

Strategies for Helping Beginning Readers With Dyslexia

By Dorothea Amey

Tommy is looking forward to first grade with anticipation and excitement. For two years he has listened to his older sisters celebrate the joys of reading. Weeks before school begins he assembles his school supplies—a shiny new lunch pail, crayons and pencils, and new school clothes. He is ready for the first day of school!

A few weeks or months later Tommy begins to realize that the other first-grade boys and girls are beginning to unlock a secret code, the code of reading, which remains securely locked to him! Tommy wonders why he can't read, like all of his friends do. He decides that he must be just plain stupid.

What Tommy doesn't know—and his teacher may not realize—is that he has dyslexia, a learning disorder that causes

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difficulty with the symbols of written language. Dyslexics' problems are not caused by lack of intelligence, incompetent instruction, or insufficient social interaction.¹

Most classrooms have one or more children like Tommy. The Orton Dyslexia Society concludes that one-tenth or more of the U.S. population has dyslexia,

or specific language difficulty.²

Only a little more than a decade ago the word *dyslexia* was unfamiliar to most people, including many educators. My introduction to dyslexia came fairly late in my career. In the late 1960s I quit teaching and became a full-time mother and pastor's wife. I went back to teaching in the early 1980s, when I began to instruct the staff members' children at Rusangu Secondary School and then Solusi College, both in Africa.

It was there that Jerry, a friendly, verbal, and in many ways precocious eleven-year-old, entered my classroom. I soon discovered that Jerry's reading skills were far behind those of his peers. This puzzled me. Jerry seemed to have received adequate instruction, and gave every indication of having an average or higher-than-average intellect.

Jerry frequently reversed letters or even entire words. He seldom wrote anything (except under duress), and had never mastered cursive writing. Jerry also made frequent, bizarre spelling errors. He could not organize or manage simple assignments. His mind often seemed to wander. He frequently had to be called back to task.

Shortly after Jerry entered my classroom, a relative wrote to tell me that her child had been diagnosed as dyslexic. Since she knew I was a teacher and would be interested, she described in detail the symptoms of dyslexia. Suddenly, I realized that she was describing Jerry's problems!

Only a professional can conclusively diagnose dyslexia. However, the average teacher can spot most of the clues and refer the child to a professional for diagnosis. Once the diagnosis has been made, the child is often relieved to know that there is a reason for why he or she has trouble learning to read and write, that he is not "stupid." It may take him much longer, and he may have to work much harder than most children, but he *can* learn to read and write.

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treating it. There is no quick cure. No "pill" or special glasses will take it away. For now the most effective way to treat dyslexia is through education or retraining techniques such as the Orton-Gillingham method or Alphabetic Phonics pioneered by Aylett Royall Cox.³

Many Adventist schools do not have special equipment or extra money to purchase helps for learning-disabled children. Therefore, the teacher and the parents must provide whatever help the child receives.

What can a teacher do? First and most important, the teacher must bolster the child's sense of self-worth. The child must see himself or herself as precious in God's sight. He or she must feel like an important, contributing member of the class.

Sally Osbourne is convinced that a heightened sense of self-worth was the most important factor in helping her learn to read and write. She says, "Once I began to feel good about myself, I could

start learning. And now that I'm learning, I never want to stop."⁴

A Variety of Skills

Children with dyslexia sometimes are skilled in the visual arts, sports, music, or mathematics. The Aylett Royall Cox Institute suggests that a child with dyslexia "is a three dimensional thinker who learns best through arts, crafts, shop, science projects, drama, and films."⁵ The teacher can identify these strengths and use them to enhance learning.

For example, if the child is artistic, he or she can draw posters for the social studies unit. Or, since the dyslexic child is often good at making three-dimensional objects, he or she can be encouraged to construct exhibits for various subjects.

I often ask my dyslexic students to operate the movie projector, VCR, or tape recorder. I also encourage them to demonstrate science experiments to the other class members.

Stressing phonics appears to be the key to successful reading for most dyslexic children.⁶ In one step, the child learns the letter's name and sound, an object that begins with the sound, and how to write the letter. MTA Alphabet Wall Cards⁷ are helpful for this purpose. Teachers can also create their own sets,

based on objects they prefer.

At the beginning of the school year, I use the MTA Alphabet Wall Cards with all of my first-grade children. Sometimes the children cannot remember the sound of a letter as they are pronouncing a simple word. If they think of the object associated with the letter, they can remember the sound. The dyslexic child needs to over-learn these letters and sounds.

A multisensory approach to phonics helps to etch phonics symbols into the mind. I keep a sandbox in my room so the children can practice their letters. For the letter "b," I say "b" and then "first the bat" (drawing a straight line in the sand), "and then the ball" (drawing a ball connected to the bat). I then repeat the letter "b."

Next, the child writes in the sand while I do the talking. He or she writes the letter over and over while repeating, "First the bat, and then the ball." The child may then move on to "d" saying, "First the drum, and then the dowel."

Other Props

I keep several sets of plastic alphabet letters in my classroom. These can be purchased by mail or in toy stores. If the letters come in several colors, they must be spray painted one color. This keeps the students from memorizing letters by color. The children feel the letters, trace

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them with their fingers, and place them in alphabetical order.

Letters cut from sandpaper also work well. The children trace each letter as they say its name and sound. The roughness of the letter stimulates the tactile sense.

Another way to incorporate the sense of feel is to "sky-write" the alphabet. I turn my back to the class so that they can follow my hand movements. It is easier to do these movements with cursive letters, but manuscript letters can also be demonstrated.

As the dyslexic child begins to learn the alphabet, have him or her vocalize the letter softly while writing it. Suggest that the child name each letter before writing it. To practice spelling, the child should repeat the word, spell it orally, and then write it.⁸

Two of the most difficult letters for

both dyslexic and beginning students are "b" and "d." Ask the child to form the "b" with his or her left hand. The thumb and index finger should form a circle, while the other fingers point straight up. To make a "d" the child does the same with the right hand. Tell the child to follow these steps:

First say "a"; then form a "b" with your left hand and say the letter. Next, say "c," and then make your right hand form "d" as you say "d."

This reminds the child that "b" comes before "d" in the alphabet.

Listening Center

In one corner of your classroom, set up a listening center. Provide earphones so children can listen to a story on tape and follow along in the book. To reinforce reading skills, have children underline with their finger as they listen to the story, and follow the words with their eyes.

Encourage dyslexic students to underline with their finger as they read silently. When they come to a word such as *saw* that can be easily confused with *was*, they are to point to the "s" first with their finger. This encourages them to say

"saw" rather than "was." As the children become more proficient, this habit can be dropped.

Strategies for Success

The child with dyslexia often has difficulty memorizing. Mnemonic memory aids can help. Cathleen Quinn suggests ways to do this in the area of spelling.⁹

The dyslexic is usually at a disadvantage in "round-robin" reading, when each child takes a turn. Ask the class instead to choral-read passages. It helps for the dyslexic student to read the story silently or have it read to him before he is assigned to read orally. Don't ask dyslexic children to read aloud in front of their peers unless they insist.¹⁰

Whenever possible, allow dyslexic children to take quizzes and tests orally. If they must write a test, avoid putting them under the pressure of time or competition.¹¹

Encourage dyslexic children to write often. I have found it helpful to have them use pencil rather than pen. This makes mistakes easy to erase.

I avoid using my red pen when helping dyslexic children edit their work. This keeps them from feeling overwhelmed by all the red marks on the page. When children see that they will not be penalized for spelling errors and grammar, they feel free to write creatively.

To avoid being interrupted for spelling help while I am teaching others, I encourage students to write down as many letters as they can of a problem word. Then they can tell me what they meant as we edit the work. Later we make the stories into a book that the child illustrates.

Story mapping is a common practice in most classrooms. The children write about the characters, setting, problem, events, and solution to a story they have read. The dyslexic child can use an alternate approach—*drawing* the characters, the setting where the story took place, a picture of the problem, and a depiction of the solution. Ask the child to share the pictures and to tell the story to the class or to you.

Since the dyslexic child often functions best with visual clues to learning, I draw stick figures and diagrams on the chalkboard as I teach. This type of "chalk-talk" and group discussion seems to aid retention.

In planning ways to help dyslexic students, be sure to elicit parental support. Families must realize that the child is not lazy or stupid; he just requires a different approach to learning. They must believe that Johnny or Susie can and will succeed.¹²

Encourage the parents of dyslexic children to read regularly to them. These

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children's reading skills usually lag far behind the level of material that they can appreciate and enjoy. Like other children, they should participate in enrichment activities such as trips to museums and individual lessons in art or sports.¹³

Conclusion

Dyslexia is a type of mind, not a disease that can be cured. Often the dyslexic has a very talented mind.¹⁴ Some of the world's most famous and productive people—Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison, Woodrow Wilson, Nelson Rockefeller, and Hans Christian Andersen—were probably dyslexic.¹⁵

Each child is unique and precious in God's sight. As we teach dyslexic children we must help them to rejoice in the mind that the Lord has given them, with all of its creative potentialities and strengths. We must also dedicate ourselves to helping these children to become all that they can become. A mind is too precious to waste! □

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