



Literacy needs and Dyslexia – Frequently Asked Questions

Bryony Landsbert (Educational Psychologist)
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What is dyslexia?

Oxfordshire schools are encouraged to use the British Psychological Society definition of Dyslexia.

‘Dyslexia is evident **when accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling develops very incompletely or with great difficulty.**

This focuses on literacy learning at the ‘word level’ and implies that the problem is **severe and persistent despite appropriate learning opportunities.**

It provides the basis for a **staged process of assessment through teaching**’
(The British Psychological Society, 1999).

There are other definitions of dyslexia, most notably where a person’s word level skills (reading and spelling) are significantly different from their ‘general intelligence’. This is not a definition we generally use in the Didcot Schools, because we focus on helping all children develop the literacy skills they need to access the curriculum whilst recognising that all learners have different strengths and needs, and valuing different ways of showing ‘intelligence’.

What does literacy needs/dyslexia look like in the classroom?

In general terms, children with literacy needs /dyslexia may have difficulties with the following, though as all children are different they may be absolutely fine with some of these things.

- Reading and spelling words
- Reading and writing passages of text
- Organising themselves and their work

They may show gaps in their learning. When they are finding accessing texts difficult it might have an impact on their,

- self esteem, self belief and therefore their approach to tasks
- behaviour when they are expected to engage in these kinds of activities.

It is important to note that

- these needs exist for lots of different reasons, and that it may not be literacy needs/dyslexia which is at the root of these. For example, children who have had speech, vision or hearing needs are very likely to initially make slower progress with their literacy skills.
- many signs of dyslexia in older children are very normal in younger children in Key Stage 1, for example missing out sounds when spelling words or getting letters back to front. It is only when these errors persist as the child gets older that they become signs of literacy needs/dyslexia.

How do we assess whether a child has Dyslexia/ literacy needs?

Unless specifically qualified, school staff cannot diagnose Dyslexia, but they can work to identify skill gaps and plan to develop these skills. In Didcot, we use a staged approach when assessing dyslexia/literacy needs, involving a ‘review, plan, do’ cycle. This should always start with the class teacher’s routine monitoring of the progress of all the children in their class. If a child is significantly behind the others in the class, or if they aren’t making their usual rate of progress, the class teacher will liaise with the schools SENCO. The majority of SENCOs in the partnership are either very experienced or have a Masters Degree in Special Educational Needs and have studied assessment processes. They will be aware of Oxfordshire’s Policy for Literacy Difficulties and how to be a ‘Dyslexia Friendly School’.



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Together, the class teacher and SENCo will,

1. discuss with parents
 - what they are worried about, and what improvement they hope they will see in their child as a result of support
 - factors which might affect progress, including how much are engaging in books at home, any previous gaps/previous support in their education, whether their hearing and vision has been checked etc.
2. look at the Oxfordshire Special Educational Needs descriptors (these are the same in all publicly funded schools in Oxfordshire)
3. probably complete further assessments to unpick where exactly the child is having difficulties, and ideally also where their strengths lie, so that teachers can use these within their teaching.
4. consider strategies the child and teacher can use in the classroom to support progress
5. consider any intervention packages (one to one or small group work) which focusses on developing particular skills.
6. Review the effectiveness of the support in place at regular review points and adapt provision for the child, reporting back to parents

Parents should ask for a clear picture of the level of support that their child is receiving in school and should have access to assessment results if they wish to see them.

Several Schools have dyslexia screening packages. These can help identify the kinds of needs that children who are dyslexic have but cannot diagnose dyslexia. They often describe children as having 'dyslexic tendencies' or 'likely/very likely to be dyslexic'. These descriptions are not a diagnosis of dyslexia.

It is rare for us to consider the term 'dyslexic' for children in Key Stage 1 as children's brains grow and develop around the age of 7 or 8 in ways which support the development of literacy skills.

Does having Dyslexia/literacy needs mean there's something wrong with my child? How can I help them understand it?

We are all unique as individuals. We all have different talents and needs. As each child grows, they learn about themselves and what they find easy and hard, and what helps them do their best. This is no different for a child who struggles with literacy. Sometimes children who struggle with reading and writing are exceptional in other areas, and what is a difficulty in some activities might be a strength in others. For example, some children find that letters flip around on the page rather easily and get them back to front, but some of these same children are brilliant at solving puzzles with shapes because they can flip the shapes around rather easily and see how they fit together. The most important thing to do is to help your child understand what they are good at and how they learn at their best.

Sometimes a child will learn that they are 'dyslexic' and this actually hinders their progress as they think it means they 'can't' read and write. When explaining literacy needs to children, we like to help them understand that we are all different, and that this means that we learn in different ways. If they are struggling to learn something the way the teacher is currently teaching it, we will find a different way of teaching until they do learn. For this reason, increasingly teachers like to talk about 'learning differences' rather than learning difficulties.



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Will having a diagnosis of dyslexia help my child?

Dyslexia is an umbrella term, which describes that someone has difficulty with reading and/or spelling. It does not explain what exactly the child is struggling with.

There are lots of different skills involved with fluently developing reading and spelling skills. For example, one child might have difficulty with remembering letter shapes, another might have difficulty remembering which letters go with which sounds, another child might find it difficult to focus on the letters on the page, and another might find it difficult to blend sounds together or split them apart when making words. Another might need to practise the words a lot more than other children in order to remember them.

Whilst some children might need support with just one of these, others might need support with several. If the needs are significant and persistent, any could potentially result in a diagnosis of Dyslexia, but this in itself does not help the teacher understand how to help the child. More important than a diagnosis is knowing which skill the child needs help with and which strategies help, so that the child makes progress. For this reason it is unpicking the child's needs that our schools focus on rather than just giving a label of dyslexia.

Children do not need a diagnosis of dyslexia in order to

- access the level of support they need to support their progress. It is available to all children who are struggling to make progress.
- receive access arrangements in SATS, GCSEs and A levels. Decisions around this are based on assessments completed within schools. Children do not need either a diagnosis of dyslexia, nor to have seen an Educational Psychologist in order to be considered for these assessments. Assessments are usually carried out during Year 6 for SATS, Year 10 for GCSEs, Year 12 for A levels. A formal diagnosis of dyslexia does not mean that the child will automatically receive access arrangements.

A note on GCSEs and A levels - There are very strict rules and time frames, and specific paperwork that schools need to comply with when requesting access arrangements for formal examinations. Private Dyslexia assessments can only be used under certain circumstances, for example if the assessor has liaised with the school before the assessment. If parents wish to arrange a private assessment, it is best to liaise with the school SENCo about these strict processes.

A note on Higher Education – Students with significant literacy needs who are planning to continue their education beyond A-level will need to explore the extent of evidence they need to show at the establishment they plan to attend. This is relevant to a small minority of students. Schools will be happy to provide details of any assessments they have completed, however if a diagnostic report is required specifically for higher education, this would need to be sourced and funded privately.

When does the School's Educational Psychologist (EP) get involved?

Schools will ask me to become involved if, when they have tried what is typically available in their school, the child is still not making sufficient progress, or if they would like further support in unpicking what the child is struggling with.

There is an expectation that the school will have completed the steps above before inviting me to talk about a child. Parents should also be aware that there is sadly not a limitless supply of my time, and that schools have to carefully prioritise how they use my time. Medical professionals and websites will often suggest an EP, but unfortunately do not always understand the level of support many schools can provide without an EP, nor other pressures on EP time. Schools are in charge of prioritising the EP time that they have, whilst they work hard to meet the needs of all the learners in school.

When I visit a child I usually talk to the parents, teacher, observe in class and work with the child. I usually complete just one piece of work, though if concerns about progress remain I may be involved again.



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Can my child have one to one support to help them?

Parents who struggled with their own literacy at school often worry that their child will be having a similar experience. On the whole, teachers now have a much better understanding of literacy needs and dyslexia than they did when many parents went to school, and are much more used to adapting their teaching to meet the needs of learners with lots of different needs.

Whilst quite a few children have a bit of additional support during their school day, there are very few children indeed that require one to one support. The aim of any teaching is to help children learn to do things with increasing independence.

The focus of interventions, either on a one to one basis, or in small groups, is to teach the children skills that they can then use independently within the classroom, and then on into adulthood. Some children will need a little support in the classroom to generalise these skills into this environment.

All teachers

- are responsible for differentiating work for the children in their class, and this means adapting it to their needs, so that they can do it as independently as possible
- should know which strategies which the young person has been taught and support the child in using these in class if they need help (they may not need help).

What can I do to help my child?

Because all children are different, and because dyslexia looks different in every child, it is difficult to recommend specific things here for all parents to do with their child. However, I would encourage parents to,

- keep sharing books with their child, even after they have learned to read to themselves
- continue encouraging them and value both their efforts and progress
- encourage the child to notice what they are good at and what helps them to succeed
- ask the child's teacher and SENCO for more specific ideas about what you can do to help the child

We've tried all the above and I'm still worried, what next?

If you've tried all this and an assessment in greater depth that enables progress is not available from the school, you can consider getting a private assessment. You should expect this to cost you several hundreds of pounds, depending on the depth of the assessment. To get the best results you should ensure that,

- the person you are asking has the appropriate qualifications. This might be someone with an AMBDA or and Educational Psychologist if you want a diagnosis and advice, or someone with a lapsed AMBDA if you are only really want the advice.
- they have recent experience of working with schools so that they can advise appropriate next steps
- they are willing to liaise with the child's school so that they understand the context that the child is being taught in as well as the support that been in place.

The child's school may have some idea about which professionals have provided good quality advice previously. You should bear in mind that schools do not have to implement the recommendations made by a private professional, though they are likely to be interested in reviewing the findings and suggestions to see if it can help them support the child.

I hope the answers to these questions have proved helpful in understanding how schools provide for students with literacy needs and learning differences, and that these help you to support child in understanding how they can help themselves succeed. If you have any further questions, please contact the school.