

BY KELLY ST. JOHN REGIER



Could your child be dyslexic?

The key is to understand the different ways that children learn.

Does your preschooler have difficulty with nursery rhymes? Was your toddler one of the last children in his baby group to start talking? Does your daughter dread reading aloud in class or get discouraged about writing and spelling? Do you have a family history of difficulty in school?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, there's a chance your child could be dyslexic.

The word "dyslexia" comes from two Greek words: "dys" (which means "poor" or "difficult") and "lexis" (which means

"words" or "language.") "It is a learning disability that affects one in five people", says Carol Clark, executive director of the Prentice School, a private Santa Ana school that serves children with language-learning issues.

Students with dyslexia have difficulties with language skills - especially reading, as well as spelling, writing and word pronunciation - that are not commensurate with their intelligence. Dyslexic students can struggle in the classroom, leading to problems with self-esteem.

"What happens in a traditional classroom, with 30 kids or more, is that the student feels that he or she is the only one who isn't learning to read," Clark says. "This child is saying, 'I'm stupid. I'm dumb. I can't complete the work.' There are a lot of tears and anger at home. Students in that situation often start acting out, or they want to disappear and not be seen."

While dyslexia often isn't diagnosed until a child starts school, there are early signs that suggest he could be at risk. Those symptoms include

dys·lex·i·a/
dis'leksēē/

A general term for disorders that involve difficulty in learning to read or interpret words, letters, and other symbols, but that do not affect general intelligence.

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late talking, difficulty pronouncing words correctly, difficulty playing sound games with rhyming words, and difficulty building a vocabulary.

For older children, indicators of dyslexia include being slow to learn the connection between letters and sounds, making consistent reading and spelling errors (including letter reversals and transpositions), and confusing basic words.

Parents who suspect that their child could have learning differences can ask their public school district for a full battery of psycho-educational tests, including a speech-and-language evaluation. Parents who don't want to wait can hire a private educational psychologist to administer these tests.

It is important for parents to learn early whether their children have dyslexia, Clark says. Studies show that when children with a language learning problem are provided with appropriate instruction by age 8, they have an 85 percent chance of achieving excellent academic growth. However, if they don't get help until age 11, that chance drops to only 15 percent.

“By fourth grade, if you haven't had the right

intervention, you can become a good reader but not a fast reader,” says Clark.

The leading cause of reading difficulty and school dropouts in the United States, dyslexia isn't something a child will outgrow. But when it is identified, parents and educators can use proven techniques to help students reach their potential. At the Prentice School, for example, students are taught in small classes through the Slingerland Approach, a multi-sensory teaching method specifically designed to help dyslexic students with speaking, reading, writing and spelling.

Clark advises parents of all young children – whether identified with dyslexia or not – to read rhyming books and play nursery-rhyming games with them.

“Parents don't realize how valuable Dr. Seuss books and rhyming books are,” Clark says. “What we know is that children need a very rich early environment to build that vocabulary. If they don't have a good vocabulary, how are they going to understand what they read?”

Dyslexia often runs in families, and parents

sometimes believe that if they made it through school without help, their child will too. Clark says that this belief could be a mistake in an era when children are taught reading in kindergarten.

“If there are gaps, these gaps are going to widen,” Clark says. “To parents who struggled but were able to do it, it's harder in this day and age for kids to be able to compensate. For kids who struggle, taking a timed test can be very difficult. At Prentice, we don't have to do standardized testing. Our kids don't have to sit through several days of testing and be exhausted and frustrated.”

Many famous people have dyslexia, including director Steven Spielberg and Richard Branson, the billionaire founder of the Virgin Group. Many of those with dyslexia tend to be outside-the-box thinkers who have exceptional talents in other areas, such as music or fine art, Clark says.

“One of the most important things is to realize that your child is bright. It's just that the language side of their brain is wired differently. They're smart, but the wiring is different and they need to learn differently.” 