Early Help
Better Future

A Guide to the Early Recognition of Dyslexia

by Jean Augur

Introduction

In the past it was thought that the earliest that a child could be identified as having a dyslexic profile was at about the age of six. This was because, by six, the child was already giving cause for concern particularly as regards reading, writing and spelling, all very important skills in the school curriculum. With experience, however, and from the findings of research studies, it is now evident that there are many signs well before school age which may suggest such a profile and the consequent difficulties ahead. Parents and pre-school carers as well as educators in those early years are amongst those in the best position to recognise these signs, and to provide appropriate activities to help. Training in some of these activities will help to build firm foundations for later, more formal, training.

What is Dyslexia?

Dyslexia is best described as a specific difficulty in learning, in one or more of reading, spelling and written language which may be accompanied by difficulty in number work, short-term memory, sequencing, auditory and/or visual perception, and motor skills.
It is particularly related to mastering and using written language – alphabetic, numeric and musical notation. In addition, oral language is often affected to some degree.

Dyslexia occurs despite normal teaching and is independent of socio-economic background or intelligence. It is, however, more easily detected in those with average or above intelligence.

Some of the Early Signs which may suggest a Dyslexic Profile

General

- Family history of similar difficulties;
- May have walked early but did not crawl – was a “bottom shuffler” or “tummy wriggler”;
- Persistent difficulties in getting dressed efficiently;
- Persistent difficulty in putting shoes on the correct feet;
  Just marking the shoes with “outside” may help to ease the difficulty. Marking them “L” and “R” may not help because they still cannot distinguish the difference between left and right.
- Unduly late in learning to fasten buttons or tie shoe-laces;
- Obvious “good” and “bad” days, for no apparent reason;
- Enjoys being read to, but shows no interest in letters or words;
- Often accused of “not listening” or “not paying attention”;
- Excessive tripping, bumping into things, and falling over;
- Difficulty with catching, kicking or throwing a ball;
- Difficulty with hopping and/or skipping;
- Difficulty with clapping a simple rhythm.

Speech and Language

- Later than expected learning to speak clearly;
- Persistent jumbled phrases;
  e.g.”cobblers’ club” for “toddlers’ club”, “tebby-dare” for “teddy-bear”, “pence-fost” for “fence-post”;
- Use of substitute words or “near-misses” e.g. “lampshade” for lamppost”;
- Mislabelling – knows colours but mislabels them e.g. “black” for “brown”;
- An early lisp e.g. “duckth” for “ducks”;
- Inability to remember the label for known objects e.g. table, chair;
- Persistent word-searching;
- Confusion between directional words e.g. up / down; in / out;
- Difficulty in learning nursery rhymes; e.g.
- Finds difficulty with rhyming words, e.g “cat”; “mat”; “pig”; “fat”;
- Difficulty with sequence e.g. coloured bead sequence – later with days of the week or numbers.

Strengths

- Quick “thinker” and “doer” – but not in response to instruction;
- Enhanced creativity – often good at drawing – good sense of colour;
- Aptitude for constructional or technical toys e.g. bricks, puzzles, Lego, blocks, remote control for TV and/or video, computer keyboard;
- Appears bright – but seems an “enigma”.

Not all dyslexic children experience all of the difficulties listed above. Moreover, it is important to note that many very many young children make similar mistakes to dyslexic children, but it is the **severity** of the trait, the **clarity** with which it may be observed, and the **length of time during which it persists** which give the vital clues to the identification of the dyslexic learner.

What does the child say?

Young children are very perceptive about themselves and very often the things which they say can alert adults to certain difficulties, provided that the adult is wise enough o listen and learn, for example:

- I think God's put my brain in upside down;
- The word is coming;
- I'm getting close;
- The word's near the front of my mouth;
- Is yesterday the day after tomorrow?
- Where is the beginning of the book?
- Where does the book start?
- This book is stupid;
- Where's the top of the page?
- Which way does it go?
- I've dropped it again;
- What's that word again?

In many ways the dyslexic child is at a disadvantage when he enters school. His main strengths are centred in the right hemisphere of the brain. Hence, he is often a random, intuitive, impulsive, sensitive thinker. Unfortunately for him, school is a left-hemisphered environment where he will be expected to read, write, spell, deal with symbols – letters, numbers, musical notation – learn phonics, follow instructions, listen carefully, respond accurately to what he hears and put things in order. The earlier he is given activities which will build a sound foundation for learning such skills, the better chance he will have.
The period between 3 and 7 years is a most important time for learning.

General Activities

- Say nursery rhymes together. These seemed to go out of fashion for a while, but fortunately have had a revival. They are part of our history and heritage and help to encourage rhythm and rhyme at an early age.

- Finger play.

- Read poetry to children, especially amusing or nonsense poems. Try making up jingles and limericks together.

- Mime a particular nursery rhyme or incident and encourage the children to guess the mime. They can then choose something to mime in return.

- Use drama.

- Provide pictures to talk about. Help the child to notice the details using prepositions in discussion. “Is the man in the blue hat **in front of** or **behind** the lady?” Is the boy climbing **under** or **over** the gate?” Is the bus going **up** or **down** the hill?

- Hunt the thimble. Encourage the children to verbalise using prepositions again. “Is the thimble **inside** the pot, **under** the pot, **on** the box etc?”

- Play “Simon Says”.

- Playground games, e.g. Follow My Leader, In and Out among the Bluebells, The Ally Ally O.

- The Hokey-Cokey – action involving parts of the body.

- Board games e.g. Snakes and Ladders, Ludo, Bingo etc., to develop turn-taking.

- Watching television **together.** Television can be a useful form of learning if it is not allowed to be passive. There are many programmes which give scope for further discussion and activities. Older children enjoy factual programmes involving nature study and exploration which can lead on to project work and interesting files.

- There are some splendid puzzle books in bookshops and stationers. Make use of these – joining dots, mazes, simple crosswords are all useful.
  Mazes can be amazing fun, but choose the level of difficulty to match the ability.

- Encourage your children to help in household activities e.g. laying the table.

Listening Activities and Auditory Sequencing

- Put various objects in containers – sand, dried peas, pennies, button etc. Shake the containers one at a time and ask the child to say what he thinks might be inside and to describe the sound. Ask him questions, “Is there one penny in here or more than one?” “Is the sound hard? Or gentle? Or soft?”

- Listen to everyday sounds, preferably with eyes closed. What can be heard? The telephone ringing? Voices? A clock ticking? Listen to traffic sounds – motor bike, lorry, ambulance, car etc.

- Tape some everyday sounds, e.g. tap dripping, toilet flushing, phone ringing.

Play them to the child and see if he can recognise them. Sound lotto and sound stories are very useful and enjoyable activities.

- Ask a child to close his eyes and guess who is speaking.

- Tap or clap a simple rhythm for the child to repeat. Gradually make the rhythm more difficult. Clap words of one syllable. Then move on to two syllable words, then more. Say the words as you clap them i.e. cat, dog, black-board, hol-i-day, tel-e-vi-sion. Later the child is given a word to clap. Can he say how many **beats** the word has? Use the child's name for this activity.

- I Spy. This game is too difficult for some children if the letter names are used. Therefore take it in stages and play it several ways:
    - Using the **sound**, e.g. I spy with my little eye something beginning with the sound (of the letter).
    - Increase the load, e.g. I spy with my little eye something beginning with the same sound as ball.
    - Using the same **letter name**, e.g. I spy with my little eye something beginning with the letter B.
    - **Using rhyming**: I spy with my little eye something that rhymes with bat.
    - **Ending sound.** I spy with my little eye something ending with the sound.

- **Sound** a word in individual units, e.g. m-a-n and ask the child to say the whole word "man". Increase the number of sounds in the word, e.g. l-a-m-p, tr-u-m-p-e-t. Do not over emphasise the sounds!

- Say pairs of words which rhyme – "cat", "bat" – do they rhyme?
  Say pairs of words which do not rhyme – "cat", "dog" – do they rhyme?
  Start off a round with a word and ask each child to say a rhyming word, e.g. "day" – "play" – "may" – "tray". The first to break the rhyme must start a new round, e.g. "pin" – "tin" – "thin" – etc.

- Simon Says. Start with very simple instructions e.g. "Simon says, clap your hands". Gradually make the instructions more difficult, e.g. "Simon says, touch your ear and your nose".

- Say a group of words with a "stranger" in it, e.g. "cat", "dog", "apple", "fox".
  The child tells you or draws a picture of the stranger. Ask why it is different.
  This can also be played with rhyming words, e.g. "cat", "bat", "fox", "hat".
  Which word doesn't rhyme?

- I went to market and I bought …….
  Start with a particular group of things, e.g. fruit or vegetables, because it is easier to remember related things. Later, shop for random things, e.g. a piano, a thimble, table mats, a coat, etc. This game can also be played where each item must begin with a given letter, e.g. peas, potatoes, pancakes, etc.
  Vary the game with different openings, e.g.

    - I packed my case with …..
    - In my Christmas stocking I found …..
    - On my birthday I had …..

- Songs involving memory and sequencing, e.g.

    - Old Macdonald had a farm
    - The twelve days of Christmas
    - Ten green bottles

- Songs and rhymes involving days of the week and months of the year.

- Following instructions. Start with one or two only:
  e.g. “Please pick up the pencil and put it in the box”. Gradually make the sequence longer, e.g. “Go to the shelf, find the red box, bring it to me”. Encourage the child to repeat the instruction before carrying it out. His own voice is his best memory aid.

Looking Activities and Visual Sequencing

Use bits of card to make up your own games

- Snap. Use pictures only at first, then introduce letters and simple words.
- Pairs.
- Pelmanism or memory games.
- Dominoes. **Dominoes provide simple help with numbers as well as visual sequencing.**

- Sorting objects into colours, shapes and sizes. Sorting pictures, e.g. “Put all the pictures that start with the same sound as table in one pile, and all the pictures which start with the same sound as dog in another pile”.

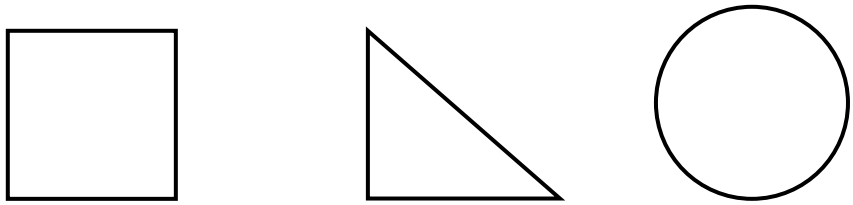
- Happy Families.

- Look together at a picture. Cover the picture and ask the child questions about it, e.g. “How many children were in the picture?” “How many people were wearing hats?” “Was it winter or summer?”

- Provide a tray of objects for the child to look at. After a few seconds cover the tray and ask the child to name all the objects he saw.

- Provide a tray of objects for the child to look at. Ask the child to close his eyes. Remove one or two objects from the tray. Ask the child to open his eyes and say which objects he thinks were removed.

- After shapes have been taught, draw three shapes on a card. Show the card to the child, cover it, and then ask him to draw what he saw, or put out the sequence with shapes drawn on cards. Gradually increase the length of the sequence. E.g.



Keep the shapes nice and simple.
You could also use these for Snap.

- Show the child several pictures - three is enough at first, and ask him to arrange them in order to make a story. Encourage them to tell you the story.

- Bingo – looking only.

- Draw several related pictures and include a stranger, e.g. apple, pear, book, plum. Ask the child to point to the “odd man out”.

Kinaesthetic Awareness

- Tracing shapes, letters, words, simple pictures etc.

- Making letters with plasticine, modelling clay, or pipe cleaners. Using chalk, paint, thick felt pens to write very large shapes and letters. Making letter shapes with the forefinger in a tray of dry or wet sand.

- Feeling and naming sandpaper or felt shapes or letters with the eyes closed.

- Feeling and naming wooden or plastic letters with the eyes close.

- Putting various objects or wooden letters in bags and asking the child to name the object or letter.

- Jigsaw puzzles.

- Threading a sequence of coloured beads on to a string and asking the child to repeat the sequence several times.

Physical Skills

Do not neglect the physical skills such as throwing, catching, kicking balls, skipping, hopping, jumping and balancing. Many children find these activities difficult and will need a great deal of practice.

Book Knowledge

Research has shown repeatedly that where children make an early acquaintance with books and they share this experience with parents, the results are beneficial.
It is important to talk about books, using the language of books – pictures, words and letters - to realise that books can be looked at, read and enjoyed over and over again.
It is not automatic for a child to know how to hold a book, to know which way it opens, where the story starts, where the top of the page is or in which direction the words flow. All these things often have to be taught. Dyslexic children in particular, need to have such points drawn to their attention many times over.

Writing

Rather than copying letter shapes, which can sometimes create or exacerbate "anti-writing" movements if not supervised very closely, large writing movements should be encouraged. These can be done as part of music and/or movement lessons, or by using the forefinger with tactile materials such as sand, e.g.

Sounds

When introducing children to "sounds" sometimes referred to as "phonics", these should be taught quietly with as little voice emphasis as possible. Rather than saying "(a) is for apple", it is better to say the word first, thereby giving the clue to the sound which the child is required to listen for – hence "apple (a), bat (b)", etc.

Letter Names

Many pre-school children know the names of several letters and some can even "recite" the alphabet in order. Activities using wooden, plastic or tactile letters are all useful and will reinforce the letter shapes, both upper case ABC which are easier, and lower case abc. Many young children will have difficulty with b,d,p,g,q but soon outgrow this.
The problem persists, however, for dyslexic children.

Parents

A mother, in particular, is often very perceptive about her own child and may well have had the feeling before formal school starts that “things were not quite right”. All too often, when she has attempted to express these feelings, she has met with comments such as, “Don’t worry. Don’t expect too much. He will catch up”. At worst she may be labelled fussy, pushy, or over anxious. The mother’s comments should always be listened to and her concerns taken seriously.

Where to Seek Help

During regular pre-school development checks, a doctor or health visitor may see children with an uneven development profile, indicating weaker areas requiring attention from:

a) a speech or language therapist; and/or
b) an occupational therapist to look at fine motor co-ordination problems; and/or
c) a paediatric physiotherapist for gross motor problems.

It would be helpful if information from all these sources, plus parents’ comments and pre-school educators’ observations could be made available to the headteacher when the child enters his first school. In too many cases it can take several years for a child to be identified as having a specific learning difficulty/dyslexia, by which time failure and consequent behavioural problems may well be all too apparent. The valuable observations and record keeping of parents and of the early years in education could prevent this sad situation arising.

Further Information

Top tips for preschoolers: http://www.dystalk.com/topics/13-early-years-preschool

Games and Resources: www.ldalearning.com