



Dyslexia – Warning Signs & Symptoms

By Linda Balsiger, M.S., CCC-SLP

What is Dyslexia?

Do dyslexics read backwards? No! How did this belief become so widespread? First, some people with dyslexia have directionality weaknesses and poor visual memory for letters. This causes them to reverse letters (such as b-d) when reading and writing. Second, people with dyslexia typically have deficits in phonological memory and sequencing that can result in transposition of sounds when they are blending words or spelling. Finally, many children with dyslexia are quite bright and guess at words based upon the letters in the word. If they read the word “*won*” as “*now*”, parents may think they are “reading backwards”.

Dyslexia is a language-based learning disability, characterized by difficulties with the phonological components of speech and language. These components include phonological awareness (ability to distinguish and manipulate sounds in words), phonological memory (sequential memory for sounds in words), and rapid naming (efficiency of visual-linguistic retrieval and processing). Dyslexia results in difficulties with reading and/or spelling, but it can also affect other areas of learning, including memory and written expression.

Warning Signs of Dyslexia

Preschool or kindergarten...

- Delayed speech or language
- Mixes up sounds or syllables in longer words
- Common sayings come out slightly twisted
- Late establishing a dominant hand
- Confusion of left versus right
- Difficulty learning to tie shoes
- Trouble memorizing address, phone number, or alphabet
- Can't create words that rhyme
- Has trouble learning the sounds for alphabet letters
- Has difficulty identifying the initial sound of a word

Elementary school

- Poor reading
 - Reading rate is slow
 - Reading is effortful, choppy, and inaccurate
 - Guesses at words based on letters, shape, or context of story
 - Recognizes a word on one page but not on the next
 - Skips or misreads small words such as *the, of, to, or, from, for, were*
 - Ignores suffixes (–ed at the end of a word)
- Poor spelling (may learn spellings for a test, then forget them 2 weeks later)
- Written language weaknesses
 - Poor organization
 - Minimal elaboration of ideas
 - Weak mechanics (punctuation, capitalization, proofing)
 - Dysgraphia (extremely poor handwriting)
- Difficulty with some aspects of math
 - Memorizing the multiplication tables
 - Multi-step math operations



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Page 2

- Directionality weaknesses
 - Letter or number reversals continuing past the end of first grade.
 - Difficulty telling time on a clock with hands
- Sequencing weaknesses
 - Reciting the months of the year
 - Trouble with temporal concepts (before/after)
- Word-finding problems when speaking

How is dyslexia diagnosed?

There is no single test for dyslexia. It affects many areas and each person has a unique profile of difficulties. Testing for dyslexia involves looking for a constellation or “cluster” of symptoms that fit the diagnosis. Comprehensive testing should be performed by a qualified professional with graduate level training and experience in the diagnosis of language-based disabilities. The following areas should be covered:

- Reading fluency (both accuracy and rate) for text passages
- Single word decoding (accuracy and speed)
- Reading comprehension (often good, but inaccuracies and level of effort can degrade comprehension)
- Phonemic word attack skills for nonsense words
- Phonological processing skills (phonological awareness, phonological memory, and rapid naming)
- Spelling
- Written Expression
- Oral Language
- Vocabulary
- Sequencing
- Memory

Background history is also an important part of diagnosing dyslexia. Dyslexia is genetic and there is frequently a maternal or paternal relative who had learning problems. Often those problems were mild and not formally diagnosed.

Should I have my child tested?

No one person will have all of these warning signs, and dyslexia exists on a continuum from mild to profound. If your child has **several of these warning signs**, and is struggling with reading or pre-reading skills, they should be tested as early as possible. This is particularly true if there is any family history of learning difficulties. Diagnosis can occur as early as kindergarten, and early intervention can make a significant difference in long-term reading skills.

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