

# Dyslexia: a difficulty in cracking the code of written language

*A summary for families*

## What is dyslexia?

If your child is having difficulties in learning to read, they may have dyslexia. Children with dyslexia have difficulties with reading and spelling, even if a high quality, evidence-based approach to the teaching of reading is used in the classroom.

Dyslexia is the most common type of learning difficulty, affecting about 1 in 10 children. It runs in families because it can be caused by genetic factors. It is not caused by not trying hard or a lack of access to high quality teaching. It affects children from all backgrounds and across a range of intellectual ability levels.

There are other students who have reading difficulties because of a lack of appropriate reading instruction. Those students do not have dyslexia. Children with dyslexia are also different to children who are *poor comprehenders*, meaning children who have a hard time understanding what they read even if they can read the words correctly.

## What causes dyslexia?

You will often hear that dyslexia is caused by students seeing letters and words backwards or reversed when reading, but this is a common myth.

Scientists have found that being able to work out unfamiliar words by using letter-sound patterns is very important in learning to read. For example, if you know the speech sounds represented by the letters 'th', 'o', and 'p', you can read the made up word 'thop' by joining them together, even if you have never seen the word before. Reading an unfamiliar real word is just like reading the made up word 'thop'. Even if the student knows what the unfamiliar word means when they *hear* it, they cannot *read* it unless they can use letter-sound patterns to 'decode' the word.

The point of reading is to understand the meaning of the words on the page. Science has shown that *reading comprehension* depends on two main skills: decoding and language comprehension (see Figure 1). If either decoding or language comprehension skills are weak, reading comprehension ability will be reduced.



Figure 1: Skills involved in reading comprehension. Dyslexia affects decoding. If students can't decode words, they can't understand what the text means, even if they understand the meaning of the words in conversation.

Dyslexia affects decoding ability, making the 'code cracking' process difficult, regardless of the student's level of language skills. Students with dyslexia find it hard to work out new words for themselves when reading and spelling. Scientists have shown that this difficulty makes learning to read and spell very difficult, since students with dyslexia are not as good as students without dyslexia at using their decoding skills to teach themselves new words.

Scientists think the decoding difficulties in dyslexia are caused by difficulties in understanding how words are made up of individual speech sounds, and how these speech sounds relate to letters. Understanding how words are made up of speech sounds is called *phonemic awareness*. Phonemic awareness is thought to help kids to 'crack the code' in written language. Children with dyslexia may also have difficulty with other language processing skills such as remembering what was just said and / or with saying the names of objects quickly.

## What should I do if I think my child may have dyslexia?

It is important that your child's reading difficulty is identified as early as possible. Speak with your child's teacher about getting your child assessed. It is crucial, however, that your child receives help for their reading difficulty as soon as possible. **You or the school do not need to wait for your child's reading difficulty to be formally identified to begin getting help from your school.**

Formal identification of dyslexia must be carried out by a professional with expertise in learning difficulties and a high level of understanding regarding language and literacy development. For this reason, dyslexia identification (sometimes called diagnosis) is usually carried out by an educational psychologist or speech & language pathologist. These professionals will work closely with you and your child's school to identify the problem and recommend evidence-based interventions.

## How can we help children with dyslexia?

All students learning to read require high quality, evidence-based instruction. However, research shows that the majority of people with dyslexia can learn to read if they are provided with more intensive, more frequent and more individualised evidence-based help. The earlier students receive this help, the better their long-term outcomes. The period over which intervention is required and the intensity of the intervention will vary according to the degree of difficulty experienced and your child's particular profile of strengths and weaknesses.

If you think your child may have dyslexia:

- Talk to your child's teacher. Ask your child's teacher about getting an assessment and whether the reading and spelling program they teach is evidence-based.
- Access support programs and services. Your school may be able to provide an individual learning plan (ILP).



- Access additional resources. Learning and teaching materials as well as specialised services are available for students with learning difficulties from a range of organisations. Your child's school can advise on what they have in place for children with literacy difficulties and / or dyslexia.

## Where can I get more information?

For more information on Dyslexia in DECD schools and preschools go to:

<https://www.decd.sa.gov.au/supporting-students/dyslexia>

The following organisations have further helpful information and resources:

**DECD Special Education Resource Unit (SERU):** <http://web.seru.sa.edu.au/>

**SPELD SA:** <http://www.speld-sa.org.au/>

**Learning Difficulties Australia** <https://www.ldaustralia.org>

**Speech Pathology Australia** <http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au>

**Five from Five** <http://www.fivefromfive.org.au/>

**Dyslexia SA** <http://www.dyslexiasa.org.au/>

**AUSPELD Understanding LDs parents guide:** <http://uldforparents.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Understanding-Learning-Difficulties-2016-edition.pdf>

**Outside the Square films (free viewing):** <http://www.outsidesquare.net>

