

Everyone thinks they know what dyslexia is. But, says educational consultant Janice Rolnick, you'd be amazed at the common misconceptions which abound.

THE TRUTH ABOUT DYSLEXIA

what every parent (and every teacher) needs to know...

OVER AND OVER AGAIN, in my 30+ years of working with dyslexic children, I have heard people say the most outrageous things about what dyslexia is – and isn't. More worryingly, it is not just parents who get it wrong, it's teachers too.

These are the sort of comments I hear:

People who are dyslexic can't read... If a child performs well in school they can't be dyslexic... He's not dyslexic, he's just lazy!... Only very bright children can be dyslexic... Dyslexia is an excuse for not being very bright, mainly used by the middle classes... Only boys can be dyslexic... Dyslexic children see and write letters and words backwards – if a child doesn't reverse letters, they can't be dyslexic...

So what is the truth?

Dyslexia is a language-based specific learning disability which is neurological in origin, but it refers to a cluster of symptoms – and, critically, no two dyslexics are the same. The degree of difficulty with reading, spelling and writing varies from person to person.

These days it is considered a 'learning difference' rather than a 'difficulty'. Although dyslexic people learn in a different way to others, they have a range of strengths, including creativity and thinking outside the box, which can lead to very original thought.

There's no cure for dyslexia, and it will affect people their entire lives, although its impact can change at different stages. The experience of dyslexia is different for each person; it depends not only on the severity of the condition, but also on the timeliness and effectiveness of remediation.

Dyslexia is not due to the lack of either intelligence or the desire to learn. It runs in families, and occurs in people of all backgrounds and intellectual levels. With appropriate teaching methods, strategies and adjustments, dyslexic people are able to learn very successfully.

The earlier dyslexia is identified, the better a child's chances – the sooner he or she is assessed, the sooner he or she can obtain the appropriate instruction and strategies to succeed in school.

What to look for

General problems experienced by people with dyslexia include learning to speak, learning letters and their sounds and organising written and spoken language. It can affect numeracy, so trouble with memorising number facts is also an indicator. A dyslexic child may have difficulty reading quickly enough to comprehend, as well as keeping up with and understanding longer reading assignments. Spelling may also be a problem, and learning foreign languages.

Primary-aged children may be struggling to remember simple sequences such as counting to 20, naming the days of the week and the months of the year, sequencing the alphabet, times tables etc. They may have trouble understanding rhyme (eg not knowing that cat rhymes with fat), and also in recognising words that start with the same sound (eg not being able to spot that dog, day and daisy all start with d). They may display pronunciation difficulties, and not always be able to think of the right word (eg using 'stuff' or 'thingy' instead). Finally, they may also struggle to remember instructions.

The how and why of assessment

The only people who can diagnose dyslexia are Educational Psychologists and Specialist Teachers, who have additional qualifications and, preferably, a Practising Certificate. It's crucial to intervene early. When children do not understand the nature of their difficulty, they tend to blame themselves. Children with dyslexia often end up feeling 'stupid', and may become stressed, anxious and even depressed.

A diagnosis helps children to understand why they are struggling, that dyslexia is not their fault and, vitally, that they can be helped. With the right support, strategies and adjustments, dyslexic people can do well at school and university and have successful and satisfying careers. Having a diagnostic label is a positive thing. It helps define the problems children face and allows for greater understanding – and it means that parents can acquire knowledge, seek help and take the necessary action to improve the situation. ●



about the author:

Janice Rolnick qualified to teach in 1977, and soon began to work 1-1 with dyslexic children. She has the RSA diploma in Teaching and Assessing Pupils with Specific Learning Difficulties and was awarded a Master of Education degree in Special Educational Needs from the University of Hertfordshire. In 2010 she was awarded the Certificate of Competence in Educational Testing. She holds a Practising Certificate from PATOSS, and has recently undertaken training into assessing for dyscalculia and for carrying out workplace needs assessments. She has been a SENCO in both state and independent schools for the past 20 years, was awarded the status of Advanced Skills Teacher and has wide experience of a range of SEN issues. She carries out dyslexia and dyscalculia assessments, both privately and for the British Dyslexia Association.

Janice offers: advice for parents concerned about their child's learning/behaviour • full diagnostic assessments for dyslexia and dyscalculia • recommendations for strategies for both home and school • advice for schools on how to implement recommendations arising from assessment • help to find a suitably qualified tutor • training for teachers and teaching assistants on dyslexia friendly teaching

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