

Understanding Dyslexia

A supportive guide for families — how to recognize dyslexia, get the right help, and let a bright, capable reader thrive.



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2026 EDITION

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COMMON, LIFELONG, AND VERY MANAGEABLE

Dyslexia is the most common learning difference — affecting how the brain processes written language. It has nothing to do with intelligence or effort, and with the right support, people with dyslexia thrive in every field. This guide walks the whole journey in **ten steps**, from first signs to lifelong strengths.

General guidance, not a diagnosis. Dyslexia is identified by qualified professionals through evaluation — this guide is educational and does not replace an assessment. If you have concerns, talk with your child's school, pediatrician, or a specialist.

What Dyslexia Is (and Isn't)

WHAT TO KNOW

Dyslexia is a **language-based learning difference** that makes it harder to connect letters to sounds, decode words, and spell — despite strong intelligence and good teaching. It is *not* a vision problem, a sign of low ability, or the result of laziness.

BY THE NUMBERS

~1 in 5

people are affected to some degree

Brain-based

a difference in processing

Not intelligence

IQ is unrelated

HOW TO HELP

Understand that dyslexia is a **different wiring, not a deficit** — then look for it early, because support works best when it starts young.

GOOD TO KNOW

Dyslexia often travels with real **strengths** — big-picture thinking, creativity, and problem-solving. It's a difference to support, not a flaw to fix.

Recognize the Signs by Age

WHAT TO KNOW

Signs shift as a child grows: in **preschool**, trouble rhyming and learning letters; in **early grades**, slow decoding, guessing at words, and shaky spelling; in **older kids**, slow reading, avoiding it, and trouble with foreign languages.

BY THE NUMBERS

Preschool

rhyming & letter trouble

Early grades

decoding & spelling

Older

slow reading, avoidance

HOW TO HELP

Watch for a **gap between effort and reading progress**, and keep notes across ages to share with the school or an evaluator.

GOOD TO KNOW

A family history matters — dyslexia runs in families, so if a parent or sibling has it, watch a young reader closely.

Get an Evaluation

WHAT TO KNOW

A formal evaluation is how dyslexia is identified. You can **request one in writing** from your public school at no cost, or seek a private evaluation. It assesses phonological skills, decoding, fluency, and spelling — not just a reading level.

BY THE NUMBERS

Free at school

request it in writing

Comprehensive

phonology, decoding, fluency

You can ask

don't wait to be offered

HOW TO HELP

Put your evaluation request **in writing** and keep a copy — that starts the legal timeline. Ask specifically for assessment of reading and phonological processing.

GOOD TO KNOW

If the school declines or the results feel off, you can request an **Independent Educational Evaluation** — see our Special Education Journey guide.

Insist on Structured Literacy

WHAT TO KNOW

Not all reading instruction helps dyslexic learners. What works is **structured literacy** — explicit, systematic, phonics-based teaching of how sounds map to letters (the “Science of Reading”). Guessing from pictures or context does not.

BY THE NUMBERS

Structured literacy

explicit & systematic

Phonics-based

sound-to-letter mapping

Science of Reading

the evidence base

HOW TO HELP

Ask exactly **which reading program** the school uses, and whether it is explicit, systematic, and phonics-based — the words that signal structured literacy.

WATCH OUT

Beware “three-cueing” or “balanced literacy” that has kids guess words — it’s been widely discredited for struggling readers.

Choose Effective Interventions

WHAT TO KNOW

The gold standard is **structured, multisensory intervention** such as Orton-Gillingham-based programs — taught by a trained specialist, ideally one-on-one or in a small group, with enough intensity and time.

BY THE NUMBERS

Orton-Gillingham

the leading approach

Multisensory

see, hear, say, write

Intensive

frequent & sustained

HOW TO HELP

Seek a **trained, certified** reading specialist, and push for enough intensity — brief, occasional help rarely moves the needle.

GOOD TO KNOW

Progress can be slow and steady — celebrate small wins, and expect intervention to continue over time, not fix things in a term.

Secure Support at School

WHAT TO KNOW

A dyslexia diagnosis can qualify a child for an **IEP or a 504 Plan**, unlocking both specialized instruction and accommodations — extra time, audiobooks, reduced reading load, and not being asked to read aloud unprepared.

BY THE NUMBERS

IEP or 504

formal support plans

Accommodations

extra time, audiobooks

Instruction

specialized reading help

HOW TO HELP

Request an **IEP or 504 meeting**, and make sure the plan includes both *intervention* (to build skills) and *accommodations* (to access learning meanwhile).

GOOD TO KNOW

Accommodations don't "give an unfair advantage" — they level the field so a bright mind isn't blocked by decoding.

Put Assistive Technology to Work

WHAT TO KNOW

Technology is a game-changer. **Text-to-speech** reads any text aloud, **audiobooks** open up grade-level content, and **speech-to-text** lets ideas flow without the spelling barrier.

BY THE NUMBERS

Text-to-speech

reads text aloud

Audiobooks

grade-level access

Speech-to-text

dictate writing

HOW TO HELP

Set up **text-to-speech** and **audiobooks** early (many are free or built into devices), so your child keeps learning content while reading skills grow.

GOOD TO KNOW

AT isn't "cheating" or a crutch — it's how dyslexic learners access the same ideas as everyone else, and it builds independence.

Support Reading at Home

WHAT TO KNOW

Home should build **confidence and a love of story**, not become a battleground. Read *to* and *with* your child, use audiobooks freely, and keep practice short, positive, and pressure-free.

BY THE NUMBERS

Read aloud

keep story joyful

Short & positive

end on a win

Follow their lead

interest fuels effort

HOW TO HELP

Read aloud together daily, lean on audiobooks, and keep any at-home practice **short and encouraging** — protect the relationship over the drill.

WATCH OUT

Never make a struggling reader read aloud to “prove” they can — it breeds shame. Build skill in private, confidence in public.

Protect Confidence & Strengths

WHAT TO KNOW

Years of struggling to read can bruise self-esteem. The antidote is **naming the strengths** dyslexic thinkers often have, celebrating effort, and making sure reading struggles never define the whole child.

BY THE NUMBERS

Name strengths

creativity, reasoning

Praise effort

not being "smart"

Whole child

reading isn't everything

HOW TO HELP

Actively spotlight what your child is great at, praise **effort and strategy** over results, and remind them dyslexia says nothing about how capable they are.

GOOD TO KNOW

Many celebrated scientists, entrepreneurs, and artists are dyslexic — the difference often comes with a powerful set of strengths.

Advocate & Connect

WHAT TO KNOW

Dyslexia is **lifelong but highly manageable**. Informed, persistent parent advocacy — plus connecting with others who've walked the path — changes outcomes and keeps you from doing it alone.

BY THE NUMBERS

Lifelong

but very manageable

Advocacy works

informed & persistent

Community

you're not alone

HOW TO HELP

Learn your rights, keep records, come to meetings with specifics, and **connect with dyslexia organizations and parent groups** for support and know-how.

GOOD TO KNOW

The goal isn't to "cure" dyslexia — it's to give a capable learner the tools and confidence to thrive on their own terms.

Signs of Dyslexia by Age

Dyslexia looks different as children grow. These are common signs — not a checklist or a diagnosis, but a guide for when to ask for an evaluation.

Preschool (ages 3–5)

Trouble learning nursery rhymes, difficulty with rhyming, slow to learn letters and their sounds, mixing up words that sound alike.

Early elementary (K–2)

Struggles to sound out words, guesses from pictures or context, trouble spelling, slow and effortful reading, avoids reading aloud.

Upper elementary (3–5)

Reads well below grade level, poor spelling, avoids reading, trouble with word problems, reluctant to read for pleasure.

Middle & high school

Very slow reading, difficulty with foreign languages, trouble summarizing, avoids reading and writing tasks, tires quickly when reading.

Any age

A gap between spoken ability and reading, strong reasoning with weak decoding, family history of reading difficulty.

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