia.
8. It is important also to consider the curriculum, differentiation and learning styles as these can help children with dyslexia understand the task more clearly and undertake learning more effectively.

9. The impact of dyslexia can be minimised with effective teaching intervention and adaptations to tasks, through differentiation in the curriculum and accommodations in the workplace.
10. The dyslexic person may have many strengths and these strengths may be used to compensate for his/her difficulties.
11. It is important to recognise the need to boost the self-esteem of children with dyslexia as it is too easy for them to become discouraged and lose interest in learning.

Assessment

There are a number of key issues and questions relating to identifying dyslexia that can cause some concern. These include:

- Who is responsible for identifying dyslexia?
- At what age can dyslexia be reliably identified?
- What is the difference between screening and formal assessment?
- How reliable are quick screening tests?
- What is the role of the class teacher in assessment?
- What role can parents play?
- How can we be sure it is dyslexia, and not some other learning difficulty?

Parental participation in the assessment

Pre-assessment

Before an assessment takes place parents need to ensure that the school /psychologist is informed of the following:

- early pre-school development,
- the age at which key milestones were reached since birth e.g. when started talking and walking,
- any reasons why the parents feel that their child may have dyslexia,
- any other reason for possible difficulty in learning, such as problems at birth,

- home factors such as behaviour, interest in learning and the things which are motivating.

The assessment

A formal assessment can be an anxious time for both the child and the parents. It is important that the potential for this is minimised. The child should be prepared for the assessment. The actual word 'assessment' however need not be used as this in itself may induce stress. There are a number of ways of indicating to the child what will happen without using the word 'assessment'. This will minimise any anxiety. Essentially the tester is engaging in a range of activities with the child to find out how he/she learns and what can be done to help to improve learning. This views assessment as a positive activity, which of course it should be.

The parent(s) should try to be available immediately after the assessment to get some initial feedback and to re-assure their child on his/her performance.

Parents also need, if possible, to speak with the tester before the assessment in order to find out how long the procedure will take and what kind of information he/she is looking for in the assessment.

The person conducting the assessment will need some background information from the parents particularly relating to any concerns they may have about the development and the behaviours/ characteristics of their child. It is helpful to provide some details on how the child behaves at home in terms of his/her social skills, learning pattern and motivation. Much of this information of course varies with the age of the child, or young adult, who is to be tested.

Feedback from the assessment

Feedback following the assessment is extremely important and should ideally involve the class teacher, member of school management team and the parents, and if appropriate, the child. The parents however usually want some immediate informal feedback from the assessor. It is also important to give the child some form of informal feedback as soon as possible after the assessment depending of course on the age of the child. The feedback to parents should include the following:

1. Details of the tests administered and the reasons why particular tests were used.
2. The child's test behaviour, motivation, was he/she interested in the test materials, did the child manage to maintain interest throughout the assessment.
3. The results - how do they compare to the norm (average), if possible you can ask to see a graph, or some other visually displayed profile.
4. The implications of the results – this is important as the results should provide information on a diagnosis, and importantly recommendations for intervention, or further assessment.
5. Follow-up assessment and details of any monitoring of progress that will be carried out. This is important and arrangements and time sequence for monitoring of progress should be indicated. It is important as a parent you are re-assured that the assessment is not the end of the process, but in many cases the beginning. Details of short, medium and long term monitoring should be indicated although this can best be negotiated with the school.

School Meetings

Pre-meeting pointers for parents

- Identify the purpose for the meeting.
- Plan for the meeting. Write out the areas and questions you want the meeting to cover. You may want to prioritise these questions in case time does not allow you to get through them all.
- Restate or make sure the person who is chairing the meeting re-states the purpose of the meeting at the onset. This is important as it ensures that all those present will know the purpose of the meeting.
- Try to stay on one topic since the length of the meeting will be limited, especially if the class teacher is present as class cover may have to be organised for this, and it will be disappointing and very frustrating if you leave the meeting with many questions still unanswered.

- Do not be over-awed by the number or experience of the professionals who may be at the meeting. I still recall when my son was very young attending such a meeting. Within minutes of the meeting starting I scanned around the table and counted the number of professionals and felt quite humbled that all those people had made an effort to attend the meeting to suit my convenience for the benefit of my son. While this was true, and I as a parent appreciated this, it did overawe me slightly and as a result I was not able to ask the type of questions I wanted to.
- Show yourself to be open and supportive throughout the meeting. Don't become antagonistic or defensive otherwise the meeting can become a negative experience for all. Even if an unfortunate comment is try to remain calm and objective. This can be difficult for you especially since it is your child and his/her welfare and education is obviously very important to you and to them, but it is also important that the relations between you and the school are harmonious.
- Try to ensure that suggestions are made that will increase your child's opportunities for learning. Try to ensure that provision has been made for long term success and progress, as well as the short term.
- Ask for examples of your child's work to be brought to the meeting. This will also help you to note progress at future meetings when samples of work will also be shown.

Either you, or the person chairing the meeting, should clarify and summarise each important point as it is discussed and sum up at the end. If the chairperson does not do this you should request it, or do it yourself and take notes.

What should parents look for in a school?

Questions parents could ask?

It is important that the child feels comfortable in the school so naturally the child must accompany the parents on school visits. Some of the points parents should look for include:

- How easy will it be for them to communicate with the school? What system does the school have in place for communication with parents? This should be made clear at the outset.

- What type of training have the staff had on dyslexia – has the training involved only a few teachers or has there been whole staff awareness training?
- Is there any special provision for children with dyslexia in the school?
- If there is, what programmes and strategies do they use? Can parents link with these programmes at home?
- Will my child have full access to the curriculum? What are the compulsory subjects?
- What is the school's homework policy?
- Are classes streamed?
- Parents could also ask how many children with dyslexia the school has. If they say very few then it may be that the school do not recognise or identify dyslexia – usually most teachers will have experienced children with dyslexia.
- You could ask what the school policy is on dyslexia and how the teachers are informed of that policy.

Careers/subject choice

This is an important issue as no career should be out of the question and it is crucial that young people realise this at an early age. It is also important that together with the school you and your child you can identify his/her strengths. These can help to identify the type of courses that would be most suitable in further and higher education. Most courses now require a degree of reading and writing but some have less than others. But at the same time it is important that the young person chooses the course that he/she wants to do. For example it is not uncommon for students with dyslexia to select Literature as their main subject at university even though they may have more reading to do.

One of the key points about subject course and career choice is to seek advice and to obtain it well ahead of time. Many careers advisors now have more awareness of dyslexia, but if they do not you can provide them with information.

Parent's challenges

Reid (2006) interviewed a number of parents on the issues they had to deal with on discovering their child was dyslexic. Some of the responses included the need to:

- maintain the child's self-esteem,

- help the child start new work when he/she had not consolidated previous work,
- protecting the dignity of the child when dealing with professionals/ therapists,
- help in the child's personal organisation,
- peer insensitivity,
- misconceptions of dyslexia.

These responses are quite interesting because they touch on some of the key areas particularly the emotional aspect of dyslexia. They also touch on the misunderstandings and misconceptions that can exist on dyslexia.

Some of the other key issues that parents have to deal with include the following:

- **Frustration**
Without question all schools, and all teachers want to do their best for all children. Schools however have to meet the needs of individuals as well as the needs of all learners. Teachers have also to meet the demands placed on them by the management and the education system. These demands are often based on principles relating to accountability and results. These principles can present a difficulty in relation to dyslexia because progress made by children with dyslexia may not always be easily measured, and certainly not by conventional means. For example for some children with dyslexia merely attending school can be a measure of success, but schools may not record this as progress and would rather focus on progress on attainments such as reading, spelling and writing. This is perfectly reasonable, but children with dyslexia may not make significant progress in this area, not at least in the short term. This can lead to some frustration on the part of parents and highlight very clearly the different agendas that can be seen between home and school. This underlines the importance of effective and shared communication.
- **Trust**
Not all staff in schools are familiar with dyslexia. It can sometimes be difficult for parents to place their trust in a system that may not even seem to recognise dyslexia, but this is exactly what they have to do! Parents can have a role to play in providing information on dyslexia to schools – it does not need to be the other way round.

- **Balance**

Parents often ask how they can balance the stress their child can experience in school work with life at home. This can be a difficult point as often the stress that can be experienced at school can spill over into home life, especially since potential stresses, such as homework, can take up an unduly amount of time at home. Work at home should be fun. This may be difficult to achieve without make light of the work that the child has to do but family fun-type activities or games can provide learning strategies for the child, develop language skills and self-esteem. This can include the use of mnemonics and board games, both of which can be useful for developing memory skills.

- **Understanding**

The knowledge and awareness of dyslexia can vary from country to country and indeed within countries and school districts. Having spoken on dyslexia to parents associations in many different countries this is becoming very apparent and almost without exception a scheduled and advertised talk to a parents association will include many teachers in the audience. It is important that parents understand what dyslexia is, and this should be explained to them as soon as their child is assessed and it is equally important that teachers also aware of the different dimensions of dyslexia.

- **Emotional Aspects**

If a child is failing in literacy or finds some aspects of learning challenging, then he/she may be affected by this emotionally. It is important that this is addressed and preferably prevented.

There are a number of ways of helping to maintain and to boost children's self esteem but one of the most obvious and most effective ways is to ensure that they achieve some success and genuine praise. In order for praise to be effective the child has to be convinced that the praise is worthy of their achievements. When children feel a failure it is difficult to reverse these feelings and often they need to change their perceptions of themselves. This can be a lengthy process and ongoing support, praise and sensitive handling is necessary.

Some parents have indicated that the following can be useful for developing self-esteem:

- paired reading,
- mind mapping, including software mapping,
- memory games,
- learning styles,
- opportunity for the child to use to use verbal ability and to benefit from discussion and
- to focus on areas of success.

The role parents can play in helping their child deal with the difficulties associated with dyslexia is of far reaching importance. Parents are the first 'port of call', particularly in the kindergarten and the early years. Communication at this level has the potential to minimise anxieties and maximise the skills of parents and those of teachers, as well as assisting in the identification of the difficulties associated with dyslexia.

It is important to consider how parents may help at home. One of the key aspects is communication, and particularly communication with the school. This paper ends on a positive note by suggesting that, despite the anxieties and the difficulties faced by parents, and children themselves, there have been considerable developments in schools in awareness of, and in support for, children with dyslexia. There is as great deal of support available. No parent of a child with dyslexia should feel isolated.

References

Reid, Gavin (2009) *Dyslexia: A Complete Guide for Parents* (2nd edition) Blackwell

Helping Your Child with Reading

Suggestions for home

- Pre-read the passage
- Pull vocabulary that is difficult to understand or to decode by highlighted the terms or noting on a separate page
- Discuss the challenging vocabulary so that your child understands the meaning and its influence on the passage
- Re-read the passage
- Ask questions to ensure your child's comprehension on several different levels:

Sample passage:

Radio has two qualities that I admire above all others. The first – and this is deeply, embarrassingly Canadian – is its modesty. It doesn't matter how you gussy it up or how many bells and whistles you add with satellites or fibre optics, it doesn't matter whether you receive programs on a doddering clock radio or on a spiffy new laptop via the Internet, radio is now what it has always been and will always be: a faceless voice and perhaps some music that float for a second on the air, then are lost to the ether. Here is technology used laudably and blamelessly as the handmaid for an elemental human requirement: the need to tell and to hear stories.

Dear Sad Goat: *A Roundup of Truly Canadian Tales and Letters*
Bill Richardson, Douglas and McIntyre, 2002

Highlight vocabulary

Radio has two qualities that I admire above all others. The first – and this is deeply, embarrassingly Canadian – is its **modesty. It doesn't matter how you **gussy it up** or how many **bells and whistles** you add with satellites or fibre optics, it doesn't matter whether you receive programs on a **doddering** clock radio or on a **spiffy** new laptop via the Internet, radio is now what it has always been and will always be: **a faceless voice** and perhaps some music that float for a second on the air, then are lost to the **ether**. Here is technology used **laudably** and blamelessly as the **handmaid** for an elemental human requirement: the need to tell and to hear stories.**

Sample oral questions for this passage:

Literal: What is the human requirement that radios fulfil?
(locates the facts and recalls information directly in the text)

Creative: In what ways can you “gussy up” radio?
(requires the learner to think creatively about the text)

Critical: Comment on the author’s parallel between modesty and being Canadian.
(requires the learner to form an opinion)

Inferential: How is radio unlike other media?
(involves “reading between the lines” or understanding facts that are not directly