

Dyslexia

By Sara Barila

Dyslexia is the most common cause of reading, writing and spelling difficulties. The disorder - also called specific reading disability - is a life-long condition that people are born with.

Whilst various organisations report that dyslexia affects between 3 and 16% of the Australian population, experts fear many more students are not being diagnosed with the learning difficulty until their very last years of schooling.

What is it?

Dyslexia Australia defines dyslexia as a specific learning disability that causes problems with learning to read words, letters and other symbols. Literally meaning 'trouble with words', dyslexia affects males, females, and people from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds similarly. It must be noted that being dyslexic does not indicate low intelligence or lack of ability. Dyslexia can occur in children with any level of intelligence and abilities, despite sometimes being mistakenly thought to have an intellectual disability.

People with dyslexia may display some of the following:

- Difficulty in learning to read, write and spell despite a normal or high IQ
- Confused by letters, numbers, words, sequences or verbal explanations
- Repetitions and reversals in letters, numbers and/or words when writing
- 'Seeing' non-existent movement while reading or writing
- Read with little comprehension
- Spell phonetically and inconsistently
- Find it hard to recount a story in the correct sequence.

Dyslexia may result in other problems, including:

- Impulsivity
- Lack of motivation
- Emotional and behavioural problems
- Difficulty making friends
- Poor planning and time management.

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What causes dyslexia?

The exact cause of dyslexia has not been identified. Premature birth and low birth weight are risk factors, with some findings suggesting that genetics also play an important role.

How is dyslexia diagnosed?

The Specific Learning Difficulties Association (SPELD) of SA says a comprehensive psycho-educational assessment is required to diagnose dyslexia. SPELD SA suggests that parents ask their child's teacher and school principal for their advice on where to get an assessment, as it may be possible to organise one through the school. Alternatively, SPELD SA suggests finding a private psychologist who specialises in learning difficulties.

D Y S L E

Treatment

Dyslexia Australia says people with dyslexia can learn to read and write well, with the following support:

- Early identification and treatment
- One-on-one help
- Teaching via several senses (e.g. hearing, seeing, touching).

School

As reading is the basis for most school subjects, children with dyslexia need extra support at school. Untreated dyslexic students are highly likely to suffer from low self-esteem because they have to work a lot harder than their classmates, and often struggle to keep up. Many undiagnosed children also develop coping strategies, such as appearing to be not trying hard enough at school, or pretending to be less intelligent than they actually are.

Struggling with dyslexia can make a student feel stressed and not want to continue their education, which can have a negative impact on their future. As a result, adolescent psychologist Dr Darryl Cross says teachers need more training in order to pick up 'the signs', and more funding is required for support staff.

The Australian Dyslexic Association (ADA) says that "many teachers would benefit from specialised language training." The ADA questions the amount of training that teachers receive, quoting the 2004 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL) Australia, which indicated that half of Australia's 34 Bachelor of Education teacher training courses devoted less than 5% of their four-year curriculum to teaching reading.

Countless learning difficulty resources suggest that a team approach is often most successful in supporting children with

learning difficulties. The base of this 'team' are the child's parents, with other potential members including the child's teacher, the principal, the school counsellor, support teachers and health professionals such as speech pathologists and educational psychologists.

Working as a 'team' is beneficial as the group can identify the needs of the child and outline specific methods to address them. Parents are recognised as the most important part of the team, as they know the child best and are considered the child's most consistent teacher.

Children with dyslexia also need extra support during potentially difficult stages in their education, such as starting school and transitioning from primary to secondary school.

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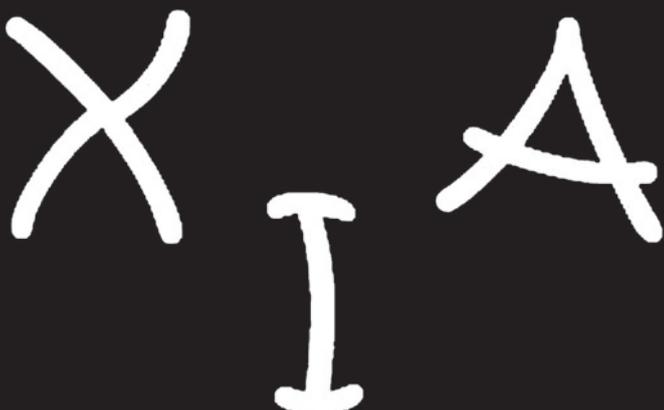
Building self-esteem

Children with any learning disability are at risk of lowered confidence. They not only require educational support, but also personal support.

How to help:

- Give the child responsibilities and tasks
- When they succeed with a task, praise them
- Give plenty of praise for trying
- Encourage hobbies he or she enjoys
- Encourage the child to make choices (e.g. choosing an outfit)
- Assure them that they are loved, no matter what.

For more advice, support and information on in-school workshops, visit SPELD SA www.speld-sa.org.au. ■

The image shows three large, white, handwritten letters: 'X', 'I', and 'A'. The letters are written in a simple, slightly irregular style, with the 'X' having two distinct strokes, the 'I' being a single vertical stroke with a small top and bottom bar, and the 'A' being a triangular shape with a horizontal crossbar. The letters are positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the page.