

Characteristics of Dyslexia

Per the "Say Dyslexia" law, dyslexia screening procedures shall include the following characteristics of dyslexia*:

- Phonological awareness: a broad category comprising a range of understandings related to the sounds of words and word parts;
- Phonemic awareness: the ability to notice, think about, and work with the individual sounds in spoken words;
- Alphabet knowledge: understanding that letters represent sounds, which form words;
- Sound/symbol recognition: understanding that there is a predictable relationship between phonemes (sounds in spoken language) and graphemes (the letters that represent those sounds);
- Decoding skills: using knowledge of letters and sounds to recognize and analyze a printed word to connect it to the spoken word it represents (also referred to as "word attack skills");
- Encoding skills: translating speech into writing (spelling); and
- Rapid naming: ability to connect visual and verbal information by giving the appropriate names to common objects, colors, letters, and digits (quickly naming what is seen). Rapid naming requires the retrieval of phonological information related to phonemes (letter/ letter combination sounds), segments of words, and words from long-term memory in an efficient manner. This is important when decoding words, encoding words, and reading sight words.

*See an additional breakdown of skills in the glossary found in Appendix A.

Students with dyslexia share some common characteristics, but it is important to remember that it manifests differently depending on the individual, their age, and other factors affecting his/her foundational reading skill development. In addition, students may have co-occurring disabilities/disorders, including twice exceptionality (i.e., gifted and dyslexia). Comorbid symptoms may mask characteristics of dyslexia (e.g., inattention and behavioral issues are more apparent or gifted students may compensate well); on the other hand, a student's disability may impair participation in grade-level instruction, creating deficits that may be misinterpreted as characteristics of dyslexia.

Table 2: Common Characteristics of Dyslexia³

Age Group	Difficulties	Strengths
Grades K-1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reading errors exhibit no connection to the sounds of the letters on the page (e.g., will say “puppy” instead of the written word “dog” on an illustrated page with a dog shown) ▪ Does not understand that words come apart ▪ Complains about how hard reading is, or “disappears” when it is time to read ▪ A familial history of reading problems ▪ Cannot sound out simple words like <i>cat, map, nap</i> ▪ Does not associate letters with sounds, such as the letter b with the “b” sound 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The ability to figure things out ▪ Eager embrace of new ideas ▪ Gets “the gist” of things ▪ A good understanding of new concepts ▪ A large vocabulary for the age group ▪ Excellent comprehension of stories read aloud (i.e., listening comprehension)
Grades 2+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Very slow to acquire reading skills; reading is slow and awkward ▪ Trouble reading unfamiliar words, often making wild guesses because he cannot sound out the word ▪ Doesn’t seem to have a strategy for reading new words ▪ Avoids reading out loud ▪ Confuses words that sound alike, such as saying “tornado” for “volcano,” substituting “lotion” for “ocean” ▪ Mispronunciation of long, unfamiliar, or complicated words ▪ Avoidance of reading; gaps in vocabulary as a result 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Excellent thinking skills: conceptualization, reasoning, imagination, abstraction ▪ Learning that is accomplished best through meaning rather than rote memorization ▪ Ability to get the “big picture” ▪ A high level of understanding of what is read aloud (listening comprehension) ▪ The ability to read and to understand highly practiced words in a special area of interest ▪ Sophisticated listening vocabulary ▪ Excellence in areas not dependent on reading

Every child is unique, and therefore the rate of development may vary. It is possible that a child may not reach a developmental milestone until the upper end of the expected range. Concerns are

³ Taken from The Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity, Signs of Dyslexia. http://dyslexia.yale.edu/EDU_signs.html

warranted, however, if the behaviors occur over an extended period of time and adversely affect the child's ability to progress and meet expectations. Many young children reverse letters and numbers, misread words or misunderstand words as a normal, developmental part of learning to read. Children with dyslexia, however, continue to do so after their peers have stopped.⁴ This is one of many misconceptions that surround the term "dyslexia." Below are more of the myths and truths associated with dyslexia.

Table 3: Common Myths

Reversals	Myth: Dyslexia is a visual problem. Students with dyslexia see and write letters and words backwards.	Truth: Many children reverse their letters when learning to read and write. Reversing letters is not a sure sign of dyslexia, and not all students with dyslexia reverse letters. ¹
School Success	Myth: If you perform well in school, you must not have dyslexia.	Truth: Some students with dyslexia perform well in school. These students work hard, are motivated, and have the accommodations necessary to show their knowledge. ¹
Intelligence	Myth: Smart students cannot be dyslexic; students with dyslexia cannot be very smart.	Truth: Dyslexia is defined by an unexpected difficulty in learning to read. Said another way, dyslexia is a paradox—the same person who struggles to read quickly often has very high intelligence. ¹
Reading Ability	Myth: Students with dyslexia cannot learn to read.	Truth: Most students with dyslexia do learn to read, but with greater effort. They tend to remain "manual" rather than "fluent" readers, reading slowly and with great effort. ¹
Reading Difficulties	Myth: All reading difficulties can be attributed to dyslexia.	Truth: The hallmark of dyslexia is an unexpected reading difficulty in a child who seems to have all the equipment (intelligence, verbal skills, motivation) necessary to become a reader. ¹ There are other ways students can struggle to read: (1) 3–10 percent of students who are strong decoders don't understand what they are reading (specific reading comprehension deficit), ³ and (2) some

⁴ Harvard Medical School <http://www.health.harvard.edu/developmental-milestones/dyslexia->

		students struggle with both the code of the language and the meaning of language (mixed reading deficit).
Eligibility	Myth: If a student has dyslexia, they will have an IEP. An IEP is the only way to get the appropriate instruction and accommodations needed.	Truth: Dyslexia comes in many degrees from mild to severe. ² Some children with dyslexic characteristics meet the requirements for TN SLD eligibility and some do not. All students receive appropriate, differentiated instruction and universal accommodations in Tier 1, and when needed, the student may receive Tier II or Tier III intervention. Students who do not respond to these interventions may be eligible to receive interventions through special education.
Gender	Myth: Only boys are affected by dyslexia.	Truth: Students of both genders can have dyslexia. The higher number of male referrals may be due to differences in classroom behaviors. ¹
Short-term Problem	Myth: Most students will eventually outgrow dyslexia.	Truth: Dyslexia is the result of a processing difference in the brain and will last a lifetime. ¹
Comprehension	Myth: Students who have dyslexia have poor reading comprehension skills.	Truth: Students with dyslexia tend to have strong comprehension skills, but this can be masked by (1) the amount of mental effort required to decode, limiting access to the ability to think critically, and (2) a limited amount of reading, leading to a gap in the student's vocabulary as compared to students who read large amounts of appropriate text. ¹

Appendix I: Additional Resources

Center for Dyslexia / Middle Tennessee University (<http://www.mtsu.edu/dyslexia>)

Dear Colleague Letter (10-23-2015)/ Office of Special Education Programs/ United States Department of Education (<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdcltrs/guidance-on-dyslexia-10-2015.pdf>)

Decoding Dyslexia Tennessee (<https://decodingdyslexiatn.wordpress.com>)

Florida Center for Reading Research (<http://fcrr.org>)

International Dyslexia Association (IDA) (<https://dyslexiaida.org>)

International Dyslexia Association-Tennessee Branch (<http://tnida.org>)

National Center for Learning Disabilities (www.nclld.org)

Support and Training for Exceptional Parents (STEP, Inc.) (<http://www.tnstep.org/>)

Vanderbilt University Research Study: Not all reading disabilities are dyslexia.
<https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2013/06/14/reading-disabilities-not-dyslexia/>

Wrightslaw Special Education Law and Advocacy (www.wrightslaw.com)

Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity (<http://dyslexia.yale.edu/>)