

Characteristics of Dyslexia

Clues to Dyslexia in Early Childhood

The earliest clues involve mostly spoken language. The very first clue to a language (and reading) problem may be delayed language. Once the child begins to speak, look for the following problems:

The Preschool Years

- Trouble learning common nursery rhymes such as “Jack and Jill” and “Humpty Dumpty”
- A lack of appreciation of rhymes
- Mispronounced words; persistent baby talk
- Difficulty in learning (and remembering) names of letters
- Failure to know the letters in his own name

Kindergarten and First Grade

- Failure to understand that words come apart; for example, that *batboy* can be pulled apart into *bat* and *boy*, and, later on, that the word *bat* can be broken down still further and sounded out at: “*b*” “*aaa*” “*t*”
- Inability to learn to associate letters with sounds, such as being unable to connect the letter *b* and the “*b*” sound
- Reading errors that show no connection to the sounds of the letters; for example, the word *big* is read as *goat*
- The inability to read common one-syllable words or to sound out even the simplest of words, such as *mat*, *cat*, *hop*, *nap*
- Complaints about how hard reading is, or running and hiding when it is time to read
- A history of reading problems in parents or siblings

Signs of Strengths in Higher-Level Thinking Processes

- Curiosity
- A great imagination
- The ability to figure things out
- Eager embrace of new ideas
- Getting the gist of things
- A good understanding of new concepts
- Surprising maturity
- A large vocabulary for the age group
- Enjoyment in solving puzzles

Characteristics of Dyslexia *(continued)*

- Talent at building models
- Excellent comprehension of stories read or told to child

Clues to Dyslexia From Second Grade On

Problems in Speaking

- Mispronunciation of long, unfamiliar, or complicated words; the fracturing of words—leaving out parts of words or confusing the order of the parts of words; for example, *aluminum* becomes *amulium*
- Speech that is not fluent—pausing or hesitating often when speaking, lots of um’s during speech, no glibness
- The use of imprecise language, such as vague references to *stuff* or *things* instead of the proper name of an object
- Not being able to find the exact word, such as confusing words that sound alike: saying *tornado* instead of *volcano*, substituting *lotion* for *ocean*, or *humanity* for *humidity*
- The need for time to summon an oral response or the inability to come up with a verbal response quickly when questioned
- Difficulty in remembering isolated pieces of verbal information (rote memory)—trouble remembering dates, names, telephone numbers, random lists

Problems in Reading

- Very slow progress in acquiring reading skills
- The lack of a strategy to read new words
- Trouble reading unknown (new, unfamiliar) words that must be sounded out; making wild stabs or guesses at reading a word; failure to systematically sound out words.
- The inability to read small “function” words such as *that*, *an*, *in*
- Stumbling on reading multisyllable words, or the failure to come close to sounding out the full word
- Omitting parts of words when reading; the failure to decode parts within a word, as if someone had chewed a hole in the middle of the word, such as *conible* for *convertible*
- A terrific fear of reading out loud; the avoidance of oral reading
- Oral reading filled with substitutions, omissions, and mispronunciations
- Oral reading that is choppy and labored, not smooth or fluent
- Oral reading that lacks inflection and sounds like the reading of a foreign language
- A reliance on context to discern the meaning of what is read

Characteristics of Dyslexia (*continued*)

- A better ability to understand words in context than to read isolated single words
- Disproportionately poor performance on multiple choice tests
- The inability to finish tests on time
- The substitution of words with the same meaning for words in the test he can't pronounce, such as *car* for *automobile*
- Disastrous spelling, with words not resembling true spelling; some spellings may be missed by spell check
- Trouble reading mathematics word problems
- Reading that is very slow and tiring
- Homework that never seems to end, or with parents often recruited as readers
- Messy handwriting despite what may be an excellent facility at word processing—nimble fingers
- Extreme difficulty learning a foreign language
- A lack of enjoyment in reading, and the avoidance of reading books or even a sentence
- The avoidance of reading for pleasure, which seems too exhausting
- Reading whose accuracy improves over time, though it continues to lack fluency and is laborious
- Lowered self-esteem, with pain that is not always visible to others
- A history of reading, spelling, and foreign language problems in family members

Signs of Strengths in Higher-Level Thinking Processes

- Excellent thinking skills: conceptualization, reasoning, imagination, abstraction
- Learning that is accomplished best through meaning rather than rote memorization
- Ability to get the “big picture”
- A high level of understanding of what is read to him
- The ability to read and to understand at a high level overlearned (that is, highly practiced) words in a special area of interest; for example, if his hobby is restoring cars, he may be able to read auto mechanics magazines
- Improvement as an area of interest becomes more specialized and focused, when he develops a miniature vocabulary that he can read
- A surprising sophisticated listening vocabulary
- Excellence in areas not dependent on reading, such as math, computers, and visual arts, or excellence in more conceptual (versus factoid-driven) subjects such as philosophy, biology, social studies, neuroscience, and creative writing

Characteristics of Dyslexia *(continued)*

Clues to Dyslexia in Young Adults and Adults

Problems in Speaking

- Persistence of earlier oral language difficulties
- The mispronunciation of the names of people and places, and tripping over parts of words
- Difficulty remembering names of people and places and the confusion of names that sound alike
- A struggle to retrieve words: “It was on the tip of my tongue”
- Lack of glibness, especially if put on the spot
- Spoken vocabulary that is smaller than listening vocabulary, and hesitation to say aloud words that might be mispronounced

Problems in Reading

- A childhood history of reading and spelling difficulties
- Word reading becomes more accurate over time but continues to require great effort
- Lack of fluency
- Embarrassment caused by oral reading
- Trouble reading and pronouncing uncommon, strange, or unique words such as people’s names, street or location names, food dishes on a menu (often resorting to asking the waiter about the special of the day or resorting to saying “I’ll have what he’s having,” to avoid the embarrassment of not being able to read the menu)
- Persistent reading problems
- The substitution of made-up words during reading for words that cannot be pronounced—for example, *metropolitan* becomes *mitan*—and the failure to recognize the word *metropolitan* when it is seen again or heard in a lecture the next day
- Extreme fatigue from reading
- Slow reading of most materials: books, manuals, subtitles in foreign films
- Penalized by multiple-choice tests
- Unusually long hours spent reading school or work-related materials
- Frequent sacrifice of social life for studying
- A preference from books with figures, charts, or graphics
- A preference for books with fewer words per page or with lots of white showing on a page
- Disinclination to read for pleasure

Characteristics of Dyslexia *(continued)*

- Spelling that remains disastrous and a preference for less complicated words in writing that are easier to spell
- Particularly poor performance on rote clerical tasks

Signs of Strengths in Higher-Level Thinking Processes

- The maintenance of strengths noted in the school-age period
- A high learning capability
- A noticeable improvement when given additional time on multiple-choice examinations
- Noticeable excellence when focused on a highly specialized area such as medicine, law, public policy finance, architecture, or basic science
- Excellence in writing if content and not spelling is important
- A noticeable articulateness in the expression of ideas and feelings
- Exceptional empathy and warmth, and feeling for others
- Success in areas not dependent on rote memory
- A talent for high-level conceptualization and the ability to come up with original insights
- Big-picture thinking
- Inclination to think out of the box
- A noticeable resilience and ability to adapt

These clues across a life span offer a portrait of dyslexia. Examine them carefully, think about them, and determine if any of these clues fit your students. Look for clues in the weaknesses and strengths. Identifying the weaknesses makes it possible to spot dyslexia in children before they are expected to read and in adults after they have developed some degree of reading accuracy but are continuing to show the remnants of earlier problems, reading slowly and with great effort.

If you think a student has some of these problems, it is important to note how frequent they are and how many there are. You don't need to worry about isolated clues or ones that appear very rarely. For you to be concerned, the symptoms must be persistent; anyone can mispronounce a word now and then, or confuse similar-sounding words occasionally. What you are looking for is a persistent pattern—the occurrence of a number of these symptoms over a prolonged period of time. That represents a likelihood of dyslexia.