

FOR PARENTS OF MULTIPLE CHILDREN WITH DYSLEXIA

6 TIPS TO SUCCEED

BY GEORGIE NORMAND, M.A.

It's both possible and even likely that if you already have one child with dyslexia, one or more of their siblings may also struggle with the process of learning to read. This is especially true if either parent experienced problems learning to read, write, or spell.

Dyslexia, the most common learning disability, affects 15-20% of the population and can occur in up to half of those children who have a parent or sibling with dyslexia. The risk and severity are greater when both parents have dyslexia.

Managing the academic success of just one child with

dyslexia can be challenging. Since dyslexia is not a one-size-fits-all reading disability, working towards successful outcomes for multiple children with dyslexia can feel a lot like juggling balls. If that's how you feel, the following tips can help you navigate the process with less stress and more success.

DOUBLE DUTY: Help each child discover and focus on their strengths. Giving them time to develop their gifts individually will create resilience, build confidence, and improve self-esteem as they tackle and conquer reading, writing, and spelling skills.



TIP #1: AVOID PARENTAL GUILT SYNDROME

Whether you are their primary tutor, you've hired a private tutor, or the intervention takes place in the school (or some combination of these options), you will seldom feel that you are doing enough for each child. Replace this guilt with action in the form of knowledge, advocacy, and determination.

Expect periods of frustration and discouragement as each child works through the hurdles involved in becoming a proficient reader. The journey will be different for each of them, depending on their specific dyslexia profile, personality, and emotional resilience. Keep your expectations high for all of them



and make sure they know you are always there to support them, even when they experience occasional plateaus in their progress. The nagging feeling of not doing enough may tempt you to skip much needed holiday and summer breaks from tutoring. Although breaks in the intervention can certainly cause learning loss, there are ways to minimize the loss and maintain the momentum of reading gains. (See our article, "Fun Ways to Prevent the Summer Reading Slide in Dyslexia" featured in the June 2023 issue of *Exceptional Parent Magazine* at www.epmagazine.com/archive to learn more about how to manage breaks from tutoring.)

TIP #2: BUILD AND MAINTAIN THEIR SELF-ESTEEM

Since each of your children can be anywhere on the spectrum from mild to severe, depression might accompany the child with the most severe profile. Children who tend to be more competitive or self-aware, may be highly sensitive to where they stand in reading levels at school compared to their classmates. It's especially important to help this child focus on academic areas of strength, along with extracurricular activities that provide opportunities to excel. When they share their emotions and thoughts about not feeling as smart as their classmates because of their reading struggles, explain to them that dyslexia has nothing to do with intelligence. Introduce them to the many successful individuals with dyslexia from all walks of life. Well known examples include celebrities like: Cher, Tom Cruise, CNN journalist Anderson Cooper, Hollywood director Steven Spielberg, Daymond John from Shark Tank, and super athletes like Muhammad Ali. There are also professors, scientists, and others who did not let dyslexia keep them from their dreams. The genius Albert Einstein was able to achieve more in the field of theoretical physics than many of his fellow scientists who did not have dyslexia.

In fact, some companies are beginning to actively recruit dyslexic individuals, because there is greater awareness of the value of "dyslexic thinking." We know from neuroimaging studies that although dyslexic children approach reading itself in a less efficient way than their non-dyslexic peers, they often recruit other brain



regions to help them with reading tasks. This compensatory approach might explain their success in tasks related to problem solving and creativity. Einstein explained that he tended to think in images, and as a visual thinker he was able to produce his greatest work. He also quipped that if you judge a fish by its ability to climb trees, it will live its whole life thinking that it is stupid. As you help each of your children develop their reading proficiency, give them plenty of time to explore and build on their natural talents and abilities.

Considering that each child with dyslexia has their own distinct reading profile, it's important that you find out more about each child's dyslexia, to ensure that their profile is being addressed in their individual interventions. This can be done through comprehensive screening that looks at the many components of dyslexia. Don't expect to see the same profile for each of your children, but if they are similar enough, they may be able to be tutored together, either by you or an outside tutor. This is not as unusual as you might think. Dyslexia intervention in schools is mostly taking place in a small group setting of two or three students, where they are grouped according to various measures. But the most logical way of ensuring success is to group your children by level of severity. If you have two children who are severely affected, they could be tutored together and receive the same level of pacing and intensity. If one has severe dyslexia and the other does not, then individual tutoring would be best.

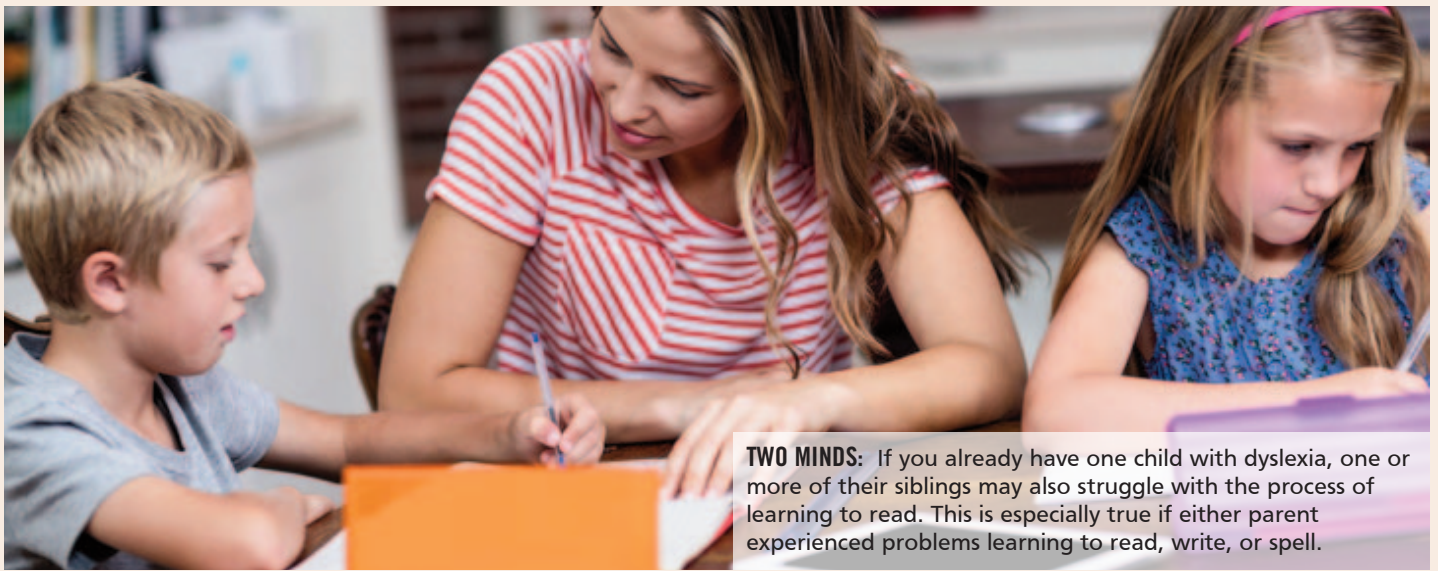
TIP #3: CATCH IT EARLY IN YOUNGER SIBLINGS

The first child in the family to be identified as dyslexic may have endured years of missed opportunities for early reading intervention, with parents frequently being told to wait for testing because the child is not far enough behind. Many children have had to wait until third or fourth grade to be screened for dyslexia, even though they remained at a kindergarten or first grade reading level.

These children lost so much ground academically, not to mention the terrible toll on their self-esteem. This scenario, although still common, is in the process of being turned around because of state legislation requiring early dyslexia screening.



If there is already a family history of dyslexia or reading problems, be on the lookout for any early signs of dyslexia in each child. One of the very first risk factors to show up in a child's life is early language delay, a strong predictor of dyslexia. Not every dyslexic child will experience this, and not every child with early language delay will have reading problems, but parents should certainly ask the school to screen this child for dyslexia, and initiate an early dyslexia-specific intervention, in PreK if possible. Early identification and intervention can prevent reading failure. It's important to know that it is possible to identify young children at



TWO MINDS: If you already have one child with dyslexia, one or more of their siblings may also struggle with the process of learning to read. This is especially true if either parent experienced problems learning to read, write, or spell.

risk of dyslexia by simply screening for early language delay and family history of reading problems in PreK.

There are other assessments that can also be used in early and late PreK. In addition to early language delay and a family history of reading problems, dyslexic children may perform poorly in an assessment called RAN when given in PreK, kindergarten, and even older grades. RAN (rapid automatized naming) tasks measure a child's processing speed in tasks that are very similar to the skills required in reading. Since it is a test of processing speed, the results of this assessment can determine whether the child will have difficulty becoming a fluent reader. Research on the fluency problem in dyslexia found that there are ways to successfully address it during the intervention. Without an intensive intervention that focuses on fluency, a poor performance on this assessment means that the child may eventually read accurately, but never progress to the grade level fluency needed to succeed in reading assignments, school tests, and homework.

Over 60% of dyslexic students score poorly on the RAN assessment because reading itself and the tasks on this assessment rely heavily on executive function, which tends to be weak in dyslexic children. Executive function in reading refers to how well the reading related regions of the brain synchronize with each other. Reading interventions that do not address the executive function issue in dyslexia, often take years and generally fail to bring the

child to grade level fluency norms. Intensive fluency training (discussed in more depth in Tip #5 below) is a research-proven intervention strategy to improve executive function in dyslexia. But it is often neglected in favor of phonics instruction. Both should be prioritized.

Most dyslexic students also perform poorly in another skill needed for reading, called phonological awareness or PA. PA relates to a child's awareness of units of sound such as individual words in a sentence, syllables within a word, and the ability to distinguish between words that rhyme and those that don't. Blending the individual sounds in a word and segmenting the individual sounds in a word (so important to spelling) depends on a subskill of phonological awareness called phonemic awareness.

A parent will want to have younger siblings tested for these skills, as early as possible, if there is already one child in the family with dyslexia. Fortunately, early dyslexia screening is being mandated in most states, but a yes/no screener is not very helpful. Each younger sibling should be screened in PreK or kindergarten with a comprehensive screener that includes other indicators of risk for dyslexia, such as poor verbal working memory. Once the child has been able to benefit from formal instruction in letter name and letter sound knowledge and basic phonics instruction, these skills should also be included in the screening. By mid-first grade, their oral reading of simple passages can be assessed for fluency and comprehension.

TIP #4: WHAT ELSE TO LOOK FOR IN YOUNGER SIBLINGS

A younger sibling may not display the same signs of dyslexia as an older sibling with dyslexia. However, weak verbal working memory leading to difficulty following oral directions with two or more steps is prevalent among children with dyslexia. Many dyslexic children also display early handwriting issues (dysgraphia) that may include a noticeably awkward pencil grip, and some dyslexic children also find simple math concepts difficult (dyscalculia). Additional interventions may be needed for each of these co-occurring conditions. If the dysgraphia is severe, it might be helpful to consult with an occupational therapist.

They may each need a different level of support and intervention.



One of your dyslexic children may be a very quick learner and even be considered "gifted," (often referred to as "twice exceptional" or "2E"), while others in the family with dyslexia may be of average intelligence and aptitude. ADHD frequently coexists with dyslexia, and this condition can interfere with the progress of any reading intervention. If one of your dyslexic children also has ADHD, you will want to find the best way of addressing it, so that the intervention can be successful. For more information, visit the International Dyslexia Association's discussion on this topic <https://dyslexiaida.org/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd-and-dyslexia>. Of course, great things can be accomplished by each of your children regardless of their profile.

Interestingly, the errors made by dyslexic children are not the same errors made by beginning readers, although it may appear that way at first. As they begin to read whole paragraphs or pages of a book or short story, you will see a myriad of unusual reading behaviors

emerge, that are not typical of other young readers. To learn more about these reading behaviors, you might find the following resource helpful in *Exceptional Parent Magazine's* Archive for September 2022: "What Dyslexia Looks Like by Grade Level" at www.epmagazine.com/archive.

TIP #5: ADVOCATE FOR EACH CHILD

Make sure the younger siblings are tested/screened for dyslexia before they fail. This means, as early as possible, either PreK or Kindergarten. If the screening or testing finds that the child has deficits associated with dyslexia, waste no time in advocating and pressing the school for an IEP (Individualized Educational Program) for this child. Without the IEP in place, there is no guarantee that your child will receive an evidence-based reading intervention that is dyslexia-specific. Instead, they are likely to receive more of the core reading curriculum that has already failed them. For more information on the IEP process, visit Dyslexia Help at the University of Michigan <https://dyslexiahelp.umich.edu>.

Stay vigilant to be sure the IEP is being followed and that appropriate accommodations are in place for tests and other challenges. An example would be spelling tests. Until your child has made significant progress in spelling, weekly spelling tests should be reduced to a few words, and grading should accommodate your child's level of progress.



Certain standardized tests may also require the teacher to read the test questions orally, to give your child a fair chance at a successful outcome. Remember that the law is on your side. To learn more about your rights, visit Dyslexia Help at the University of Michigan. <http://dyslexiahelp.umich.edu/parents/living-with-dyslexia/school/know-your-rights>.

The greatest challenge in dyslexia intervention is helping each child reach grade level reading fluency norms.

Fluency training provides a shortcut to gains in every reading measure, not just fluency. So, no matter what their unique dyslexia profile is, make sure that intensive fluency training is included in the intervention for each of them. This means that the intervention should include timed repeated reading, and timed repeated handwriting tasks with word lists and sentences, that are based on instruction that they have been explicitly taught. Handwriting fluency facilitates reading fluency, so timed repeated handwriting tasks are just as critical to achieving reading proficiency as timed repeated reading tasks.

TIP #6: TAKE ADVANTAGE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND RESOURCES

While your children are working to improve reading proficiency, take advantage of the many learning resources on YouTube and audio book resources, such as Learning Ally at <https://learningally.org>. Audio books will give each child opportunities to explore their own individual interests, acquire vocabulary, and develop comprehension skills.

There are a host of assistive technologies that will make schoolwork and homework so much easier. To learn more about them, visit the Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity <https://dyslexia.yale.edu/resources/tools-technology>.

Again, help each child discover and focus on their strengths. Provide time every week for them to build on these strengths, which can appear in the form of a hobby, sport, academic interest, or special talent. Giving them time to develop their gifts individually will create resilience, build confidence, and improve self-esteem as they tackle and conquer reading, writing, and spelling skills.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Georgie Normand, M.A. holds a Master's degree in Reading Education and has spent many years working with students with dyslexia. She is the founder of Early Literacy Solutions and the author of the Orton-Gillingham based Fluency Builders Dyslexia Program (earlyliteracy-solutions.com). Designed for parents, tutors, and teachers, the Fluency Builders program

utilizes the latest neuroscience in dyslexia. These new studies found that dyslexia is not a one-size-fits-all learning disability. Georgie has also developed the Certified Dyslexia Practitioner Program, a professional learning program that trains teachers and tutors to identify and succeed with multiple dyslexia profiles. Contact her at georgienormand@earlyliteracysolutions.com



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