

# FUN WAYS TO PREVENT THE SUMMER READING SLIDE IN DYSLEXIA

BY GEORGIE NORMAND, M.A.

*Eight-year-old Alec was a very motivated student during his daily dyslexia intervention at school. He had been diagnosed with dyslexia six months earlier when still reading at kindergarten level. When he was told this was the source of his reading problem, he felt better. He now understood that he was as smart as his classmates and simply needed a specialized approach to reading instruction.*

**H**is twice weekly after-school tutoring sessions were also building his reading skills. He was looking forward to a time when he could pick up a book and read it fluently. As summer approached, Alec told his mother that he wanted to take the summer off from all lessons. She was justifiably concerned that some of his hard-earned gains would be lost over the summer break.

## SUMMER LEARNING LOSS

Although the summer slide can impact all students, with or without dyslexia, there is no consensus about how much learning is lost. One recent study found that the average student lost 17-34% of the prior year's learning gains (reading, math, and other subjects) during the summer, and that those who lost ground in one summer are likely to lose ground in subsequent summers.

An earlier study found that achievement scores declined by one month's worth of school-year learning, with declines being greater for math than for reading. Another study suggested that the degree of loss depends on many factors, including household income. Some experts say that the summer slide issue is far from settled, but surveys do show that the average teacher finds it necessary to spend the first 3-6 weeks of school re-teaching content from the previous year.

For dyslexic students, when there is no summer intervention in place, the slide can be more dramatic and consequential.

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**SUMMER SLUMP:** Without ongoing cumulative review and lots of repetition with newly introduced reading skills, progress can stall or the student may regress.



Reading skills are much more difficult to acquire and retain, compared to their non-dyslexic peers. Without ongoing cumulative review and lots of repetition with newly introduced reading skills, progress can stall, or worse, the student may even regress. In dyslexia, multiple inefficiencies in the brain's reading circuit interfere with the critical processes involved in learning to read. Overcoming these inefficiencies requires such an intense effort, that any interruption in instruction can result in learning loss.

## THE PLAN

Remembering how even a short two-week holiday break had impacted Alec's progress, his mother was worried that a summer break could create a significant setback for Alec. She discussed the situation with his tutor.

The decision was made to work out a compromise with Alec. Instead of two tutoring sessions per week, they would only do one

during the summer, with the caveat that Alec would complete assigned work from the tutor, twice a week. His mother would need to supervise this work to address another feature of dyslexia - a weak error-detection mechanism in both reading and spelling. Every component of a dyslexia intervention requires supervision, so that errors are not overlooked.

Since fluency is especially impacted during tutoring breaks, Alec's tutor gave his mother 30-minute fluency drills each week, to use for his supervised work. These drills were based on the instructional content from their weekly tutoring session. Alec could do all 30 minutes at one time or break it into two 15-minute drills. This plan would at least maintain the momentum he had established during the school year. It was also possible that he would even make gains with this plan.

Studies have found that a focus on fluency during dyslexia interventions can actually accelerate gains in every reading measure -

## GET A GRIP : TEN TIPS TO PROTECT YOUR DYSLEXIC CHILD FROM THE SUMMER READING SLIDE



**1. Avoid changing the tutoring schedule that was in place during the school year, if at all possible.** If the intervention only took place in school, you could still follow Tips 2-10.



**2. Add 30 minutes of supervised fluency drills (as described above), at least 2 days per week.** Record the time it takes to complete each repeated task. Make it a game, encouraging your child to "beat" their previous reading and handwriting rates.



**3. Keep it fun!** Waterproof the writing paper, word lists, and sentences so that the drills can be taken to the beach, pool, waterslide, and other enjoyable activities. You may want to save the handwriting drills for the kitchen table.



**4. Set a goal of adding 45+ Words Correct per Minute (WCPM) over the summer and reward your child with a small prize for achieving that goal or even coming close to it.** You can use an online Words Correct per Minute (WCPM) reading calculator to make this easy. <https://calculator.academy/wcpm-calculator/#f1p1> Or use the following formula: *To calculate WCPM, subtract the number of mistakes made from the total number of words read, then divide by the total time in minutes.*



**5. Let your child track their own WCPM progress on a chart.**



**6. Don't neglect the handwriting component of the fluency drills.** It's just as important as the reading component, in terms of building the reading circuit in the brain.



**7. Encourage your child to listen to self-selected audiobooks** to build vocabulary and comprehension, and to foster a love for books.



**8. Find decodable readers for your child to read in their spare time.** Talk to their teacher/tutor about decodable readers that would match their current phonics skills. This will usually prevent the word-guessing habit, but it's still wise to listen in, to monitor for accuracy.



**9. Let your child select books for reading aloud** (you do the reading). Minimize unsupervised reading, unless your child is far advanced in their intervention.



**10. Create a special space in the house just for your child to listen to audiobooks.**

not just fluency. When done the right way, fluency activities improve connectivity in the reading circuit and provide a shortcut to reading gains. For connectivity to improve, the research tells us that these activities must “push” Alec out of his comfort zone in both reading and handwriting rates.

Alec’s tutor recommended that the fluency drills involve repeated timed reading of the assigned word lists and groups of sentences, in addition to writing these words and sentences (from dictation). She explained that each time he completed a timed reading or writing task, he should repeat the task multiple times, with the goal of increasing his speed each time. During the school year, the tutor had set a goal with Alec of increasing his reading fluency rate by 20 words correct per minute (WCPM) every month. She encouraged Alec’s mother to do the same, explaining that goal setting is a very important part of making gains in dyslexia. She suggested that some small prize could be awarded to Alec for reaching the goal or getting very close to it. She also gave Alec a fluency chart, so he could track his own progress.

Lastly, she alerted Alec’s mother to the possibility that he may try to skip the handwriting component as he had attempted to do during the school year. This was the only part of the intervention he didn’t enjoy. She shared the results of neuroimaging studies which found that handwriting, by itself, plays a major role in rewiring the reading circuit, especially timed handwriting activities. In fact, handwriting fluency facilitates reading fluency.

These fluency activities had been included in Alec’s sessions throughout the school year. He especially loved the game of beating his own time, competing with himself instead of other students, and seeing his fluency improve, week after week. Even though he enjoyed this challenge during the school year, his mother knew that she had to integrate the drills into a summer-fun environment. She tucked the writing paper, word lists and sentences into clear plastic pocket sleeves to make them waterproof for trips to the beach, nearby pool, and waterslide. She also included them in the backpack they took when the family went hiking. Stopping to snack was the perfect time to do a 15-minute drill. Once they were back on the trail, Alec never gave it another thought until their next stop. Sometimes they saved the handwriting drills for the kitchen table.

Audiobooks were another recommendation from the tutor, because they are a great way to build vocabulary and comprehension, over the summer. His mother repurposed a comfortable and quiet space in the house for him to listen to these books. Alec also selected books from the library for his mother to read aloud to him.

Each week the tutor sent him home with “decodable” readers that he could read somewhat independently in his spare time. Decodable readers are books that use phonics skills that have already been explicitly taught to the student. This usually prevents the word-guessing habit, so common in dyslexia, but it’s still important for accuracy to be monitored by a tutor or parent, while reading. When matched to the student’s current phonics skills, decodables can provide practice, enjoyment, and a sense of accomplishment.

Alec used the fluency chart to track his own progress over the summer, and he, his tutor, and his mother were excited to see monthly gains. He had almost met the goal that was set for the summer. When he returned to school and was tested, these gains were confirmed. His mother was relieved to learn that he had

avoided the summer reading slide and had even made gains in several other reading measures. Most importantly, embedding the fluency drills into some all-day summer-fun activities made the work seem almost effortless to Alec.

## COMPARING APPLES TO ORANGES

When summer tutoring for dyslexic students is dropped, the reading slide can be far more substantial than the summer slide experienced by other students. The activities that would prevent a reading slide for Alec’s non-dyslexic classmates, such as lots of independent reading, would not be sufficient for Alec and could even create problems for him. For example, depending on how much time a student has already spent in their intervention and how much progress they’ve made, unsupervised reading activities could reinforce dyslexia-related reading behaviors, such as word-guessing.

The first step in preventing the summer reading slide in dyslexia is to recognize that these students need much more specialized help than their classmates •

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