

Social and Emotional Problems Related to Dyslexia

Dyslexia can have significant effects on emotional well-being. Samuel T. Orton, M.D. was one of the first researchers to describe the emotional aspects of dyslexia. His research on preschoolers with dyslexia revealed that most were happy and well adjusted, yet emotional problems began to develop when early reading instruction was not effective.

Over the years, students with dyslexia may develop increasing frustration if the reading skills of their classmates begin to surpass their own. Access to effective Structured Literacy teaching will help these students, but they may still experience social and emotional problems. Understanding these issues will assist parents and teachers in supporting students to develop a healthy sense of emotional well-being that will serve these students well as they continue their work to become skilled readers and spellers.

Why is dyslexia discouraging and frustrating?

The frustration that individuals with dyslexia experience often stems from their inability to succeed, no matter how hard they try. Parents and teachers see a bright, enthusiastic child who is not learning to read and write. Since dyslexia, almost by definition, is unexpected, students with dyslexia will make many mistakes that may be interpreted as careless. Time and again, these students and their parents hear, "They're such a bright child; if only they would try harder." Ironically, no one knows exactly how hard the individual with dyslexia is trying.

It can be painful and frustrating to struggle with basic reading and writing skills and to be unable to achieve in the eyes of their teachers, classmates, and parents. These experiences may result in students feeling chronically inadequate. A sense of failure and inferiority may generalize beyond the classroom and may last into adulthood. At times, it can even lead successful adults to mistrust their own capabilities.

What might the person with dyslexia feel or experience?

Anxiety

Anxiety is the most frequent emotional symptom reported by both children and adults with dyslexia. Anxiety is a normal, adaptive human response intended to protect us from danger. It often results in the typical reactions of fight, flight, or freeze when encountering an adverse situation. When a person develops anxiety, these responses increase to the point of interfering with day-to-day functioning. Children who are anxious become fearful because of their constant frustration and confusion in school. The anticipation of possible failure when asked to read or spell, which may apply to many new situations, can provoke anxiety and fear.

Social and Emotional Problems Related to Dyslexia

Anxiety causes human beings to avoid whatever frightens them. The child with dyslexia is no exception. However, many teachers and parents misinterpret this avoidance behavior as laziness. In fact, when a student with dyslexia is hesitant to participate in certain school activities, such as reading out loud or completing homework, it is likely the result of anxiety and confusion rather than apathy or unwillingness to work. It is important to note that individuals who experience long-term anxiety are at a higher risk of developing depression.

Anger

Many of the emotional problems caused by dyslexia occur out of frustration with school or social situations. Social scientists have frequently observed that frustration produces anger. This can be clearly seen in many children with dyslexia. Anger is also a common manifestation of anxiety and depression.

The obvious target of the child's anger could be schools and teachers. However, it is also common for the child with dyslexia to vent anger on family members. Often, children sit on their anger during school to the point of being extremely passive. Once they are in the safe environment of home, these very powerful feelings often erupt. Ironically, it is the safety of home that allows them to vent their anger, however, this becomes very frustrating and confusing to a parent who is desperately trying to help their child and may worry that they are doing something wrong.

As youngsters reach adolescence, society expects them to become independent. The adolescent with dyslexia may use their anger to break away from those people on whom they have learned to be dependent. Because of these factors, it can be difficult for parents to help their teenager. At this point, a person outside the family may be better able to intervene and help.

Poor Self-Image

The experiences that children have during the first years of school can affect their self-image. If they succeed in school, they will develop positive feelings about themselves and believe that they can succeed in life. If, instead, they meet failure and frustration, they begin to feel that they are inferior to others, and that their effort makes very little difference. Instead of feeling powerful and productive, these individuals develop the idea that their environment controls them. They may feel powerless and incompetent.

Researchers have learned that when a student with good self-esteem succeeds, as would be the case with typical learners, they credit their own efforts for their success. When they fail, they tell

Social and Emotional Problems Related to Dyslexia

themselves to try harder. However, individuals with a poor self-image are likely to attribute their success to luck. When a child with dyslexia fails, they may simply see themselves as stupid.

Depression

Although most children with dyslexia are not depressed, they are at higher risk for intense feelings of sorrow and pain. Perhaps because of their low self-esteem, children with dyslexia are often afraid to turn their anger toward their environment and instead turn it toward themselves, which can result in depression.

Depressed children and adolescents often have different symptoms than do depressed adults. A child who misbehaves or becomes irritated may be covering up painful feelings. Even though the child may not seem obviously unhappy, both children and adults who are depressed tend to have three similar characteristics. Parents should be alert to the following characteristics:

- First, they tend to have negative thoughts about themselves—a negative self-image.
- Second, they are less likely to enjoy the positive experiences in life and may find it difficult to have fun.
- Finally, they may have trouble imagining anything positive about the future and may foresee a life of continuing failure.

In some extreme cases, chronic feelings of hopelessness can lead some children to thoughts of suicide, so parents and teachers should be watchful and not hesitate to consult mental health professionals, including school counselors.

Social Problems

In addition to internal frustration, a child with any learning difference—including dyslexia and related conditions—may have problems with social relationships.

- If individuals are physically or socially immature in comparison to their peers, it can compound the poor self-image resulting from academic difficulties and make it harder to be accepted by peers. This can lead to awkwardness and discomfort in social situations.
- Dyslexia often affects the way students communicate, known technically as oral language functioning. Students with oral language challenges may have trouble finding the right words or may pause before answering direct questions. Students with broader language processing difficulties may also misinterpret teasing, sarcasm, and words with more than one meaning; in other words, they may have trouble understanding what others mean by

Social and Emotional Problems Related to Dyslexia

what they say. These confusions put them at a disadvantage as they enter adolescence, when language becomes more central to their relationships with peers.

- Just as students with dyslexia may have difficulty remembering a sequence of letters or words, they may also have difficulty remembering the order of events. This might create problems for children as they attempt to explain experiences or conflicts with other children. Students with sequencing and memory problems may relate a different sequence each time they describe an event, which may result in teachers and parents concluding that the child is confused or even lying. When playing sports, children may forget the sequence of plays.
- Students with dyslexia may also perform erratically or inconsistently within tasks. For example, they might write a word correctly on the spelling test, but then misspell it when asked to write it in a sentence. They may spell the same word in different ways within a single paragraph. The complexity of sentence writing and simultaneous focus on content, grammar, punctuation, and spelling can be incredibly difficult for students with dyslexia, yet adults may erroneously assume that a child is simply careless, creating frustration for the adults and hopelessness for the child.

Family Problems

A child's dyslexia may affect the family in a variety of ways. One of the most obvious is sibling rivalry. A typically achieving child may feel jealous of a child with dyslexia who seems to receive the majority of the parents' attention, time, and money. Ironically, the child with dyslexia does not want this attention. This situation can create stress in relationships between siblings, often without the parents' knowledge.

Since dyslexia is usually inherited, this means that one or both parents may have had similar school problems. Whether parents have experienced dyslexia or not, they may deny the existence of dyslexia and believe that if their child would just buckle down, he or she could succeed. When faced with a child who is having learning difficulties, a parent who lived through similar experiences may relive their failures and frustrations through their child's school experience. This brings back powerful and terrifying emotions, which can have an impact on their relationship with the child and their ability to work with school personnel.

How can parents and teachers help?

Adults with dyslexia who have developed a sense of emotional well-being tend to have certain things in common. Early in the child's life, someone has been extremely supportive and

Social and Emotional Problems Related to Dyslexia

encouraging. The individual has found an area in which he or she could succeed. Many successful individuals with dyslexia have also developed a commitment to helping others.

Teachers and parents who wish to offer consistent, ongoing encouragement and support can keep these elements in mind.

- First, listening to a child's feelings is critical. While anxiety, anger, and depression may be daily companions for children with dyslexia, it may be difficult for them to express their emotions. Therefore, adults must help them learn to talk about what they are feeling.
- Second, it's extremely important to provide a clear, simple explanation of dyslexia and describe the possible causes of the challenges that result. This will eliminate many misconceptions and help students understand that they are not "dumb," "bad," or "lazy."
- Third, teachers and parents must reward effort, not just the product or the outcome. For the student with dyslexia, grades should be less important than progress.
- Fourth, when confronting defiant or avoidant behavior, adults must not inadvertently discourage the child with dyslexia. Words such as "dumb" or "lazy" can seriously damage the child's self-image.
- Finally, it is important to help students set realistic goals for themselves. Many students with dyslexia set perfectionistic and unattainable goals, or they may be unwilling to set any goals at all. By helping a child set and achieve attainable goals, teachers and parents can change the cycle of failure.

Most importantly, parents and teachers must help children recognize and rejoice in their successes. Many a child's self-esteem has been salvaged by prowess in athletics, art, or mechanics. Parents and teachers can encourage a child to be involved in activities that build on their strengths and can help cultivate abilities that are more subtle and less obvious. One way that students with dyslexia can develop their own self-image is by helping others. If they can contribute through volunteer work or by working with younger children or animals, for example, it can help them develop empathy and feel more positive about themselves at the same time.

Helping individuals with dyslexia feel better about themselves and deal effectively with their feelings is a complex task. Caring adults need to understand the cognitive and emotional issues that may result from dyslexia. They must then design strategies that will help the child find joy in personal relationships and success in academics and life.

Social and Emotional Problems Related to Dyslexia

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