

Chapter 3

DYSLEXIA

The staff at Tom's nursery school loved him. He was a bright and sociable little boy who was constantly engaged in one activity or another. He got on well with the other children; he was cooperative and able to look after himself. He may have asked a lot of questions but staff enjoyed his friendly interaction; they were, however, surprised that this apparently quick and able child did not recognise the names above the coat pegs and that his drawings of people never included arms. Despite this everyone assumed that he would do well when he moved on to his primary school. This was not to be the case. Tom struggled with literacy and was eventually identified as being dyslexic when he was eight years old.

I imagine we have all read about people with dyslexia who are incredibly successful, Albert Einstein and Richard Branson being two well-known examples. There is some evidence that the dyslexic brain does have compensations. The dyslexic entrepreneur may be bad with small details yet have vision and an amazing grasp of the big picture. There are many people with dyslexia who are excellent artists, sportsmen and scientists.

The young person with dyslexia does, however, have to navigate and survive school before he can burst onto the world and follow his own interests and talents. Each child will take a different journey and will need appropriate support and encouragement. Parents have a vital role to play.

We live in a print-filled world. Fluent reading and writing is expected to be the norm, not the exception, and yet for our dyslexic children every school day will present difficulties and challenges. The child with extreme dyslexia may struggle to read even at secondary level. The child with mild dyslexia may read well but very slowly; small reading inaccuracies may affect his understanding of text.

This chapter looks at the kind of difficulties typically experienced by dyslexic children at different ages and stages of development and will consider how parents can help. The problems encountered by a seven-year-old will of course be different to those of a 10-, 15- or 20-year-old.

The chapter looks at particular ages and stages, ranging from nursery to 18 plus. At the end you will find individual case studies to illustrate particular aspects of dyslexia. These stories also help to show how the needs of the dyslexic learner change as they progress through school.

The sections of the chapter are not mutually exclusive but you may want to skip bits that you think are not relevant to you. But before that, a little background information should be useful.

The story so far

Back in the 1980s, which is when Tom started primary school, there was growing acceptance and understanding of the label dyslexia but at that time there were still many people (teachers included) who held the view that it was a middle-class invention to explain away dim children.

Things have moved on. Dyslexia was recognised under the Disability Act in 1995, and in 2009 Sir Jim Rose published a government report entitled *Identifying and Teaching Children and Young People with Dyslexia and Literacy Difficulties*. Dyslexia is also specifically mentioned in the 2010 Equality Act, which means that schools now have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that those affected by dyslexia are not disadvantaged compared to their peers. Despite this, adequate help is not always forthcoming, and the parents of children who are struggling to read and spell can feel concerned, frustrated and at times helpless. It is not always easy for them to know how to progress or what to do to help the child who is having difficulty.

Over time there have been many definitions of dyslexia. What they have in common is the idea that dyslexia is a difficulty with reading and spelling. ‘Dys’ means difficulty and ‘lexia’ means words. The Rose report agreed on the following broad (and somewhat circular) definition: ‘Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling.’

It is difficult to be more precise because it is genuinely difficult to pin down. No two people with dyslexia have exactly identical profiles of strengths and difficulties. Reading, writing and spelling are complex skills that involve many different processes, which means that there are many places where things can go wrong.

The one thing that all people with dyslexia have in common is difficulty with reading and spelling. The majority of such people have associated difficulty with aspects of language. A number of them have difficulty with visual analysis of print but by no means all. Some also have both language and visual difficulty. Brain scans show atypical electrical activity in certain areas of the dyslexic brain when reading is happening (compared with the non-dyslexic reader) but this varies from one dyslexic brain to another. Dyslexic people are not all alike.

If this all sounds a bit woolly there is some firm ground out there, and there are things which we can say with certainty about dyslexia:

- The characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed (these are explained further on in this chapter).
- Dyslexia occurs across the full range of intellectual ability.
- Dyslexia is on a continuum ranging from mild to severe. There are no established cut-off points.
- Co-existing difficulties may be seen in relation to language, motor coordination, mental maths, concentration and personal organisation. Of course, many non-dyslexic children also have these difficulties.
- It is only by looking at a child's response to good teaching and intervention that we can establish the severity of the difficulty.
- Dyslexia is neurological in origin.
- There is a genetic basis and it tends to run in families.

It is estimated that about 10 per cent of the population experience a degree of dyslexia. The earlier we can identify and support children who are at risk of difficulty the better.

Reception class through to the end of the infant phase

So how can we identify difficulties and support four- to seven-year-olds during this period?

There are two ways in which the young reader starts to make sense of the words on a page. She either has to learn to sound out each word or she has to learn to recognise the whole word visually. Both approaches play a part and most children rely on a combination of both to get off to a successful start. The dyslexic reader, however, has difficulty with one or both of these systems.

The sounding-out approach to reading requires good phonological awareness, and whole-word recognition requires good visual memory.

There are, however, a number of additional cognitive and information processing weaknesses which have also been found to occur alongside poor literacy skills.

These trademark problems which are described below are often evident from an early age – certainly before the child is in school. If many

of these are evident before school then it is prudent to consider the young child to be at risk of future difficulty. If they are evident and your child is already in school and perhaps not finding it easy to take off with early reading activities then now is the time to start planning and making sure that good help is in place. Tom and Pippa, whose stories are at the end of the chapter, are good examples of the early difficulties found.

The areas of cognitive and information processing which are linked to poor literacy skills are detailed below.

Phonological awareness

Children cannot 'crack the code' of reading until they have gained the ability to identify and distinguish all those small sounds which build into words. To do this they need good phonological awareness. They need to be able to hear and to tell the difference between the sounds made by the different letters of the alphabet. They need to be able to tell if two words rhyme or sound different. They need to be able to hear and distinguish the first, middle and end sounds within a word. The ability to do all of this is called phonological awareness, and children need to have developed the ability to make these distinctions fluently before they are expected to match spoken sounds onto written letters and before they are expected to blend letter sounds together and to segment the sounds in words; in other words, before they are expected to learn to read and spell.

Reading is not the only activity that suffers if phonological skills and awareness are weak. Children with poor phonological awareness are likely to:

- transpose sounds in words, for example saying par cark instead of car park
- have difficulty or lack interest in learning nursery rhymes and in playing other word games such as I spy if letter sounds (not names) are used
- mispronounce words more frequently than other children of their age.

Working memory

We know that children who have a poor working memory have considerable difficulty in learning to read. The chapter on working memory elaborates on the reasons for this. Young children with poor working memory are likely to:

- struggle to remember the names of people and places
- struggle to find the words they want to use
- say 'the thingy' or 'the whatsit' or just point when they cannot call up the word they need
- find it hard to remember instructions or requests
- forget what has been said as though things went in one ear and out of the other, and so need to have things repeated.

Sequencing

The child with poor sequencing will be likely to have difficulty in learning and retaining sequenced information such as days of the week, months of the year or the alphabet.

Visual processing

If visual processing is a problem the child will be likely to:

- lose their place when reading
- forget words from line to line – if he reads a word on one line and meets it again within a few moments he is quite capable of failing to recognise it
- transpose letters, for example reading was as saw and no as on.

Children who are showing some or all of these difficulties are definitely in need of support. If in addition there are problems with attention and concentration and if there is a history of dyslexia in the family then they should really be taken seriously. The important thing to remember is that these children can and will learn but it may take longer and need much repetition and rehearsal.

What can we do to help these young children?

Parents can work on:

- phonological skills – check the games section in the appendices for appropriate activities to help your child to start to hear and discriminate the small speech sounds which go to make up language

- reading – share books and read to him on a daily basis and ensure that a love of books is fostered. It is important that books do not become something associated with difficulty and failure
- using a paired reading technique – reading together with your voices in unison. You will find full details in the chapter on reading. This takes away much of the struggle and is a godsend to parent and child
- playing plenty of table-top games such as snap, Pelmanism, matching games and all games relevant to pre-reading skills (see the games section in the appendices).

The secret of success is that learning should be little and often, with plenty of reinforcement and practice and lots of fun – always start with what he can do and move forwards gently, ensuring that any new activities are set at a level that he can manage. Success is important. Set small, achievable targets and celebrate success.

Many dyslexic children will perform really well one day and struggle the next. This is a reality and it is not because they are being lazy or not trying. Do not extend or overdo practice on a good day. Just praise him and stop at the normal time.

Literacy teaching should be:

- highly structured and systematic
- multisensory.

This means that dyslexic readers need to follow a programme which teaches them small step by small step in a logical and systematic way. Even learning the sounds of the letters of the alphabet will be better learnt in a specific sequence. These children are unlikely to suddenly ‘get it’ and take off. They will need to learn brick by brick. Programmes such as Toe by Toe are structured and well designed (see the Chapter 14 section in Useful Resources, Organisations and Websites).

New learning should be introduced through different mediums. If, for example, your child is learning a new letter sound, make sure that he hears it, says it, feels it (draws it in the air or in sand, or traces it on sand paper, or copies it in pasta shells). Learning is better reinforced if more than one sense can be engaged (see Chapter 1, Information Processing). If you are teaching at home, follow a specific programme.

You may be wondering if you should get any help for your child from a teacher who has a qualification to teach children with dyslexia. This may depend on your pocket, how easily you manage to engage in games and activities with your child and your time constraints. If you have work

commitments and/or a large demanding family, it may be particularly difficult to find time.

However, if you can work with your child on a very regular basis in a calm and enjoyable way and he is progressing, you do not need to look for outside help. If you have any doubts, do all you can to find a dyslexia specialist to help.

It is important not to allow your own feelings of anxiety or frustration to transmit to your child. It is all too easy to put a struggling reader off reading and for their confidence to evaporate.

Working with school

If you have concerns, talk with your child's teacher and see if they have picked up any problems. Become familiar with the school reading programme and find out the policy if a child needs additional help. Find out if your child's class teacher is making any allowances for your child in class. If necessary, ask to talk to the school special educational needs coordinator. Find out exactly how your child is coping with school, and if you have serious concerns, follow things up.

By the time that children have had their seventh birthday they should be well on their way to being independent readers. Many dyslexic pupils are still struggling. They may be starting to feel that they are different or stupid. Supporting them in learning to read is now a priority. Please do not panic but take it seriously. Talk it through at home and make a plan of action. Any help must be fun, systematic and daily.

The junior school years

So how can we recognise and help the older primary school child (those aged seven to eleven)? By this time you will know for certain if your child is finding it hard to learn to read and to spell and you may be wondering if this might be dyslexia. You may not be sure because he may be different from other children who you know have been identified, or you may know of other children in your child's class who are struggling more than he is. Dyslexic children are not all exactly alike, so just because he is not like others does not mean he may not experience a difficulty.

Dyslexia is not a single entity. The pattern of difficulties which children experience can be varied. The severity of the difficulty can also range considerably from mild to severe. Even a mild difficulty can need attention and it is important that children with mild dyslexia get support too.

Dyslexia can also co-exist with other areas of specific learning difficulty. He may, for example, have elements of difficulty more generally associated with dyspraxia, dyscalculia or ADHD. Children are individuals.

The stories about Pippa, Ethan and Chloe at the end of this chapter show that the composition and degree of difficulty which individual children experience can be very varied.

What difficulties are the seven- to eleven-year-old children with dyslexia likely to experience?

The obvious difficulties will be poor reading and poor spelling. These may be serious or quite mild.

- Children who are struggling with reading are likely to have difficulty in all subjects because of insufficiently well-developed basic skills. By this stage there is an assumption that children can read simple instructions and write independently.
- Some children are reading well but having difficulty with written work. Spelling may be odd and unreliable. It may vary from day to day and from line to line.
- Writing may look spiky and the margin may travel across the page. The child may find the process of writing hard work.
- Homework may not be recorded accurately or in full, causing difficulty at home when the child does not know what he is meant to be doing.

There may be difficulties with verbal expression and short-term/working memory. The dyslexic child:

- will often have difficulty with word finding and with self-expression. Maybe he starts his sentences over and over while he searches for the next words that he needs. Maybe he uses a lot of words such as 'thingy' and 'whatsits'
- may find it hard to follow instructions
- may have difficulty in completing tasks because he has forgotten what to do next
- may find French a challenge. The child may perceive it as yet another mysterious and irregular set of words to be learnt. Many children with dyslexia love Latin; it is phonically regular and follows predictable rules.

Although many dyslexic children are good with numbers and quick to get maths concepts they are likely to have some quite specific difficulties. They may:

- lose track while working through multistep calculations due to poor working memory. Many dyslexic mathematicians prefer to work fast and become frustrated if they have to set out and record each step involved in problem solving
- find it hard to learn and retain their number bonds and times tables
- have difficulty reading questions or problems.

There may be some issues relating to vision. The child may:

- suffer from headaches after reading
- sometimes see the words moving or letters looking blurred or double (this is rare but can happen for some children)
- have difficulty in copying off the board
- find that his eyes are sensitive to light
- prefer to read through a transparent coloured overlay.

There may also be some behavioural issues:

- An unsupported dyslexic child may be coping by becoming the class clown, being teacher's pet or opting out and presenting challenging behaviour.
- The child who is really 'good' in school may take out his frustrations and unhappiness at home. This is a much safer environment, and kicking the cat, winding up a sibling or just annoying a parent may provide the much-needed outlet.

You may be worried that the bright child you know at home is performing at a very average level in school. Some bright children with mild dyslexic difficulties may seem to be bumping along. As far as the teacher is concerned they may appear to be an average pupil doing just fine. But the reality may be that he is a very bright but 'mildly' dyslexic child who has to work particularly hard to cope and to keep up. Parents may have noticed that there is a discrepancy between what their child is doing in school and the way they see him at home. Parents can often feel that if they say anything they look like 'pushy parents' who think their child is a genius.

No child will have difficulty with everything on the list, but if your child ticks over half of these items it does sound as though he needs some help. Do not be put off by a teacher who tells you not to worry and that it will all come good given time. I think that you do need to worry. Your child really does need to have mastered basic literacy skills and to have become a reader by the time he starts secondary school at 11. It is almost impossible for children to make up lost ground once they embark on Key Stage 3. There is just too much going on and so often they are putting enormous efforts into covering up their difficulties and making sure that they appear to be coping. By this stage your child will still need extra support but of a more sophisticated nature. If your child is seriously behind with reading at age seven, eight or nine it is a priority and all stops must be pulled out to ensure that he becomes a reader. He will never have these years again – make the most of them, whatever it takes.

What can you do to help?

At this stage an educational psychologist's assessment could clarify the nature and extent of his difficulty and could provide you with a profile of his strengths and difficulties (see the chapter on assessment). More importantly, it could help pinpoint the areas on which to focus help. With or without an EP assessment you could build on the suggestions made for the younger child and also follow these general principles:

- Follow a well-structured multisensory reading and spelling programme.
- Little and often is the rule and this applies to reading as well as to learning new spellings.
- Allow time for reinforcement. Although he may be very quick to learn some things this does not include spelling and reading. Make sure that anything learnt which comes into the difficult category is practised again and again, starting with short time intervals. The chapter on working memory explains why this is necessary and helpful.
- Do not push things if he is tired or having a bad day.
- Try and stick to a daily routine so reading becomes an automatic part of the day and does not have to be renegotiated every time.
- Make sure he has enough sleep.

More specifically where literacy skills are concerned:

- Look for specialist help if you possibly can, unless you are certain that you can help on a daily basis in a way that does not exacerbate the difficulty.
- If you are working with him, follow a small-step learning approach to spelling and introduce spelling rules.
- Encourage him to complete written work on a laptop. Learning to touch type has been very liberating for many children. Although children can often write extremely fast with just two fingers I do advocate learning to touch type. It is a valuable life skill.
- Introduce study skills (see Chapter 24, Habits, Strategies and Study Skills).
- Refer to the chapters on reading, spelling and writing for more specific thoughts.

Foster his motivation:

- Above all keep a light touch. He is not going to be motivated or take personal responsibility for his learning if he hates every minute of extra help.
- To help with motivation involve him in setting targets for what he is going to learn or achieve over the next few weeks. It is important to do all you can to get him involved in his learning. Some children let extra help wash over them. Read the chapter on motivation.
- Encourage his enjoyment of books and his experience of reading and make sure his vocabulary is building.
- Read with him copiously. Use a paired reading technique when necessary.
- Give him story CDs to listen to alongside the written version.
- Pay attention to his vocabulary and make a conscious effort to enlarge it. Children who read are picking up new words fast. Non-readers can get left behind.

Dealing with poor working memory (he is the one for whom things seem to go in one ear and out of the other and the one who sets off upstairs to find three items for you and returns five minutes later asking what he was meant to get):

- Limit the length of instructions and give him time to process what has been said or asked.
- Get him to repeat instructions as a way of ensuring that he has taken them in.
- Read the chapter on working memory to find ways of supporting the child with a poor working memory.

Help him to stay confident and happy:

- Do all you can to ensure that he maintains confidence in himself. Can you find something that he is good at and allow him to excel, even if it means preventing his younger sibling from competing with him?
- Remember that the child who is dyslexic will be having a tough time in school. He needs emotional support as well as practical help.
- Allow him activities that help him let off steam and get rid of frustrations when he gets home from school.

Family life:

- Enlist the help and support of other members of the family and make sure that you and your spouse are in agreement about what to do.
- Think through how you are going to give this child additional help in a way that does not adversely affect, or disrupt, family life.

What about homework?

This can be a dilemma for parents. If you leave him to his own devices he may produce two lines of careless-looking work. It's hard to allow this to happen, as you know the response it will evoke when he hands it in at school. So, do you sit over him while all concerned get uptight and frustrated, do you insist that he spends three times as long as the other pupils in his class to get it done properly, or do you do half of it yourself or leave well alone? So many parents I have talked with have faced this problem. Here are some suggestions:

- Help him by reading any relevant texts.
- Write out or get him to copy out a list of the words he may need to use for different subjects so that he can have them easily to hand while he works.

- Act as a scribe but try and do so without passing judgement on the content. Just write what he dictates and leave him to have ownership of what he has to say.
- Discuss the problem with his class teacher and let her know the work she is setting is often beyond him. Explain your dilemma. Ask if she could differentiate his work (differentiation means modifying the work set to ensure that it is at a level which he can manage). Would she accept less quantity or be happy for you to scribe part or all of his work for him?
- If this particular teacher expects her pupils to copy homework instructions from the board or from dictation chances are your child will fail to do so accurately or completely. Ask her if she can find a way to ensure that he knows what he has to do. For example, can she provide photocopied instructions?
- Encourage the use of dictionaries, spell checks and computer-aided learning.

All these learning and performance aids are helpful if introduced to the right child at the right time. You will find useful information in the resources section.

Above all, remember that if your child is struggling with basic skills during these precious school years it is essential to do all you can to ensure that he is helped to get his reading, spelling and writing to a good functional level before he moves into secondary school.

Recognising and supporting the pupil in secondary school

Many pupils will have been identified as having a specific learning difficulty before they finish their primary education but others may go undetected. Those who have not been identified tend to be children who are particularly bright and who have managed to stay under the radar. If there is a dyslexic difficulty it is unlikely to be very serious or it would/should have already been picked up. Even if it is mild it should not be ignored; it still has an impact.

The information processing difficulties which underpin dyslexia do not seem to change or disappear; however, the teenager with dyslexia will experience a different set of problems at this stage of his education. He will therefore need to be armed with a new set of strategies for coping.

Teenage pupils want and are expected to work independently and to take responsibility for their studies. It can be hard for the dyslexic teenager who must yearn to get on with things on his own but who still needs some help. Many dyslexic pupils will have had years of one-to-one work focusing on phonics and multisensory-structured spelling programmes. Whatever level they have achieved it is time to let them off the hook and to help focus on acquiring really good study skills. (Study skills are discussed in Chapter 24, Habits, Strategies and Study Skills.)

Problems that may be encountered by the secondary school child with dyslexia

- There is likely to be a continued discrepancy between ability and the standard of work being produced.
- He may have continued problems with spelling – even easy and common words get misspelt or can be spelt differently on the same page.
- Reading may be at a good level but is likely to be slow compared with the good reader. The dyslexic pupil may have to stop and ‘sound out’ words he does not recognise. This process can interfere with comprehension and the pupil may have to reread texts. The first reading may be to work out all the words and the second to get the meaning. He may also get stuck on unfamiliar words not already encountered.
- He may have difficulty in verbal and written expression. This may be due to a more restricted vocabulary (lack of reading) as well as difficulty in mentally accessing words as and when needed. These students may also prefer to use words that are easy to spell even if they are aware that they do not contain the exact nuance they wish to convey. Sentences may be rather convoluted.
- Note taking is challenging, and at the worst end of the spectrum some students will be unable to read their own notes due to poor handwriting and spelling.
- Poor working memory will continue to make it hard for him to absorb lengthy instructions.
- Planning, organising and sequencing difficulties are likely to result in messy folders, lost bits of paper and problems with essay planning and developing logical arguments.

- Talking in groups or in public may make him self-conscious. Poor working memory and difficulty in accessing the words he needs may make some students shy of talking in large groups.

Helping the dyslexic teenager

Depending on the level of difficulty any of the suggestions for younger children may still be appropriate. In addition:

- Study skills. He should have started to learn good study skills but it can be important to update these as the demands of the curriculum change. Studying for GCSE requires certain skills, but the A-level student will have to develop a more sophisticated set of learning strategies and habits and a booster course will be a good help with this (see Chapter 24, Habits, Strategies and Study Skills).
- Planning and organising. Help to make sure that his workspace is well organised and that there is a place for books and files. Make sure that he has the right files for the different subjects.
- Time management. Discuss ways in which he can be helped to stay on top of weekly assignments and homework as well as preparing for exams and keeping to deadlines. A visual timetable with dates marked in when work should be completed may reduce the last-minute scramble to get things done. Both a weekly as well as a yearly timetable can be helpful in planning when and how to get work completed without last-minute panic.
- Other aide-memoires. Some older children find it helpful to use an electronic alarm to remind them what they should be doing. This is so easy to set up today. It could be the diary on the computer or a message on a mobile phone.
- Technology. This may be the time for the severely dyslexic student to use a word recognition program. There are a number of very helpful programs available.
- Ensure that he has access to his own computer. He can use the spell check, and poor grammatical sentences will be flagged up. Typed work also looks neat and is easy to read.
- An electronic dictionary will be helpful.
- Encourage good self-expression. Give time for conversations.

Liaison with school:

- Parents will need to have continued liaison with school. It is useful to have a key contact such as the school special educational needs coordinator now that your child has a number of subject teachers, and this key contact should ensure that all who teach him are aware of his difficulties and of how to support him.
- Discuss whether your child could have a specific member of staff to support him and to act as his advocate.
- You could also discuss the possibility of dropping a subject such as French (usually of great difficulty for the dyslexic pupil) to free up some additional study time.

Finally:

- Do not forget that your child has to work especially hard to keep up. He needs encouragement and praise for the things he is doing well.

What about the dyslexic undergraduate?

Even those pupils who have quite marked difficulties can find their way into higher education. Generally they are following a course which suits their strengths and have been able to drop the topics which they found hardest. Those students who have come back to see me for a final assessment have generally done so to see if their needs are such that they might qualify for additional time for exams and whether their local education authority might provide them with the technological facilities which would enhance their learning. They might, for example, be provided with a laptop and printer.

There are always a number of students whose dyslexia is not uncovered until they are in higher education. These students are by definition intellectually able. They have managed to cope in secondary school and acquire the necessary grades to gain entry to university. But once at university the new and more complex demands which are made of them in an unfamiliar environment may mean that they find it difficult to keep up. It may be the slow speed at which they can extract information from source material or their inability to make good notes in lectures or just the lack of imposed structure on their time which results in a performance which is disappointing and which does not reflect their enthusiasm, commitment and ability. These students can also be helped.

What can parents do to support their undergraduate child?

This is the time when your child should really be finding his wings and flying the nest. Hard as it may seem, parents must cut the ties and let him manage on his own. However, the last task for parents is to ensure that he:

- has developed some good strategies for time management. He will no longer have a school timetable and teachers handing out detention if he fails to hand in work. This can be a hard transition. He needs to plan in time for essays and for revision. Essays may not be evenly spaced through the year and he needs to know how to cope with this
- can organise his work environment. He will need an uncluttered work surface, storage for files, shelving for books. He needs a systematic and reliable system for keeping notes
- has learnt appropriate study skills to meet the new demands made by his university course
- has the technological aids and computing hardware that will help with his studies.

This means that parents must find a way of helping instil good work habits. An appropriate course on study skills for the undergraduate can be exceptionally helpful. There are also several excellent books which can be used, although it is always so much more difficult to learn from a book without a tutor.

Finally, it is important that the dyslexic undergraduate makes use of the facilities available at his university. I recommend that these students contact their university special needs department. In recent years universities have started to take the needs of their dyslexic students much more seriously and there is expertise available to help them. If they make themselves known to the university special needs department, they can find out what is available and whether they wish to avail themselves of what is on offer.

Although this is the time when parents need to stand back and let their child go, some new undergraduates may need a bit of parental encouragement to make sure that they do make use of specific facilities. The sheer volume of things which the student is now adjusting to as well as a degree of embarrassment may be a barrier to seeking support. Ideally, parents will find a way of monitoring things but in a 'hands-off' way.

CASE STUDIES

Each story has been selected to illustrate a particular point.

Anthony's story

Many parents of young children who are identified with dyslexia are anxious to know what will happen next. Of course, it is hard to make predictions when there are so many unknowns ahead. However, it can be reassuring to hear about other children who have managed to get through school and who have achieved well. Anthony's story is an optimistic story and illustrates what can be achieved when there is good parental involvement, positive support from school and appropriate specialist teaching help.

Anthony was seven when I first met him. His reading was well below the level expected for a child of his age. He could barely read words such as 'the', 'up' and 'into' and certainly could not manage anything longer. He had difficulty in distinguishing the sounds within words, which is the all-important prerequisite for learning to read and spell. Anthony had experienced an intermittent hearing loss (glue ear), which could well have had an impact on the development of his phonological awareness.

Anthony's writing was slow and laborious. He was able to write a few regular words such as 'cat', 'fish' and 'hand' but tended to miss out letters such as the 'm' in jump. Anthony had not built up any bank of words that he could recognise by sight.

Perhaps not surprisingly Anthony had become afraid of going to school despite a wonderful teacher and despite the fact that he had many friends and was popular with his peer group.

Assessment revealed that Anthony had a very poor working memory for both auditory and visual stimuli and he had difficulty with the tests, which sampled his visual/spatial skills and his hand-eye coordination.

He experienced specific learning difficulties which were primarily dyslexic in nature but with additional coordination difficulties. The combination of poor phonological skills as well as poor auditory and visual memory suggested that he was going to have ongoing difficulty.

Anthony urgently needed regular specialist teaching on a one-to-one basis. He needed to follow a multisensory teaching programme which was very structured and cumulative. The programme would need to cover reading, spelling and writing. He needed daily help at home too.

He needed to develop his phonological skills as well as focusing on how words look and building a sight vocabulary to help him on his way. Anthony was a candidate for paired reading.

Anthony's mother and I discussed appropriate spelling techniques, the learning of times tables and how to ensure that it was kept fun, all of which are discussed in the relevant chapters later in this book. It was really important that any extra help or work should be done on a little-and-often basis. There was much for them to be getting on with.

Eighteen months later Anthony's reading had progressed but was still well behind his peers. He had become much better at decoding words but it was still a slow process, and his spelling had only made a few months' progress. His ability to read individual words was now age equivalent to seven years, but sounding out words such as 'photograph' and 'comforting' was laborious work.

The very best thing was his attitude. He was now able to say 'I am dyslexic' rather than 'I am stupid' and was aware of the many things that he could do.

A key concern was that during the following year the school curriculum would 'speed up'. Most children of his age would have mastered the basic skills and therefore it was likely that there would be a growing gap between Anthony's level of achievement and that of his peers. We wondered whether he might need a change of school and whether he would need either a specialist school or one which was a little less academic. His mother decided he should stay where he was, and on the plus side the teaching staff were superbly responsive to his needs.

This was a good decision. At the age of 11 there had been a huge improvement in his reading fluency and comprehension. He also seemed more confident and had a real twinkle in his eye and a good sense of humour. His reading accuracy was still two years behind his chronological age but his reading comprehension was at a 13-year-old level. He still appreciated having stories read to him and that was how his mother was helping to make sure he was accessing age-appropriate information.

The key recommendations at this point were:

- » the implementation of a small-step learning approach to his spelling. This meant learning a few words at a time and practising them on a daily basis until he had become fluent and achieved 100 per cent accuracy at speed and was able to do this on several consecutive days before moving on to learning new words (see Chapter 15, Tips for Spelling)
- » the use of a voice recorder that he could keep in his pocket in order to take down important information such as homework. (This was to avoid having to copy it from the board or from the teacher's dictation, both requiring him to use skills which he found particularly hard.) This

turned out to be a great success. Fortunately his class teacher embraced the idea and helped to facilitate it

- » undertaking a touch typing course. Many children experiencing dyslexic difficulties, especially those with poor handwriting, find that the use of a laptop is really liberating. Word processing improves the presentation, speed of writing and general organisation, but it is important to be competent before taking a laptop into the classroom
- » support with study skills – this was now very important.

By his mid-teens Anthony's reading accuracy had progressed to a 13-year-old level. (This is a level of reading ability which is sufficient to enable a student to access most texts presented in secondary school without too much difficulty.) Many of his reading errors were the misreadings so typical of students with dyslexia; for example, he would miss out one letter or insert another. This sometimes changed the sense of what he was reading, thus making it an effortful process. His spelling lagged but had now progressed as far as a 10–11-year-old level. This is no mean feat when we consider that he was required to spell words such as 'strength' and 'doubt'. His errors were not serious – 'beginning' spelt as 'begining' and 'excitement' spelt as 'excitment'. They were certainly not such that it would impede the reader.

Anthony had dropped French (always a difficult subject for dyslexic pupils), which gave him five spare classes each week, and this allowed for his specialist teaching and gave him time to keep up with the subjects that were difficult. Anthony was finding school very tiring. Although he was superficially confident, this was shaky.

As with many dyslexic students Anthony needed help with his planning and organising. He needed help remembering to remember. He needed strategies to help him to remember to hand in homework, to take the right books to school. Effective aide-memoires were discussed. The most simple is a timetable, which is easy to see at a glance and shows what equipment is needed when. A small notebook, which can live in a pocket and in which all-important information can be stored, avoids the paper chase of trying to find where information has been recorded.

Anthony needed continued help with his study skills.

By the time that Anthony was ready to embark on a degree course he was a 'well-compensated' dyslexic student. He was reading at a good level but it remained an effort and was slow. His spelling was at a 13-year-old level. His personal organisation was weak and he found it hard to settle down to work. Anthony was aware of his challenges but by this stage had found ways of dealing with them.

He had showed great determination to overcome the educational barriers which he encountered through school, and his success provides us with a clear illustration of the importance of long-term support and help from home and school.

But this isn't quite the end of the story and we can give the final word to a recently graduated Anthony. He told me that as he has matured he has discovered a great love of literature. Reading, he explained, has enriched his life. An initial passion for history has led him to open up to many wider interests. His message to parents and to young struggling readers is that 'people with dyslexia can also have a rich and rewarding relationship with books'.

Pippa's story

This provides us with an example of the importance and value of early intervention and of parent involvement. Pippa was nearly six years old when her mother first made contact. She was concerned about Pippa's slow progress with reading.

Pippa had always appeared to be a very bright and alert child, curious, busy and engaged. But now, having started school, reading was becoming an issue. She found it hard to sound out words and she often transposed letters in words, for example reading no as on, or was as saw. She would read a word on one line and then fail to recognise it on another just a few moments later. Pippa had never enjoyed playing I spy or learning nursery rhymes. She was finding it hard to learn the days of the week. Poor attention and concentration were also an issue.

At this stage in the chapter you will recognise how the difficulties which Pippa's mother described reflect characteristics which we know are associated with dyslexia. The question was what to do. Pippa needed to:

- » develop her phonological skills and awareness. This could be done following a programme such as Sound Linkage (see Further Reading) or through playing games that would improve her listening and sound analysis skills. A full list of appropriate games can be found in the appendix on games and activities for parents and children to play. The chapter on reading also lists helpful resources
- » build a sight vocabulary which would give her rapid recognition of words and avoid the need to sound out. The chapter on reading gives greater detail about the best way to do this
- » maintain a love of books and stories and to see these as a source of pleasure. The importance of reading aloud to and with Pippa was emphasised

The huge importance of making any joint activities fun and engaging was stressed. Anything which Pippa was asked to do in the realms of reading and writing was to be pitched at a level where she could succeed and they should have fun. Pippa's mother said that she would keep in touch.

A year or so later there was still concern about Pippa's slow progress with reading. By now seven years old, Pippa had also been having extra help in school for several months and her progress did not match her lively mind and high level of motivation. We arranged an assessment.

Pippa was very bubbly and threw herself into the test activities with an almost constant smile. She turned out to be extremely bright. Assessment of her reading showed that it was a little below the expected level for her age but considerably below the level we might have expected in view of her supportive family and excellently targeted extra help. Her phonological skills were weak and she did not always process what she heard very well. Her attention was variable but her short-term memory good. On the plus side, she was a great communicator and loved writing, which she did willingly and with enthusiasm.

It seemed that she had mild dyslexic difficulties and it was important for her to have as much reading practice as possible. It takes 'normal' readers at least two years to progress from the initial learning of letter names and sounds to fluent reading. It takes children with dyslexia considerably longer, particularly when you consider that they are unlikely to 'practise' on their own and read for pleasure (in the early days). The reading section covers reading in greater detail.

Paired reading is a great way of making the daily reading practice motivating and fun; it can be so frustrating for parent and child when the reading practice is slow and the same word is misread line after line. Parents who care deeply about progress can feel agonising despair. So if this sounds familiar, paired reading is for you (see Chapter 14, Tips for Reading).

Pippa also needed to follow a spelling programme (see Chapter 15, Tips for Spelling) and she was both bright enough and sufficiently motivated to think about using a spelling aid. These can be helpful to many children but probably not until they are eight or nine years old. The Franklin spell check is one such aid (see the Chapter 15 section in Useful Resources, Organisations and Websites).

Pippa came for her last assessment soon after entry to secondary school. She was loving school. Her reading accuracy and comprehension were excellent. She loved creative writing and excelled.

However, the 'mild' dyslexic difficulties evident earlier were still having an impact on some aspects of her life. Her spelling

lagged behind. She struggled to organise thoughts and sentences in a logical and comprehensive order when having to do more structured written work. She found the school day extremely tiring. French vocabulary was a challenge. She had to work hard to absorb and retain classroom instructions.

We will never know how Pippa would have done if her mother had ignored her initial concerns and had not sought advice about helping Pippa. I have, however, assessed enough children at intervals of a few years to know that there is a definite trend. The children who have parents who get involved and ensure that their child has regular, calm, consistent and appropriate help do better, without a shadow of doubt, than the children whose parents have not taken or acted on the advice given and have not managed to give this kind of input. Pippa's difficulties were definitely at the milder end of the spectrum, and by the time she was 12 her reading was good but she still experienced residual difficulty with spelling.

Chloe and Ethan's stories

These two are polar opposites and show us that dyslexia is not a single entity and that children can have very different strengths and difficulties. We will start with Chloe. What is unusual about Chloe is that she has excellent language skills and very good phonological awareness but nevertheless has found learning to read a very slow and laborious process.

There are some children for whom literacy skills present a challenge, but who do not have a phonological deficit and have no apparent difficulty with language-based activities. Their reading difficulties appear to be due to visual weaknesses. Visual memory is weak. Memory for sequences is poor. The child whose reading difficulties seem to stem mainly from poor visual processing may lose his place easily and fail to recognise a word on one line which he has just learnt to read on the line above.

Chloe proved to be one of these children. She was a very articulate small child. She would sit and chat from an early age, play games and make intricate models. Unlike many young children she never showed any ability to pick out logos or names of shops or products. (Many young children will quickly recognise the sign for things such as McDonald's.) Chloe became unhappy in her reception year at school. She had difficulty with the early reading activities. Her teacher complained that she was disruptive when she was doing reading tasks.

Chloe made little progress over the following year or so and by Year 2 still had minimal reading and writing skills. An educational psychologist's assessment showed her to be verbally able. Her

phonological skills were excellent, but her working memory for both auditory and visual information was poor. Chloe was not a 'classic phonological deficit' dyslexic child, but she did have poor visual processing, visual sequencing and visual memory. She could be described more accurately as a 'visual' dyslexic child.

Chloe's eyes were checked by a behavioural orthoptist but the assessment did not reveal any visual difficulty with acuity or with other important aspects of vision such as tracking and convergence.

At this point much effort was made at home and at school to launch her as a reader. She read on a regular basis with parents and had small-group support in school. Progress was slow, but by the age of ten she was reading for pleasure. She tended to select easy books that were suitable for younger children.

Her parents continued to read extensively to her to ensure that she was able to access age-appropriate stories and information. Chloe's spelling remained delayed for her age, but a passion for wildlife which developed some time before her 11th birthday gave her the motivational boost that she needed to read extensively. She also liked to make notes and this made her much more aware of how words should be spelt. In the long term the prognosis looked good. By the time she was 12 she was reading well though not fast, and her spelling remained variable. She coped fine with spelling tests but would misspell the same words when she was focused on the content of her written work.

It is worth asking your child if she sees words or letters move on the line. Subtle visual difficulties (beyond long and short sight) can make reading hard. This may not be detected by a standard optician's assessment, which only assesses long and short sight. An assessment from a behavioural orthoptist can be helpful. It might be necessary to implement eye exercises. The use of coloured overlays or glasses has been found to help some people. (See Chapter 10, Visual Processing Difficulty.)

Ethan came for assessment at the age of nine. Until that point there had been no concerns regarding his progress but suddenly he had become unhappy about school and was struggling with work. It was quickly apparent when he read to me that he either knew a word or did not know it. When he did not know a word he had no strategies available to work out what it might say. He made no attempt to sound it out and did not even seem to know the sound made by the initial letter. Ethan had an excellent visual memory. It seemed that he had managed to build up an extensive sight vocabulary, which had compensated for his lack of phonological awareness and knowledge. Ethan had memorised enough words by sight to get by, but books were getting harder and had a more extensive vocabulary. Work in school was also getting more difficult and sophisticated. His strategy for dealing with reading could no longer carry him through and he needed to be taken

back to basics and to learn about letter sounds and how to decode (sound out) and encode (spell) unfamiliar words. Chloe's very good visual memory was unusual, but again it emphasises the fact that no two children are ever identical in the way they learn and in the strategies they use.

Tom's story

You will remember that we first met Tom at the start of this chapter. Even before he started in reception class he was showing many signs that he was going to have difficulty in learning to read. These could have been picked up and his entry to school could have been managed better as a result. His early days in school were not very positive and he was frequently in trouble.

Trouble started almost the moment that Tom began school just before his fifth birthday. He found it hard to stay sitting and had little interest in reading and writing. His teacher found him difficult and frequently excluded him from the classroom. One classroom assistant decided he was lazy because, she asserted, he would learn if she got cross with him. Tom, it was later discovered, was dyslexic and showed many signs of ADHD.

Although it was not until he was eight years old that a formal identification was made, there had been plenty of signs that he was going to have problems in acquiring literacy skills. These signs were apparent well before he started reception class.

First, Tom came from a family where there were several known dyslexic members. We know that there is a genetic basis to specific learning difficulty.

He had the kind of language-based 'word finding' difficulties that are typical of many people with dyslexia. He would often say 'thingy' or 'whatsit'. He had difficulty in remembering people's names.

His phonological awareness was poor:

- » He had no interest in games such as I spy or in learning nursery rhymes or children's songs – all of which require good phonological skills.

There were signs that his auditory working memory was not great:

- » He had difficulty in following instructions and these often needed to be repeated or broken down into small steps.
- » He had a tendency to interrupt when he wanted to tell his parents something. If he couldn't get it out right away he would forget what he had wanted to say.

Finally, at nursery school, there were signs that his visual memory and visual analysis were weak:

- » He had difficulty in recognising his name on the coat pegs.
- » His pictures or paintings of people always missed arms.
- » He was not able to recognise or match number symbols to their spoken name.
- » He had little interest in constructing puzzles.

These issues in relation to visual analysis, visual memory, working memory and word finding are all very much associated with dyslexia, and coupled with Tom's very poor attention should/could have set warning bells ringing.

As it turned out, Tom did have huge difficulty with reading. An educational assessment at the age of eight indicated significant dyslexic difficulties.

Despite the extra help he had both at school and at home he started secondary school with literacy skills that were well below his chronological age. His reading was slow and laboured; it was insufficiently good to enable him to cope with the texts he would be presented with. He was resistant to writing, and when he did settle to writing tasks his spelling mistakes made it difficult to read.

Soon after starting secondary school Tom was assessed by his local authority and it was decided that his educational needs would warrant a statement of special educational need (now known as an education, health and care (EHC) plan). This meant that he had a few periods of specialist teaching and the help of a classroom assistant for several classes each week, which went some way to enabling him to access the curriculum.

Staff at his comprehensive school were enlightened and supportive. They found, for example, that, despite his weak skills, his behaviour and involvement with learning were much better when they moved him into the top group for English literature, which he enjoyed. His science teachers realised that the work he handed in did not represent his understanding of the subject and were able to accommodate his weaknesses. He was allowed to give up modern languages.

Tom was also fortunate that he had great social skills; he was also a good all-rounder at sports. He enjoyed and was good at art. Teachers liked him and he had many friends, so the overall experience of school was positive. Tom was able to remain in education and to continue into higher education due to his strong practical and artistic abilities. Despite continued difficulty with both reading and writing/spelling, he emerged from university with a degree in one of the subjects within the field of art, design and media.

Tom now runs his own business. He explained that he is able to read tolerably well and to write and spell with some ability. He is quite proud of his spelling. He plays and wins games of online scrabble with bright and literate friends. He says that this process has taught him a great deal about spelling and about how letters generally go together. The instant feedback regarding words which are incorrectly spelt has improved his spelling.

Tom also explained that his literacy skills have improved as a by-product of running a business. He is no longer reading to learn to read or spelling in order to learn to spell. He has to read, write and spell to achieve a larger goal and one that he is immensely motivated to achieve. He needs to make his business work, and to do this he has to read and to write – accurately.

There is surely a message here about the great importance of motivation and the need for pupils to be prepared to open themselves up to learning. It is so easy for those pupils whose difficulties are marked rather than mild to become jaded. So much of their energy goes into appeasing teachers and finding ways to do as little as possible to get by without losing face or self-esteem.

This is a challenge to all of us who parent or teach a seriously dyslexic child.

KEY POINTS

- ⇒ Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. It is neurological in origin. There is a genetic basis and it tends to run in families. It is estimated that around 10 per cent of children are affected.
- ⇒ Dyslexia is on a spectrum and can be mild or severe. There are no established cut-off points. It is only by looking at a child's response to good teaching and intervention that we can establish the severity of the difficulty.
- ⇒ The characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, working memory and verbal processing speed. Co-existing difficulties may be seen in relation to language, motor coordination, mental maths, concentration and personal organisation.
- ⇒ No two people with dyslexia have exactly identical profiles of strengths and difficulties. Reading, writing and spelling are complex skills which involve many different processes. This means that there are many places where things can go wrong.
- ⇒ Dyslexia can affect pupils of all intellectual abilities.
- ⇒ The earlier we can identify and support children who are at risk of difficulty the better.

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- ⇒ Early help should encompass work on phonological skills and awareness. A learning programme should be multisensory, highly structured and systematic.
 - ⇒ Specialist help should be fun as well as provided little and often.
 - ⇒ Dyslexia does not fully disappear. The type of difficulties which dyslexic children experience in school will change depending on their age and the stage of education they have reached as well as the severity of the difficulty.
 - ⇒ At each stage they will need to learn compensatory strategies as well as work to enhance basic skills.
 - ⇒ Parents have a crucial role to play and can do a great deal to support their dyslexic child.
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