

# What Dyslexia Looks Like by Grade Level

## Pre-K

### Letter Names and Sounds

The at-risk child will have difficulty with learning and remembering the names of the letters, and have even more trouble associating the sounds with their corresponding letters.

### Phonological Awareness/Phonemic Awareness

Phonological awareness (PA) is a broad term which refers to a child's understanding that sentences are made up of words, and words are made up of individual sounds and sometimes syllables. PA is acquired through listening, and children who can clap out words in sentences or syllables in a word have PA. These children can also tell if two words rhyme. About two-thirds of dyslexic children have a deficit in phonological awareness (Ring & Black, 2018).

Phonemic awareness is a subskill of PA which involves awareness of individual sounds (phonemes). Children with poor phonemic awareness may not be able to segment sounds in a word or blend sounds together. If your classroom uses phonemic awareness activities, this child will be puzzled by these activities. For example, identifying initial sounds, final sounds, and medial sounds will be difficult for this child even after the teacher models this task. These children may find blending and segmenting sounds in short CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words - cat, dog, bat, tip - very difficult.

Other phonemic awareness activities – especially phoneme manipulation - will be challenging for them. Phoneme manipulation involves adding, deleting or substituting phonemes: In the following deletion example, the teacher says, “My word is *bat*. Say *bat*. Now say *bat* without the /b/ (The teacher makes the sound of the letter b.) The // symbol represents the sound of b rather than the letter name. The child should be able to respond with *at*. Or in the case of a substitution activity, the teacher says, “My word is *bat*. Say *bat*. Now change the /b/ to /c/. The response should be *cat*.”

### Sight Words

They will find sight words more difficult to learn than most children. They may not recognize them when they encounter them in text – even if they have memorized them.

### Early Language History & Skills

Some children at risk for dyslexia may have a history of early language delay. This is a strong predictor of dyslexia (Raschle, Becker, Smith, Fehlbauer, Wang, & Gaab, 2015). Some children might also show signs of specific language impairment (SLI), but it is a

distinct disorder not always associated with dyslexia. Usually parents will report an early language delay if the child has SLI. The child might already be receiving speech and language therapy. Children with dyslexia and children with SLI represent 2 separate subgroups of reading disability. Behaviorally, their reading problem appears similar, but with different underlying causes (Lauterbach, Park, & Lombardino, 2018).

## **Kindergarten**

Keep in mind that most of these behaviors are not typical behaviors found in beginning readers, but are unique to dyslexia.

### **Letter Names and Sounds**

Like children in Pre-K who are *at risk* for dyslexia, *at risk* children in kindergarten will probably struggle learning their letter names and sounds.

### **Phonological Awareness/Phonemic Awareness**

See *PreK* above for discussion of what this deficit looks like.

### **Sight Words**

They may be able to recognize sight words in a list, but fail to recognize them in text. Often they recognize a sight word in text on line 1, but fail to recognize the very same sight word on line 2 of the text. They will frequently try to sound out sight words that they should recognize as a unit.

### **Reading and Handwriting**

You may also notice that their handwriting is less legible than their classmates. They may display a very awkward looking pencil grip even after instruction in handwriting. They may begin to show signs of avoiding phonics activities and becoming a reluctant reader.

### **Math Concepts**

Math concepts such as addition and subtraction may be difficult for this child to grasp, even when the teacher uses counting objects to demonstrate the concept.

## **Grades 1-2**

### **Reading and Handwriting – Confusion/Fatigue/Frustration/Embarrassment/Anxiety/Reluctance**

These children may at this point understand the alphabetic principle (that letters represent sounds), and even have strong phonics knowledge, but they have difficulty applying this knowledge in real time when reading. They may continue to sound out words they should be able to instantly recognize. As self-awareness increases, they begin to realize that they are behind their peers, and their self-esteem begins to suffer. They experience anxiety and begin to develop reading reluctance. They may instantly recognize the word **top** in a text, and

painstakingly try to sound it out when it is repeated on the same page. They may read slowly and deliberately or read quite fast, scrambling letters and/or words. They may not observe punctuation, may pause more than other readers, and possibly lack expression when reading.

When reading orally, they may omit/add words in a sentence and letters within words (reading **blad** for **bad**) and omit or substitute articles and prepositions (reading **the** for **a**, and **for** for **of**). Their reading comprehension may be poor, even when decoding improves.

The **b/d** reversal and other common reversals that occur in kindergarten and early first grade may persist in both reading and writing beyond first grade and second grade without intervention. As in kindergarteners who are at risk for dyslexia, you may also notice symptoms of dysgraphia – not only impacting handwriting, but the ability to copy or generate an original sentence. Handwriting may be uneven, letters/words sometimes floating above the line, sometimes under, and lower case mixed with upper case letters. They may have an awkward pencil grip, and may write letters from the bottom up.

When writing dictated sentences, they may skip prepositions and articles or other words, and they often need sentences repeated several times. This may be associated with weak auditory memory. They may forget to capitalize sentences and omit end punctuation.

Fatigue in both writing and reading activities (including word level phonics work) may be apparent. The child may want to “give up” during these activities because the effort involved produces cognitive overload and may result in both physical and mental exhaustion.

### **Spelling**

They may have trouble spelling even the simplest words. They may pass a spelling test on Friday after practicing all week, and not remember how to spell any of those words on the following Monday. Spelling their last name may be very difficult and they may replace it with an initial.

### **Math Concepts**

Because the comorbidity between dyscalculia (math difficulties) and dyslexia is so high, this child may also require intervention in math, as math concepts and operations become more complex. Towards the end of second grade, without intervention, the child may continue to have problems with math concepts - telling time using an analog clock, memorization of the multiplication tables (if introduced), word problems, and understanding math symbols (all signs of dyscalculia).

### **Reading Comprehension**

For children with dyslexia, reading comprehension is poor relative to their listening comprehension (Spencer, Wagner, Schatschneider, Quinn, Lopez, & Petscher, 2014).

When asked to narrate what they have just read to assess comprehension of the text, children with decoding impairment show weaker performance in terms of the number of main ideas retold (Kida, Ávila, Capellini, 2016).

## Grades 3-12

In addition to the problems experienced by children in PreK-2, specific reading behaviors may be common especially as the older student attempts to read longer passages, chapter books, or articles. These students are often known to be “reluctant readers.”

### Typical Reading Behaviors That May Be Observed

- Sounding out words (and sight words) that should be instantly recognized
- Reading a word correctly on one line, and then reading the same word incorrectly elsewhere in the text
- Slow deliberate reading or fast scrambled reading
- Skipping lines in the text or parts of sentences
- Omitting words in the sentence (prepositions, articles, or other words)
- Adding words in the sentence (prepositions, articles, or other words)
- Semantic substitutions (home for house, yell for shout)
- Transposition of letters within words (broad for board)
- Transposition of letters within words with wild guessing (griddle for garden – student pulls the r in garden towards the g to make gr and takes a wild guess, bringing in the d sound)
- Migration of letters between words (late flight might be read as flate light or other variation)
- Vowel switching (bug for bag)
- Switching initial or final sounds (tack for back, man for mat)
- Adding letters to a word (blad for bad)
- b/d confusion (brink for drink, did for bid)
- Dropping/adding/skipping/substituting syllables in multi-syllable words, especially words with suffixes (park or parked for parking)
- Incorrect Plural/Singular Form and/or Verb Tense
- Poor recognition of base words (such as skate in skating – may read skating as skating because of inability to recognize the fact that the silent e has been dropped before adding ing)
- Weak error detection or high number of self-corrections with multiple corrections on a single word (trying it 2-3 times)
- Prosody Issues – poor phrasing, expression, and overall smoothness and timing. Poor observation of punctuation, especially commas and periods.

### More Details about Some of These Reading Behaviors...

#### Letter Transposition/Migration of Letters between Words/Prefix Dropping/Switching

They may also have difficulty discriminating between words with transposed letters such as **board/broad, diary/dairy, clam/calm, cloud/could, form/from**. They may **drop** a letter that appears more than once in a single word – especially if the result of the drop is an

actual word. An example would be for the word **drivers**, the student might read it as **divers**, dropping the first **r**. The word **garden** might be read **griddle** as the letters migrate to a point that the student makes a guess without any reference to context. This is especially true as the student encounters more two and three syllable words. They might also drop or switch prefixes, suffixes, and other syllables. The prefix **pre** will often be read as **per** and vice versa. The word **unclear** might be read as **clear**.

### **Vowel Switching**

When the student begins to read passages or pages, there is more of a tendency to switch vowels even in simple CVC words.

### **Dropping/Adding/Skipping/Substituting Syllables in Multi-Syllable Words**

This problem becomes more noticeable as the student gets older because s/he is required to read more difficult text involving multi-syllable words. They may delete or add entire syllables as they read. This very weak sensitivity to syllables, especially when reading unfamiliar words may lead the student to replace a word like **parking** with **park** or **parked**.

### **Poor Recognition of Base (root) Words with Suffixes**

Suffixes **ed** and **ing** are often dropped or changed, as well as words ending with **ies** and **ied**. These students have difficulty recognizing base words and they find these suffixes very confusing. For example, in a simple word like **buried**, they may not recognize that the base word is **bury**. *Again, these errors are not the same as the errors typical of beginning readers; instead, their errors are unique to dyslexia.*

### **Incorrect Plural/Singular Form and Verb Tense**

The student may read the word **horses** as **horse** and vice versa. Another frequent error pattern relates to verb tense. **Jumped** may be read as **jump**, and vice versa.

### **Weak Error Detection or High Number of Self-Corrections**

Although error detection can be very weak in dyslexic students, some make a high number of self-corrections, sometimes trying a single word 3-4 times.

### **Inaccurate Articles, Prepositions, Tense, and Plurality**

There is a frequent disregard for prepositions and articles. They are often deleted altogether or changed in ways that impact the meaning of the text. There is sometimes a tendency to add prepositions and articles – even in a simple sentence like the following:

The cat went up the tree.

Might be read as

The cats went up into a tree.

or

The cat will go to the trees.

Notice that the above examples also show changes in tense and plurality.

### **Lack of Prosody**

Problems with **prosody** (appropriate pacing, expression and phrasing) may be the result of poor decoding and missed punctuation cues. The student may read slowly and deliberately, sounding out words that should be instantly recognized, or may read quite fast, scrambling words together and creating non words without noticing. Pacing may be uneven and punctuation almost completely ignored. Frequent and inappropriate pausing is common.

Placing commas and periods where they do not exist, and missing these important cues where they do exist dramatically interferes with comprehension of text. Students with dyslexia will often combine the ending and beginning of two sentences instead of acknowledging a period between the two, totally missing the meaning intended by the author. The following is an example using an excerpt from *National Geographic Kids* Level 1 Reader titled *Frogs* by Elizabeth Carney, 2009.

But some frogs live in trees. Some even live in the desert. Frogs can be found all over the world. Wherever they live, that's their habitat.

The student may read the above passage in the following way:

But some frogs live in trees. Some even live. In the desert frogs can be found all over the world wherever they live. That's their habitat.

This student will not even realize that reading it this way does not make sense or changes the author's intended meaning. Students who read this way have very weak meta-cognitive and/or self-monitoring strategies while reading. Their reading may be choppy, fast and then slow, with no attention to punctuation.

### **Weak Comprehension/Retelling/The Writing Process**

They will usually exhibit poor reading comprehension and great difficulty organizing ideas in preparation for written expression. Composing more than the simplest sentences may be almost impossible. Their weak spelling skills will continue without intervention.

When retelling stories, they might begin in the middle of the story and have trouble retelling in sequence. Many of these students have excellent oral comprehension and some are able to develop compensatory skills with and without receiving accommodations in school.

As school becomes harder and the student feels more and more left behind, some may develop behavior problems, become depressed or angry, and/or have low self-esteem. Early intervention is the most important way we can help them.