



Department of
Education



Understanding Dyslexia

A Guide for Tennessee Parents and Educators

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Introduction

The department frequently receives questions from parents and educators regarding dyslexia and its relationship to specific learning disabilities. Additionally, several recent policy changes have precipitated a need to provide further guidance around this issue. In particular, school districts recently began implementation of the Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI²) Framework, which provides increasingly intensive, research-based interventions aligned to students' needs¹. This is also the framework used to identify students with Specific Learning Disabilities according to Tennessee state law². In 2014, the legislature also passed the Dyslexia is Real Bill which requires school districts to include training on dyslexia as part of their in-service teacher training each year³. More recently, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) issued a Dear Colleague letter clarifying that nothing in the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) prevents schools from referencing the term dyslexia in their evaluations or Individual Education Programs (IEPs)⁴. As a result of these significant events, a group of stakeholders was convened to develop guidance for clarifying issues related to dyslexia.

Acknowledgements

Decoding Dyslexia Tennessee

The International Dyslexia Association

Support and Training for Exceptional Parents (STEP)

Tennessee Association of Administrators of Special Education

Tennessee Center for the Study and Treatment of Dyslexia

¹Tennessee's RTI² Framework Manual can be found here:

http://www.tn.gov/assets/entities/education/rti2/attachments/RTI2_Manual_revision_1_15%20final.pdf

² Tennessee Rules and Regulations 0520-01-09-.11

³ Dyslexia is Real Bill T.C.A. 49-6-3004(c)(1)

⁴ The OSEP Dear Colleague can be accessed here:

<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdcltrs/guidance-on-dyslexia-10-2015.pdf>

What is dyslexia?

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin and is characterized by difficulties with accurate and fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge⁵.

Dyslexia is a term used to describe a learning profile that includes deficits in phonological awareness (i.e. ability to hear and manipulate sounds in language). Individuals with dyslexia have difficulties with accurate and fluent word recognition and have poor spelling and decoding skills

Approximately 1 in 5 school-age children demonstrate some of the characteristics of dyslexia – some of these students have a formal diagnosis but most do not. Regardless of whether a diagnosis has been made, educators should be aware of these characteristics in order to intervene appropriately and provide the necessary supports.

Characteristics of dyslexia

Students who read *b* for *d* or *saw* for *was* do not have a vision problem — they see things just like everyone else. To some observers, students with dyslexia may appear to be “reading backwards;” however, this is not the case.

Dyslexia is a language-based condition. Students with dyslexia struggle with the relationship between letters and sounds. Because of this, they have a hard time decoding, or sounding out, unfamiliar words, and instead often misread them based on an overreliance on their sight-word memory.

⁵ International Dyslexia Association (2002). <http://eida.org/definition-of-dyslexia/>

Students with dyslexia share some common characteristics, but not everyone with dyslexia is the same. Some common characteristics of dyslexia include:

- Difficulty identifying or generating rhyming words (phonological awareness)
- Difficulty with hearing and manipulating sounds in words (phonemic awareness)
- Difficulty learning the sounds of letters (phonics)
- Difficulty remembering names and shapes of letters, or naming letters rapidly
- Misreading or omitting common short words
- Difficulty with word retrieval or naming problems
- Difficulty sounding out words
- Confuses letters that look similar to each other such as p/d/g/q and m/w/n
- Many spelling mistakes
- Excellent thinking skills
- Sophisticated listening vocabulary⁶

How is dyslexia identified?

Dyslexia is usually diagnosed by a licensed psychologist or neuropsychologist through an evaluation that includes intelligence, educational and language assessments. Characteristics of dyslexia can also be identified in the school setting after conducting short reading assessments, such as those measuring oral reading fluency. Schools typically conduct reading assessments as part of their universal screening procedures through the RTI² Framework. Individuals with dyslexia often read slowly and make frequent errors. These results would then indicate the need for further assessment of a student's phonics and phonological awareness skills. Also, in the early grades, measures of letter naming and letter sounds look at how quickly a student can recall phonetic information. Students who perform poorly on these assessments may be at risk for or show characteristics of dyslexia. It is important for schools to identify these characteristics in order to provide appropriate interventions.

Interventions for students with dyslexia

It is not necessary for a student to be diagnosed with dyslexia in order to receive appropriate intervention. Once a school identifies that a student shows characteristics of

⁶ From *Just the Facts...Information provided by The International Dyslexia Association*

dyslexia, it is important to provide the right interventions. These students need intervention that is:

- **Intensive** – given daily or very frequently for a sufficient amount of time
- **Explicit** – skills are explained, directly taught, and modeled by the teacher
- **Systematic and cumulative** – introduces concepts in a definite, logical sequence; concepts are ordered from simple to more complex
- **Structured** – has step-by-step procedures for introducing, reviewing, and practicing concepts
- **Multi-sensory** – links listening, speaking, reading, and writing together; involves movement and “hands-on” learning
- **Language-based** – addresses all levels of language, including sounds (phonemes), symbols (graphemes), meaningful word parts (morphemes), word and phrase meanings (semantics), sentences (syntax), longer passages (discourse), and the social uses of language (pragmatics)

These principles of instruction are often referred to by the following terms: Orton-Gillingham based, a Multisensory Structured Language, or Structured Literacy. Interventions must be aligned to individual students’ needs. For students with dyslexia or for students with the characteristics of dyslexia, the intervention should address the specific phonological deficits identified through targeted assessments.

Services for students with dyslexia

A continuum of services

Like all students, students with dyslexia have diverse needs and demonstrate characteristics on a broad spectrum. It is possible for a student with dyslexia to experience difficulties in the classroom that are problematic but not disabling. A *continuum of services* is available in Tennessee schools to address the needs of all students. Some students are successful with minimal supports and accommodations in the classroom; some need additional intervention provided through general education; and others need intensive intervention provided through special education.

It is important for educators to consider all available information to determine the level of support students need to be successful. Tennessee’s RTI² Framework provides an avenue for struggling students to receive increasingly intensive interventions through general education, in addition to their regular curriculum. Some students may require Tier II interventions. These interventions are research based, provided in a small group, and are targeted to address

students' needs. A few students might require Tier III interventions which are more intensive than those provided through Tier II. These interventions may be more structured and explicit, or have smaller group sizes.

Determining the Need for Special Education- The Most Intensive Intervention

If a student with dyslexia is not successful with interventions provided through general education, he/she *may* be diagnosed with an educational disability (i.e. A specific learning disability). The criteria for identifying a student with a specific learning disability is established by state and federal law. In Tennessee, this includes a student's response to research-based intervention. Although eligibility for special education *includes* students with dyslexia, students diagnosed with dyslexia still need to meet state criteria for a specific learning disability in order to receive special education services. Special education interventions are considered the most intensive and are provided based on a student's eligibility and his/her need for specialized instruction. Parents have the right to request an evaluation to consider special education at any time, regardless of the student's participation in tiered interventions.

Access to the Curriculum

It is also important to consider a student's access to the general education curriculum. Access is the opportunity and ability for an individual to participate in the instruction, discussions, activities, products, and assessment that are provided to all students within a public school. Accommodations are provided to "level the playing field." They are intended to offset the effects of a disability and to provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge and skills.

In order to fully access the curriculum, students with dyslexia may be eligible for an accommodation plan through Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504)⁷. Under Section 504, a student with a disability may have a plan that guarantees equal access to education and allows for certain accommodations or modifications. Unlike IDEA 2004, Section 504 has no requirement for an IEP and has fewer procedural safeguards. Some examples of accommodations for students with dyslexia may include:

- extended time on exams

⁷ Tennessee's 504 Guide can be found here:

http://www.tn.gov/assets/entities/education/attachments/legal_section_504_guide.pdf

- tape recording lectures
- audio books and/or screen reading technology
- use of smart pens or tablets, or spell check
- giving the student a choice between print, cursive or word processing,
- not requiring the student to read aloud in certain settings
- scribes
- oral testing options or prompting upon request
- grading writing assignments for content and not for correct spelling

School teams, in collaboration with parents and families, should consider all available information to develop a plan to address the individual needs of each student. This continuum of support may include tiered interventions through RTI², accommodations provided through Section 504, and/or special education interventions.

What can parents do at home?

- Read out loud every day with your child.
- Provide reading materials that would interest your child.
- Use audiobooks.
- Look for apps to help with spell-check or to dictate notes.
- Encourage your child; give praise for trying hard, boost their confidence, etc.
- Let your child know that he or she can be successful. Many talented individuals and historic figures have overcome their challenges associated with Dyslexia, and your child can too. Resource: <http://www.thepowerofdyslexia.com/famous-dyslexics/>

Additional Resources

[Center for Dyslexia | Middle Tennessee State University \(http://www.mtsu.edu/dyslexia/\)](http://www.mtsu.edu/dyslexia/)

[Decoding Dyslexia Tennessee \(www.decodingdyslexiatn.wordpress.com\)](http://www.decodingdyslexiatn.wordpress.com)

[International Dyslexia Association \(IDA\) \(https://eida.org\)](https://eida.org)

[STEP, Inc. \(Support and Training for Exceptional Parents\) \(http://www.tnstep.org\)](http://www.tnstep.org)

[University of Michigan \(http://dyslexiahelp.umich.edu/dyslexics\)](http://dyslexiahelp.umich.edu/dyslexics)

[Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity \(http://dyslexia.yale.edu/\)](http://dyslexia.yale.edu/)