

DYSLEXIA

Dyslexia is a type of reading disability in which the eyes are able to see letters and words clearly, but the brain is somehow unable to "translate" them into correct meanings. Dyslexia can be part of a general learning disability, or it can occur alone. It exists to some degree in about one out of ten children, usually boys, who are of normal or above-normal intelligence.

Because so much of what we learn is gained through the sense of sight, people have a natural tendency to associate reading problems with a possible eye problem. Sometimes a need for eyeglasses can lead to eye fatigue, which might slow the reading process somewhat, but eye defects do not in themselves cause reading problems.

Dyslexia is probably related to a "mis-wiring" of certain connections in the brain, which leads to a slow or abnormal maturation of reading ability. Although it might stem from "minimal brain damage" from a difficult birth delivery, dyslexia is more likely to be genetic, since the problem tends to run in families.

Diagnosis

A dyslexic child may have a very short attention span and tend to be hyperactive, though these signs alone are not reliable indicators of a potential reading or learning problem. Once dyslexia is diagnosed, which is not usually until the early school years (though it may be suspected earlier), experienced professionals can test for specific types of reading difficulties.

Someone will usually recommend a "complete eye examination" as part of a broad evaluation, but that is unlikely to be very helpful since the eyes are not really part of the basic problem.

Unproven Treatments

Whenever a child's learning or reading skills are particularly slow to develop, the parents tend to blame themselves, thinking they must have done something wrong. It is this guilt and the strong desire to make matters right for their child that makes them grasp at any straw—no matter how far-fetched or undocumented—to try to help their child.

One such popular straw is the "visual training clinic." However, there is no scientific evidence that hand-eye coordination exercises, running through

mazes, or using the trampoline or balance board will have any effect on a child's reading. There is no evidence that any type of eye exercise, such as "accommodative rock" (rapid shifts in focus from far to near to far) will improve reading skills. The current theory of color-related dyslexia and its correction with colored lenses also has no scientific basis.

Although some children have shown slight progress at times with such unproven treatments, many experts feel that it is the time spent with the children that has benefited them, not the treatment itself.

While it is understandable to want to try every possible means of helping your child, "visual training" is wasteful. You will spend a lot of time and money, and put your child through a lot of work. By pursuing such "straws," you could actually be shifting attention away from educational managements that are more likely to be helpful and have a greater chance of success.

Dyslexic children CAN learn to read

Dyslexic children cannot be taught to read by the same methods that are used with other children. A dyslexic child has a deficit in one or more areas of perception. Once this has been identified (by a diagnostic team that usually includes a pediatric neurologist and a reading educator) and an accurate diagnosis made, appropriate educational methods can be tailored to the child's specific problem. Reading can then be taught in a way that avoids the perception problem, with specialized, sometimes unusual methods. For example, if your child cannot make words out of letter combinations by seeing them, s/he may learn to read by touching letters cut out of sandpaper.

A truly dyslexic child is not likely to become a "good" reader, even with good teaching. Yet, properly taught, he or she can learn to read and also develop other skills to acquire information normally offered by the written word.

It may help you and your child to know that some dyslexics—despite their dyslexia—have become brilliant scientists and mathematicians! Learning more about those individuals and their achievements could provide a good psychological boost to everyone in your family.