



# How early can dyslexia be diagnosed?

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When a child is born, medical personnel and parents both make a visual inspection to make sure the baby is healthy: counting fingers and toes, testing reflexes, checking for digestive and structural challenges. But not every challenge is immediately apparent with a visual inspection. Some issues only make their existence known as a child develops, and these can be much harder to detect. Dyslexia is one such issue.

Dyslexia occurs when the brain develops and functions in a way that causes a neurological difficulty with decoding the written word. In her book *Overcoming Dyslexia*, Yale professor Sally Shaywitz provides an excellent starting definition by describing dyslexia as “an unexpected difficulty in reading in an individual who has the intelligence to be a much better reader.” Dyslexia is never a matter of lower-than-average intelligence. It is a structural dysfunction of the left side of the brain—also known as the cerebral cortex—which is responsible for decoding the written and spoken word. It’s important to know that the dysfunction does not change with age; a person can’t outgrow dyslexia.

In order to truly understand their dyslexic child’s brain, parents need to remember that the written word is a code that requires the brain to match seemingly meaningless marks on a page (letters and groups of letters) with the spoken language heard from birth, and not all brains are structurally or chemically equipped to do this with ease.

Dyslexia is often hereditary, and it frequently goes unnoticed until a child enters school and begins to struggle with literacy. That was certainly true in my own experience. As an undiagnosed dyslexic, I felt like a normal, happy kid until entering first grade. Then things changed. I couldn’t understand why I struggled with reading, writing, numbers, sequencing, tying my shoes, telling time, and differentiating between left and right, just to mention a few of my difficulties. I was working as hard as I could, but nothing fell into place for me like it did for the other first graders. I fell farther behind year after year. My story is not unique.

Each dyslexic person can manifest different aspects of dyslexia. Your child may not have the same problems I did. People with dyslexia



exhibit varying degrees of symptomology and dyslexia can affect a broad spectrum of abilities beyond reading, which can make diagnosis difficult. To complicate matters, dyslexia has sibling conditions, and your child may experience any or all of the following symptoms:

**Dyscalculia** involves trouble with math, numbers, sequencing (things like learning the alphabet in order or following a series of instructions in the proper order), sense of direction, and time management.

**Dysgraphia** presents as illegible handwriting or printing, incompletely written words or letters, poor planning of space when writing (running out of room on the page), strange contortions of the body or hands while writing, and signs of a struggle or the outright inability to take notes, which requires thinking, listening, and writing simultaneously.

**Auditory dyslexia or dysphonic dyslexia** are terms that describe the brain's difficulty differentiating and interpreting the different sounds of spoken words.

**Dyspraxia** is an issue that involves the whole brain, causing a child problems with gross (large) muscle movements and coordination as well as with fine motor skills, which may be evidenced by a child having a hard time gripping a pen, unclear hand dominance, trouble fastening clothes and tying shoes, or difficulty writing on the line on paper. A child with dyspraxia may exhibit clumsy, accident-prone behavior due to proprioceptive challenges (difficulty sensing where the body is in space); may have trouble telling right from left; and may display erratic, impulsive, or distracted behavior.

**Dyspraxia of speech** includes misspeaking words and/or halting speech. This aspect of dyslexia happens because the brain has problems planning and coordinating movements of the body parts—including the lips, jaw, and tongue—needed for speech. The child knows what he wants to say, but the

brain has difficulty coordinating the muscle movements necessary to say those words.

Like dyslexia, all these conditions are caused by structural brain differences that mean that reading, writing, math, spelling, and more will never be automatic. A dyslexic person will never read or perform other affected tasks quickly. No matter how brilliant a dyslexic student may be, these tasks will always be laborious. Dyslexia robs a person of time. Without accommodation in the classroom (like extra time for reading and writing), a dyslexic student will be under tremendous strain to keep up.

If your child struggles with experiences like these, please don't assume that he or she is lazy, unmotivated, inattentive, or unintelligent. Dyslexia is not an intelligence problem or a character issue. There is no cutoff point for IQ scores below which someone is deemed to have dyslexia, and above which they do not, nor do struggling dyslexics lack motivation or a work ethic. Learning disabilities do not equate to thinking disabilities or moral weakness. In fact, most people with dyslexia are highly intelligent, creative, and capable. Dyslexia can help a person develop numerous unique strengths that can lead to a successful career. Many business entrepreneurs have dyslexia, as do many scientists. It's a curious thing that dyslexics, who have so much trouble reading, can become so skilled at seeing the big picture in so many situations. That ability is one of the foundations of efficient problem-solving and offers real value in the workplace.

## Why Early Diagnosis of Dyslexia is Important

Timing is everything, especially when it comes to detecting dyslexia in children. Developmentally, kids have a brief, precious window of time during which they can build a foundation for literacy and learn the mechanics of reading. Beyond that window, the student must be able to read well with full comprehension in order to continue learning.

Think about your own school days—probably most of kindergarten, first grade, and second grade were spent learning how to read. After that, you gradually had more and more reading to do on your own, reading in your history book, math book, or science book. Those reading assignments became longer and more difficult with every passing year.

Dyslexia makes these reading assignments not just arduous but often nearly impossible. If a student's reading, writing, or comprehension isn't up to the task of the progressive workload, very little learning can take place. The earlier dyslexia is detected, the sooner a child can get effective help with learning to read, and the better he or she will be prepared to cope with the demands of reading to learn.

Early detection is also important because much like a nuclear event, dyslexia causes fallout—that is, far-reaching toxic effects that go well beyond the original event. For the dyslexic student, this fallout is emotional. When a child's efforts to read and write don't produce the desired results, the subsequent feelings of frustration, anger, shame, helplessness, hopelessness, and inadequacy are harsh realities that shape a child's belief systems into what can become a crippling set of concepts about their identity. Early detection and intervention are necessary to give students with dyslexia a good foundation in reading, but also a good foundation for developing life-long coping skills that will give them perspective on their situation, hope, and the ability to live up to their full potential.

## Early Symptoms of Dyslexia

Of course, early detection does not always happen. The difficult truth of the matter is that even 130 years after the first medical documentation of dyslexia, it is still frequently missed. Conservative estimates are that at least one in ten people is dyslexic—most sources suggest up to one in five—and most never get diagnosed, so learning the early signs of possible dyslexia is key for awareness, advocacy, and remediation. Contrary to popular belief, certain signs that may poten-

tially indicate dyslexia can be detected well before a child enters school.

If preschoolers have trouble identifying rhyming words, pronouncing words, calling items by the right names, following instructions with more than one step, or if they speak less or use fewer vocabulary words than their peers, screening for dyslexia is advisable. Suspect dyslexia if your preschooler is struggling to learn the names of the letters of the alphabet, including the letters of his or her own name. Delayed language development is often the first sign of dyslexia in preschoolers. Is there a history of reading or spelling difficulties in the parents, siblings, or other family members? Dyslexia is highly heritable.

Kindergarteners and first grade students with dyslexia could exhibit frustration with reading, complaining that it is too hard. Children this age are also really good at disappearing when it's time to practice reading! Students are often unable to sound out even the simplest words, since they can't easily connect a letter to its matching sound. Since dyslexics are great problem solvers and guessers, they may often supply their own narrative to an illustrated book based on the pictures. The student may say *kitty* or *kitten* instead of *cat*, for example, even though the word *cat* is used in the story.

Be aware that signs of low self-esteem and shame show up early for dyslexics. Children especially experience low self-esteem in situations in which they believe they are destined for failure. Kids with learning problems feel most vulnerable in settings in which their learning difficulties are obvious and exposed, such as in the classroom. Low self-esteem can show up in the following ways:

- Quitting or outright avoidance of difficult tasks
- Being disruptive or clowning around in class
- Poor eye contact, slumping posture, and reluctance to talk or engage in conversation
- Being Impulsive
- Becoming aggressive or bullying

- Negative self-talk: I'm stupid, I can't do anything right

Every day that a child doesn't receive needed help—and doesn't even know that such help exists—a little piece of that child's heart and soul dies. He's just slow. She just isn't very comfortable around people. He just has a short attention span. I didn't talk much when I was a kid, either. He's just really clumsy. I guess she just likes baby-talk.

Remarks like these are made by parents around the world every day, and they get shrugged off by their speakers and hearers. Parents don't realize that at their foundation, these very observations are a clarion call to action, and that time is of the essence. If you have observed any of these traits or behaviors in your child, please don't wait. Share your observations with your child's pediatrician and ask for a recommendation for a qualified licensed educational psychologist or neurologist to get your child tested as soon as possible. Don't assume your child is too young for testing—some tests are designed for children as young as one or two months, while many others are effective starting at the age of two years.

Educating yourself about how dyslexia and other learning challenges present themselves and understanding the next steps to take if you do suspect dyslexia can change your child's life for the better so profoundly that it's difficult to imagine. Doing so is well worth your time and effort!

This article is based on an excerpt from my book, *Raising a Child with Dyslexia: What Every Parent Needs to Know*, a user-friendly guide that provides detailed assistance to parents and educators who want to help dyslexic children achieve their best life, including how to build a strong preliteracy foundation from birth.

**Don M. Winn** is a multiple award-winning children's author, keynote speaker, and dyslexia advocate. As a dyslexia advocate and a dyslexic himself, he frequently addresses parents and educators on how to maximize the value of shared reading time and how to help dyslexic and other struggling readers to learn to love reading. He has written the book, *Raising a Child with Dyslexia: What Every Parent Needs to Know* and numerous articles about dyslexia and helping struggling readers. His blog archives are available at [www.donwinn.com](http://www.donwinn.com).

