



Demystifying Dyslexia

Far more than flipping letters

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Helping the Struggling Reader

School is a child's occupation, and feeling unsuccessful at reading, one of the primary components of education, can be crushing. Many dyslexic students face this challenge. For students who struggle with reading, it's about more than remediation. You also have to rebuild their self-confidence.

Establishing a trusting relationship is our first goal after a child is placed in reading "pull-out" at The Joy School (TJS). The term pull-out simply means a small percentage of students rotate out of their core classes for sessions of highly-specialized instruction. A student who feels safe, understood and cared about will be receptive to reading intervention. As you build trust, you can develop an effective and individualized reading remediation plan.

Components of Reading Success

Reading has three main components: decoding, fluency and comprehension. A student without all three will have a difficult time reading.

Decoding is the ability to use visual, syntactic or semantic cues to derive meaning from words and sentences and involves the following skills: selective attention, phonemic awareness, phonological processing and alphabetic knowledge.

Fluency is defined as the ability to read with speed, accuracy and proper expression and involves visual scanning, rapid orthography (word recognition), sustained attention and motivation.

Comprehension, in reading, is defined as the ability to derive meaning from a body of text. It is a complex system involving language development, working memory, executive functioning and capturing the interest of the reader.

Other factors

Another crucial reading skill is **print tracking**. The function of print tracking, reading from left to right and top to bottom, is often not natural for dyslexic readers. Their eyes may jump over lines or words, making it difficult to continue reading. Students who struggle with print tracking need strategies to help make tracking an automatic behavior.

It is also important to understand that 25% of English words are non-phonetic, or words that don't look the way they sound. There are over 1,100 ways to represent our 44 sounds. Therefore, it is imperative to develop **orthography**, the ability to automatically and effortlessly recognize words in print based on their spatial and visual form.

Understanding the three components of reading can help you identify where students struggle as well as which subtype of dyslexia they have. From here, you can outline a remediation plan.

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“While I’m reading, I must sell myself a bill of goods to convince myself that what I’m reading is so fascinating and valuable... so compelling that it’s worth the effort. This is an act of self-discipline, fortitude and concentration that ultimately will benefit me.”

– Philip Schultz, Dyslexic Author

Subtypes of Dyslexia

As part of our dedication to continuing education, our reading pull-out team met with Steven G. Feifer, D.Ed, ABSNP, a neuropsychologist and renowned speaker and author in the field of learning disabilities. We learned intervention strategies for the following subtypes of dyslexia: dysphonetic dyslexia, surface dyslexia and mixed dyslexia.

Dysphonetic dyslexia – Students with this subtype have difficulty connecting sounds to letters and sounding out words. In other words, they over rely on visual cues to determine meaning from print. It is crucial to help these students understand language morphology, or the structure of words. For example, you might study how prefixes and suffixes change a word’s meaning.

How it presents: These students lack the knowledge and ability to derive sounds from spelling patterns. They often look at the beginning of the word and guess what it is based on visual and context clues.

Surface dyslexia – While students with dysphonetic dyslexia struggle with “sounding it out”, those who have surface dyslexia over rely on that skill. Readers with surface dyslexia break down every word to its phonetic base. They have difficulty recognizing whole words, especially ones that do not sound like they are spelled, like “debt”. Developing the ability to see syllable chunks within words, as well as seeing words as a whole, is the key to improving the reading ability of these struggling students.

How it presents: When kids with surface dyslexia see a word, they have to stop and think about how each individual part of the word sounds before attempting to blend those sounds together. In other words, they lack the ability to automatically and effortlessly recognize words in print based on their spatial and visual form.

Mixed dyslexia – This is the most challenging form of dyslexia. Struggling with both decoding and fluency, these readers have no usable key to the reading and spelling code. When a student has difficulty at this level, it is critical to take an eclectic approach to intervention, involving whole-word recognition, spelling-sounds and word structures. To increase the effectiveness of remediation, we must also incorporate the student’s strengths and affinities.

How it presents: This subtype of dyslexia is the most severe and long-term, impacting multiple parts of the brain. Assistive technology is a necessary tool for these students as they advance. They will likely struggle with reading most of their lives.

Reading Pull-Out at TJS

One well known and beloved statement at The Joy School is “It depends on the needs of the kid.” This is extremely true of our pull-out program. There are many factors to consider when working with a child one-on-one for reading remediation: age, previous exposure to phonetic concepts, motivation, mindset, emotional state, the subtype of dyslexia and more. Although we use similar programs with many different kids, the approach and focus for each is individualized. In addition, educating these children about their strengths and weaknesses in reading is key to developing their self-advocacy skills.

The Joy School’s focus on the individual needs of students is the shining feature that makes our pull-out program effective and important. The future for our struggling readers is bright, and convincing our students of this truth is half the battle. What a worthy battle it is! 🏠