

Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent wording reading and spelling.

. Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. Difficulties with these are reliable markers of dyslexia.

Phonological awareness is defined as the ability to identify and manipulate the sounds in words, and is recognised as a key foundation skill for early word-level reading and spelling development³⁶. For example, phonological awareness would be demonstrated by understanding that if the 'p' in 'pat' is changed to an 's', the word becomes 'sat'.

Verbal (phonological short-term) memory is the ability to retain an ordered sequence of verbal material for a short period of time; it is used, for example, to recall a list of words or numbers or to remember a list of instructions.

Verbal processing speed is the time taken to process familiar verbal information, such as letters and digits.

Difficulties in these areas can be thought of as reflecting disorders in the systems that are involved in processing information about word-sounds (phonology). In practice people with dyslexia often find it hard to:

- retain spoken information within their short term memory systems
- access spoken information from long-term memory
- reflect on the units of sound within words

These difficulties impact on the learning of vital aspects of reading and writing, such as encoding, decoding, segmenting and blending.

In addition the definition identifies the following difficulties which, although not part of the dyslexic pattern, can co-occur with it.

- Aspects of language - receptive and expressive language (Speaking and Listening)
- Mental calculation –dyscalculia
- Concentration and attention –distractibility
- Motor coordination – dyspraxia
- Personal organisation

••Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities.

Difficulties of a dyslexic nature can affect children across the range of intellectual abilities. This represents an important shift away from reliance on a discrepancy between measured IQ and measured attainment in reading and spelling once used to identify dyslexia

••It is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points.

The definition proposes that dyslexic difficulties are best thought of as existing on a continuum from mild to severe, rather than forming a discrete category⁴². Until recently, a child was deemed to either have or not have dyslexia. It is now recognised that there is no sharp dividing line between having a learning difficulty such as dyslexia and not having it⁴³.

•• A good indication of the severity and persistence of dyslexia difficulties can be gained by examining how the individual responds or has responded to well-founded intervention.

The severity of a particular learning difficulty can be gauged by the response of the learner to good, well-implemented intervention. For example, those with mild literacy or dyslexic difficulties will make good progress in word-level reading in the context of appropriate classroom teaching or after some additional support.

A small proportion will need more intensive support and long-term assistance. It is important that those children who have responded well to interventions continue to be monitored, to ensure that progress is maintained and to notice whether there are subsequent difficulties involving aspects such as reading fluency and spelling.

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