



LEARN THE LEARNER

Dyslexia is one of the most common learning difficulties that needs to be dealt with and not shunned upon. Experts tell **Patricia Mascarenhas** how to cope with the mechanisms of dyslexia

Dyslexia is one of the most common difficulties that needs to be dealt with and not shunned upon. So if you suspect that your child is dyslexic or is a certified with dyslexia, knowing about the difficulty will help you deal better. According to the Dyslexia Association of India, this learning difficulty is a neurological condition that is characterised by difficulties that mainly affect the ability of a child to read, write and spell. It mainly affects the development of literacy and language related skills and is marked by poor response to sound teaching which might be effective for a typically developing learner. "Some of the main characteristics include difficulties with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory, processing speed and the automatic development of skills that may not match up to an individual's other cognitive abilities," explains Tilly Mortimore, senior lecturer in Inclusion and Specific Learning Difficulty (spLD)/ Dyslexia, Bath Spa University, UK.

In India, in areas where there is a means to identify dyslexia from other general literacy difficulties, the numbers are staggering. According to *The Psychology of Dyslexia: A Handbook for Teachers with Case Studies* by Michael Thomson, "If one takes an estimate of five per cent of the population being dyslexic, there must be around five million dyslexic children in India alone."

Present at birth and lifelong in its effects, people often do not know how to cope with dyslexic children. It is a sad cliché that many people with dyslexia still think they are stupid. Though obviously wrong, it is a logical conclusion to come due to the lack of knowledge in our country.

"In my younger days, it was very difficult to deal with the disability as the knowledge in India did not exist," says Kabir Bhogilal

who was lucky to get the opportunity to move to the UK and get the right intervention. Often, frustration among teachers leads to punishment of the student as they continue make mistakes. This in turn never helps in building self confidence in a child. "Being taught the right way is was an important aspect of my early childhood and it has laid the foundation of my life," says Bhogilal.

The main mission of any education system is to equip teachers and parents with effective strategies for teaching, so every child can reach his or her full potential. In India, though the awareness has set in and a number of schools have been formulated to address the needs of those with learning difficulties, the mind set of many is yet to change. "Parents and teachers need to stop concentrating on disability and find each child's ability," advises Bhogilal adding that the system of coping with dyslexia needs to be inclusive and teachers as well as parents need to believe that every child has a unique ability.

IN FOCUS

If one takes an estimate of five per cent of the population being dyslexic, there must be around five million dyslexic children in India alone

Apart from changing mindset, parents and teachers also need to recognise the importance of computer support in working with students with dyslexia and encourage the use of assistive technology. "Computer support is important for dyslexic learners because it can allow them to focus on the essential part of the task in hand while the technology takes care of other parts that would otherwise prove too demanding to allow them to stay focused," explains Malcolm Litten, independent consultant in dyslexia and assistive technology. He further adds that while typing out their work,

if the computer helps with their spelling they will use their full range of vocabulary. If they worry about the spelling they are likely to censor their own use of 'difficult' words.

In order to be able to teach, as far as possible, according to each child's educational needs, it is essential to see him or her as a whole person, complete with individual strengths and weaknesses. "Learn how they learn and teach them that way. Instead of teaching just facts and procedures that learners remember one day and forget the next. It is easier to teach them what they understand and remember," advises Steve Chinn, chair of the BDA's Dyscalculia group and a member of ESRC Peer Review College.

More dyslexic children could become talented and gifted members of our society if we worked not only with their areas of difficulty, but also their strengths from an early age. "Dyslexic learners have many strengths like oral skills, comprehension, good visual

spatial awareness/ artistic abilities and are prominent among entrepreneurs, inventors, architects etc. Some famous people include Walt Disney, Picasso, Winston Churchill, Tom Cruise, and Agatha Christie," says Mortimore.

Above all, learners must be assured from all those who teach them, that they may have many talents and skills and their abilities are not be measured purely on the basis of their difficulties in acquiring literacy skills. Dyslexic children, like all children, want to learn and thrive on challenges and success.

patricia.m@dnaindia.net

ROLE OF PARENTS, TEACHERS, FELLOW STUDENTS

Teachers

- Identify weaker areas in literacy early and fill the gaps as soon as you notice them
- Design tasks that let them show what they can do and celebrate their strengths
- Don't show them up in public
- Reduce any emphasis on rote learning and on memorising and reproducing facts
- Try to learn as much as possible about dyslexia and support
- Help children to work together to support each other - e.g. clever dyslexic scientist paired with poor scientist who can read and write. Both gain
- In exams and tests they should be allowed access arrangements so that they can show their knowledge e.g. use of ICT, scribes and readers so that they can show what they know

Parents

- The home is the child's refuge. Find the hero inside the child. Find the thing/s he is good at and celebrate learning strengths and use them to compensate for weaknesses
- Don't compare her/his negatively with other children. Don't blame her/him for the effects of her dyslexic difficulties e.g. poor spelling test results, failure to learn tables, poor writing skills
- Don't provide negative mantras. Being aware that the effect of constant failure and negative feedback cause real damage to the child's self esteem and willingness to learn

Fellow students

- Understand what dyslexia is so that you can help your friend show his/her talents
- Encourage to co-operate rather than compete

-Tilly Mortimore

BEHAVIOURS ASSOCIATED WITH DYSLEXIA

Reading

- Frequently losing place
- Omitting or repeating words
- Laboured reading, pupil tires quickly
 - Confusing similar looking words (e.g. Saw, was & lots and lost)
 - Difficulty decoding unknown words
 - Poor comprehension

Spelling

- Frequent misspellings, even of common words
- Bizarre spellings, from confusion between letters
 - Same words spelt differently within same piece of writing

Writing

- Written work takes a long time to complete
 - Messy writing
- Written work does not represent oral ability
 - Unstructured work

Speed of Processing

- Pupils may take longer to learn new information and to demonstrate evidence of learning within time constraints
 - Struggle to find the right words quickly
 - Deterred from answering questions in class