

Treating Dyslexia

By Lisa Harp

Dyslexia has become a term that most people are familiar with. They believe it means reversing letters and numbers, which is true, but in my work with children I have found that it encompasses so much more than just reversals. What I have primarily found is that these children are highly intelligent, yet their world cannot seem to hold still for them. Can you imagine your world floating or moving? That is what these kids deal with daily. Can you imagine your world changing daily, hourly, or by the minute? That is what is on these poor kids' plates. And yet, we ask them to sit still, read, do math, mind and follow directions, and the list goes on.

There are many forms of dyslexia. The dyslexia most people think about involves reading and reversing letters. Recently I was working with a dyslexic student and told her mom that she was having a hard time reading the silent e. I gave her some activities to help her. The next day the mom called me. The student had indeed inherited her dyslexia from Dad. When Mom was telling Dad about the silent e, He replied, "Well, that's because we don't see it." How simple is that? Can you imagine not being able to see a letter right there in front of you, a letter so important that it can change the sound and meaning of a word? Can you imagine how stupid you would feel if you read the word site as sit? How about if you did it in front of your reading group or the entire class? How about if your teacher isn't kind and makes you feel stupid in front of the whole class when you make a mistake such as this? It happens daily.

There are many other forms of dyslexia. It may show up in math, writing, handwriting, or spelling. I have worked with kids who could read so well it would amaze you, but give them some math problems, and they fall apart. Also, they may not reverse letters or numbers. They may have an auditory form of dyslexia. Some of these kids can't focus because they hear the computer whirring away but only hear every third or fourth word the teacher might say.

And we wonder why these kids are failing. We wonder why many of them become behavior problems or retreat into a silent, strange world. I think I might have to get up and move around the classroom if it couldn't hold still. I can guarantee you that a teacher wouldn't sit for hours on end if she had this problem. And the sad truth is that these kids are probably smarter than the straight A student whose mom is bragging to you at soccer practice. If you are the parent of a dyslexic child, you may have given up or you may think your child is dumb. That bragging can get pretty old.

Dyslexia can be treated. I don't know if there is a cure, but I do know this. I have had students who write backwards or in mirror form, who couldn't read or write, who were failing school and life. After working with these kids, most have

been on the Honor Roll or close to it. The most severe dyslexic student I have ever had was misdiagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. Her mother was told by the school to plan on institutionalizing her when she grew up because she had no future ahead of her. She was 9 years old and couldn't read or write. She couldn't do first grade math. She is now reading, writing, and doing math. No, she is not yet on grade level, but I have no doubt that within a year she will be close. My first indication that she had a world that wouldn't hold still was how she held her head. You see, it was tilted to the side constantly. Each week when she comes, that is one of my biggest victories. Her head is no longer tilted, which means her world is starting to settle down. She can now settle down and get on to the business of learning. I am convinced that she is intelligent. I am convinced that she does not have Asperger's Syndrome. I am convinced that as we work on spatial issues and visual and auditory processing activities as well as brain retraining that this child will lead a normal life. She will be reading and writing like any other kid her age.

The progress each child has will differ. I have had kids show huge growth in a few weeks. Other kids will show nothing and then one week they seem to know everything. Some kids will just plod along at a steady pace. Do not give up on them. Keep the kindness and patience alive for them, because you are all they have to fight this battle. I usually work with a student once a week for a year before the student is able to function in a classroom and have decent grades and test scores. I have had some severe students for two years. The students who make the most progress get daily help. Once a week isn't enough to lick this thing.

Most parents are relieved when they actually get a diagnosis. However, they must understand that if a student has dyslexia, then he won't always see a b as a d. It may be a p or a q another day. This just seems to drive parents nuts. They had just gone over the b the day before and now the kid is saying it is a p! Keep in mind that their worlds are not constant. Not much is constant in their brains, and yet you will hear some of the biggest bits of wisdom you have ever heard come out of their mouths. There truly is intelligence in there. If you have a problem you can't seem to find the answer to, find a dyslexic child or adult and ask his opinion. You will be astounded at his insight. These are the most intuitive kids I have ever met, and most have a sense of humor that is so advanced that they are one step ahead of you.

So, how do you know if your child has dyslexia? Following are some general symptoms of dyslexia that can serve as a guide for the steps you need to take if your child has these symptoms.

- Slow, labored inaccurate reading of single words in isolation
- Slow, choppy oral reading while ignoring punctuation
- Becomes visibly tired after reading for a short time

- Poor reading comprehension
- When reading, frequently reverses, inverts, or transposes letters or words
- Substitutes similar looking words, even if it changes the meaning of the sentence, such as sunrise for surprise
- Omits or changes suffixes, such as need for needed
- Spelling errors of reversals, inversions, or transpositions
- Continually misspells sight words or misreads sight words
- Written work shows signs of spelling uncertainty
- Misspells even when copying something from the board or from a book
- Unusual pencil grip when writing, often with the thumb on top of the fingers – a fist grip
- May hold the pencil lower or higher than normal
- The pencil grip is so tight that the child's hand cramps
- Writing letters is a slow, labored, non-fluent chore
- Writes letters with unusual starting and ending points
- Has great difficulty getting letters to sit on horizontal lines
- Unusual spatial organization of the page. Words may be widely spaced or tightly pushed together. Margins are often ignored
- Has an unusually difficult time learning and using cursive writing
- Writes extremely short sentences
- Takes an unusually long time to write
- Displays very poor mastery of punctuation as well as grammar, syntax, and suffixes
- Misspells many words
- Has nearly illegible handwriting
- Uses space poorly on the page
- Misses many errors in written work even when proofreading has been attempted
- Left-right confusion, mainly showing up in handwriting and math
- Difficulty in directionality – confuses north and south or the meaning of words such as right – left
- Tying shoelaces is difficult
- Difficult time writing capital cursive letters
- Long division, fractions, and memorizing multiplication tables is difficult
- Touch typing is difficult
- Learning science and history facts is difficult
- Concepts of time and calendars are difficult
- Disorganized personal space
- Loses many personal items such as clothing, watches, papers, books, shoes

If your child has many of these symptoms, he may be dyslexic. A test is a good place to start to find out for sure. Or, you can just assume that this is his life and move on from there.

So, how do we still the waters that churn continually in a dyslexic child's mind? For starters, brain exercises must come into play. To calm these waters the brain must become balanced. Ear eights, eye eights, cross crawls, magic eights, and mirrors are exercises I use regularly with the dyslexic child. Martial arts is wonderful for these children due to the constant crossing of the midline and visualization of moves and poses.

Next, I work on spatial and visual processing. I have found that most of these kids are having a difficult time processing in their visual field. Eighty percent of what we take in is visual, so I always start here. Usually their eye muscles are weak, so I patch an eye and do the star eye exercises and repeat them on the other eye. I work on strengthening eye muscles. I have them work on spatial skills as well. Listen and draw is a great exercise I use for dyslexic children, as it encompasses all three avenues of learning. It is amazing how these kids perceive the world.

Next, I work on auditory and fine motor skills. I have yet to work with a dyslexic child who didn't have fine motor skills problems. I am to the point where I can almost diagnose a kid after a few minutes. This thing is real, and it seems to be an epidemic. Getting these kids to write is one of the most difficult things I do. We start slowly with other exercises to get their hands and brains to work together. I always have these kids learn cursive, as it is difficult to have a reversed letter with cursive and it also flows with the brain. Manuscript is choppy and it does not flow. It actually slows these kids down. Cursive is a tough transition for them, but once it is made, then it works so much better and writing skills can then be learned.

Usually, after a few months of this, the waters do indeed calm down. They start doing things that were not possible for them before. They start seeing some successes in school. Reading isn't quite the chore it once was. Writing becomes easier.

Is this an over night fix? Definitely not. It usually takes about a year for me to get a kid with dyslexia to be functional in a classroom and on grade level. And, that is with the parent's help. Daily exercises are important. It took me twice as long to get a dyslexic girl up to speed because her parents weren't willing to do eye exercises at home. But, she is in junior high school now and doing well. It just takes time and patience.