

# THE READING TREE

Excerpts from our book on Dyslexia

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## WHEN THE SOLUTIONS DON'T WORK: REASONS FOR FAILURE AT SCHOOL AND AT HOME

Do you know a child who consistently has difficulty:

- organizing his/her room, desk, and locker?
- maintaining attention?
- following directions?
- memorizing data? or
- expressing ideas clearly?

At the same time does this child consistently enjoy:

- working with his/her hands?
- relating to objects and pictures more than words?
- participating in imaginative and creative thought processes?
- pursuing the logical perspective of an issue?
- reducing experience to quantitative terms (distance, time duration, price, and amounts)?

If these symptoms fit, you may know a child who left unattended may:

- struggle hopelessly with reading or reading related subjects,
- despise and possibly discontinue formal education, and
- develop a poor self-image and attending emotional difficulties.

At least 5% of the school population evidences these symptoms and some experts estimate that the number may be as high as 20%. This means that on the average at least one, and possibly as many as five students in every classroom, register these symptoms.

As a parent, educator, or psychologist, can you identify who these children are? Can you name their deficiency? Do you know how to help them?

These are questions that you will find addressed in the paper, titled, *DYSLEXIA: Definition and Solutions*. It consists of observations that The Reading Tree staff has made in their work with language deficient students over the last fifteen years. These observations are discussed in the light of current research in the field that is now known as auditory dyslexia.

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## DYSLEXIA DEFINED

Dyslexia is a language disorder that affects a person's ability to listen, store, process, retrieve, and express language efficiently.

Because it affects the neurological auditory systems that impact blending, sequencing, and closure (distinguishing the whole from the part), dyslexia causes significant difficulty with reversals, substitutions, mispronunciations, insertions, and omissions in reading. As a result, dyslexia is often misdiagnosed as a visual disorder.

Although it is true that reversals are sometimes caused by a strictly visual condition, the incidence of this condition is either rare or rarely has a significant impact on the learning process. However, in order to minimize confusion, it is sometimes prudent to use the term auditory dyslexia when discussing children with language deficits.

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## Definition and Diagnosis

A growing body of psychological research suggests that people process information differently. “I think, therefore I am,” proclaimed one famous philosopher. Modern research would alter a few words of that statement and offer, “The way I think is the way I am.”

Albert Einstein recognized that he thought differently than other people. In his own words he explains,

*The words of the language, as they are written and spoken, do not seem to play any role in my mechanism of thought. The psychical entities which seem to serve as elements in thought are certain signs and more or less clear images which can be voluntarily reproduced and combined...The above mentioned elements are, in my case, of visual and some of muscular type. Conventional words or other signs have to be sought for laboriously in a secondary stage, when the above mentioned associative play is sufficiently established and can be reproduced at will.*

Without careful reading, it is difficult to follow what Einstein is saying. After all, he is using words to explain that he thinks primarily in visual images, and it takes a more verbally-oriented person to express ideas clearly in the verbal medium. Someone with more verbal facility might have said,

*I think primarily in visual images, not in words. The words come later, after I have manipulated the images. There is some muscle activity (Einstein’s meaning is unclear here) in my thinking.*

Yet, it is because of the way that Einstein’s brain was organized that he was able to do what few in his field have even been able to approximate. Notice that we said “because of” and not “in spite of” the way his mind was organized.

As we examine the dyslexic learner, it is very important to keep that distinction clear. Dyslexic learners think differently, learn differently, and express themselves differently than their more verbal counterparts. It is because of these differences that they are suited to fulfill very significant roles in society. Theirs is the world of the designer, mechanic, engineer, farmer, surgeon, dentist, architect, chemist, factory worker, builder, physicist, transport driver, pilot, artist, and sculptor.

They will excel in these areas because of the way their brains are organized, not in spite of.

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This is not to imply that every mechanic, engineer, and surgeon is dyslexic. There are many people who have the mental capabilities to fulfill these roles without being dyslexic. Nor is it to imply that dyslexia for a child is not a liability.

Notice that Einstein refers to speaking as a “secondary stage,” one that requires a laborious search for the right words. What comes naturally for a verbal child is laborious for a dyslexic child. School is a tremendous frustration for this child, because education, like the society it reflects, puts a premium on words. In fact, knowing the mindset of dyslexic children, it is difficult to conceive of a condition that could be more incompatible and distasteful to him or her than the educational system as we know it.

This is not an education-bashing statement, nor an argument for alternative education. It is an observation, not an indictment. Dyslexic students and school do not mix naturally, creating problems and struggles for teachers, parents, and most of all for the students themselves.

Gaining some insight into how dyslexic children think and function can help alleviate some of that struggle. Following is a list of eight characteristics that define many dyslexics.

<u>Characteristics</u>	<u>Behaviors</u>
1. Poor organizational skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Keeps a messy room, desk, and locker.</li><li>b. Forgets to do homework.</li><li>c. Does homework, but forgets to take it.</li><li>d. Shows little interest in systems of doing things. e.g., keeping papers in appropriate folders.</li></ul>
2. Short attention span	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Unattended, has difficulty maintaining one task for longer than a few minutes, unless the focus of the task is highly relevant.</li></ul>
3. Poor listening skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Has difficulty following verbal directions.</li><li>b. Easily distracted when someone else is talking, even during a highly interesting story.</li><li>c. Evidences particular difficulty with sequencing of two or more instructions.</li><li>d. On the <u>Detroit Test of Learning Aptitude</u>, scores at least one and one-half years lower on sub-test #6: Auditory Attention Span for Unrelated Words than on sub-test #9: Visual Attention Span for Objects.</li></ul>

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## Characteristics

## Behaviors

### 4. Poor processing skills

- a. Has difficulty relating to information when the focus or perspective has been changed (e.g., a student learns that “Appomatox” is the answer to the question “Where did General Robert E. Lee surrender?”, but is unable to respond correctly to the question, “What happened at Appomatox?”)
- b. Has difficulty transacting a task that involves a series of motor and cognitive skills (e.g., taking out a book, finding the right page, starting on the appropriate exercise, and remembering the instructions).
- c. Tends to perform each step of a process as if that step were the complete task. Evidences little or none of the “peripheral” brain activity that enables other students to anticipate the next step before they have completed the one they are on.
- d. Registers marked inconsistency in processing information. One day the student will seem to work normally. The next day the teacher or parent may feel like someone has used an eraser to wipe the student’s brain clean.

### 5. Poor memory

- a. Has problems with phonics, math facts, and spelling.
- b. Has difficulty retrieving the appropriate word in conversations.
- c. Has difficulty pronouncing some multi-syllable words even immediately after having heard the correct pronunciation.
- d. Has difficulty overcoming the natural tendency to reverse and confuse commonly known letters and words: *was* and *saw*, *d* and *b*, *come* and *came*.
- e. On the WISC-R, tends to score low on the Arithmetic, Coding, Information, and Digit Span (ACID) sub-tests. These tests require concentration, short- and long-term memory and attention span.

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## Characteristics

## Behaviors

- |                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 6. Poor expressive skills                                                      | a. Does not talk a lot.<br>b. Talks a lot, but tends to “muddle” through ideas.<br>c. Responds to questions with words or phrases when a sentence would be more appropriate. E.g., when asked what he watched on T.V. a dyslexic student answered, “Elephant tusks.” When asked to explain further, he added, “You know, poachers.” The student understood, but had difficulty identifying what he had learned in words. |
| 7. Marked, uneven development of cognitive skills                              | a. The development of memory, integration of mental skills, sequencing, and closure (the ability to distinguish the whole from a part) may be delayed for two to eight years. In some, the delay is even longer, or does not fully occur.                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 8. Immature emotional development (from one and one-half to two years behind.) | a. Does not take responsibility for fulfilling requirements at school and at home.<br>b. Shows little concern about grades or the need to prepare for the future.<br>c. Tends to be satisfied with dependency on others.<br>d. Does not readily do or say what is socially appropriate.                                                                                                                                  |

A student may not evidence all of these characteristics to be dyslexic. Nor is a child necessarily dyslexic just because he or she registers some of these qualities. But if your child has difficulty organizing, attending, listening, processing, and expressing language, and these weaknesses consistently interfere with his or her daily performance, (Appendix A provides a checklist for teachers to use to identify language-deficient students in their classrooms.) chances are that dyslexia is the appropriate diagnosis. If formal testing confirms your suspicions, then certain steps should be taken immediately to develop the emotional and practical support students need.