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CHAPTERS ON HIGH SCHOOL, COLLEGE AND BEYOND

# DYSLEXIA 101

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TRUTHS, MYTHS AND  
WHAT REALLY WORKS



MARIANNE SUNDERLAND

# **DYSLEXIA 101**

## Truths, Myths and What ***Really*** Works

By Marianne Sunderland

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To my husband, Laurence, for your unending support and for helping me to understand what it is like to be dyslexic. You are amazing!

To my kids, Zac, Abby, Toby, Jessie, Lydia, Katherine, Ben and Paul-Louis. Thank you for being patient with me while I learned about dyslexia and for your support during the writing of this book.



## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Introduction

Chapter 1: What is Dyslexia?

Chapter 2: How to Know if You or Your Child is Dyslexic

Chapter 3: Testing

Chapter 4: Reading Instruction That Works

Chapter 5: Navigating the Public School System

Chapter 6: Homeschooling Your Dyslexic Child

Chapter 7: When to Hire an Educational Therapist

Chapter 8: Preparing Your Student With Dyslexia for College Success

Chapter 9: Technology Helps for the Dyslexic College Student

Chapter 10: Understanding the Differences Between High School and College

Chapter 11: Different Types of College Support Programs

Chapter 12: How to Find the Right College for Your Dyslexic Child

Chapter 13: Options for After High School

Chapter 14: How to Get Your Student With Dyslexia Accommodations on College

Entry Exams

Chapter 15: Financial Aid and Scholarships for Students With Dyslexia

Chapter 16: Alternatives to a Traditional College Degree

Chapter 17: A Note to Parents

Chapter 18: A Note to Teachers

Chapter 19: A Note to Students

## **APPENDIXES**

A: Resources

B: Our Story

C: Keeping Perspective

**About The Author**

## **INTRODUCTION**

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), 17% of our nation's children have trouble learning to read. More than 2.9 million school-age children in the United States – approximately six percent of the student population – are diagnosed with learning disabilities. When we first realized that our otherwise bright oldest child was not learning to read as he should, we began looking for answers. That was 17 years ago. He learned to read, graduated from high school with honors, and has gone on to do amazing things with his life. Our journey to discover what held him back in reading and how to help him had a steep learning curve. Since then, we have 7 more children – 6 who have struggled in some way to learn to read

Researchers estimate that learning to read, will be the hardest thing that approximately 20% of the general population will ever do. Interestingly, dyslexics make up a disproportionately large number of our world's entrepreneurs. Julie Logan of the Cass Business School in London found that 35% of the entrepreneurs that she interviewed identified themselves as dyslexic. This makes sense as more and more successful business people have begun to step up and talk about their experiences with dyslexia - Richard Branson of the Virgin Empire, Charles Schwab, the founder of the discount brokerage that bears his name, John Chambers, chief executive of Cisco, Craig McGraw, the cellular phone pioneer, and Paul Orfalea, founder of the Kinko's copy chain to name just a few.

On the other end of the spectrum, researchers at the University of Texas Medical Branch in conjunction with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (published 2000) have found that dyslexics make up 48% of prison inmates - a disproportionately high number. What do these statistics tell us about the nature of dyslexia? Illiteracy is tied

to a disappointing variety of social ills. The way that dyslexia is handled in the early years has a significant impact on the future success or failure of the dyslexic learner.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of understanding of what causes these difficulties in learning to read despite the fact that there is a growing body of scientifically-based research on what dyslexia is and how to effectively teach dyslexics to read, write and spell. Unsuspecting parents go through everything from frustration to fear, and far too often, helplessness, in their quest to help their child.

Writing about dyslexia is a passion of mine because of our own experience raising and teaching our kids with dyslexia. I know how it feels to be utterly confused by an otherwise bright child who just doesn't 'get' reading. I know how overwhelming it was to search through web site after web site, book after book, searching for the answers. I know how many false starts and disappointments we went through before we found what really works. I saw how being unable to read and write well affected my kids as they grew up. How I wish I could go back, knowing what I know now and do things differently.

Over the years I have come to learn that our experience is far from exceptional. In fact, many parents of struggling readers waste untold amounts of time and energy because of misinformation and their own limited understanding of dyslexia. This experience has been the impetus for this book – *to encourage other parents that, with the correct information and the right methods, their children can not only learn to read and spell and write, but to understand the inherent strengths of the dyslexic mind, embrace them and find success.*

Our perseverance paid off and after years of sifting through the research and writings of experts, trying some of this and some of that, we began to understand more fully the typical signs of dyslexia, how to test for dyslexia and how to effectively help our kids not only succeed but to thrive. Understanding dyslexia can be complicated, but *Dyslexia 101* will attempt to provide the information you need, exposing the myths and defining the truths, so that you can help your child succeed.

From research to real life, prevention to remediation, preschool to college and from the practical to the spiritual, *Dyslexia 101* will walk you through figuring out your child's reading struggles and give you the information you need to help them to succeed.

*Because the scope and study of dyslexia is constantly expanding, adding new information to our understanding of dyslexia, the appendixes in the back of the book are full of [resources and links](#) to help you as you further your own understanding of the intricacies of the dyslexic mind.*



## **Chapter 1: What is Dyslexia?**

Before the National Institutes of Health began their research in the 1980's, the definition of dyslexia was limited by our lack of understanding. If a child was otherwise bright, had no vision or hearing problems, but struggled learning to read, he or she was considered dyslexic. No one knew why or what to do about it.

In 2000, Sally Shaywitz, author of *Overcoming Dyslexia*, and researcher at Yale University, looked closer at the brains of good readers and poor readers. She and her team used Functional MRIs to look at the neural pathways that were used during reading by both 'good' readers and poor readers. What they saw drastically enhanced what professionals know about the mechanics behind dyslexia. The researchers were amazed to see that the pathways of the good readers were direct: impulses transferred directly from the eyes to the reading center of the brain; while the poor readers' pathway was much more convoluted.

### **Defining Dyslexia**

More is known about dyslexia now than ever before. We now know that it is a biological condition, genetically based, that results in structural differences in the brain. These differences can affect:

- short term memory
- visual and auditory information processing
- phonological processing, especially in hearing the smallest sounds in words
- speed of processing information
- organization and sequencing

Dyslexia is complex. A dyslexic can struggle because of slow auditory and visual processing, weak short term memory or all of these and in varying degrees. This processing glitch manifests in numerous ways within the classroom environment or business place. A dyslexic may have slow, inaccurate reading, terrible spelling, a difficulty with penmanship (also known as dysgraphia) or a variety of other struggles. The basic issue in the early stages of dyslexia is with reading and spelling. However, dyslexic people may also have trouble speaking clearly, pronouncing new or long words, or learning a foreign language. For this reason, dyslexia cannot be neatly categorized. Generally stated, **dyslexia is an inherited condition, neurologically-based, that causes interference with the processing of language.**

Statistics show that:

- 5% of kids will learn to read on their own
- 20-30% will learn to read relatively easily once exposed to formal instruction; most methods will be effective
- 30-50% will find learning to read to be difficult without direct systematic, explicit instruction
- 30-50% will find learning to read to be the most difficult challenge they will ever face
- 50-60% of kids with dyslexia have ADD or ADHD

Despite these statistics, please know that **ALL CHILDREN CAN BE TAUGHT TO READ.**

### **What Dyslexia Isn't: Myths and Facts**

Because dyslexia has been misunderstood for so long, there are a lot of misperceptions about what dyslexia is and is not. Scientific research on how the brain

works has shed light on a lot of these myths. Here are 10 of the most common myths {and truths} about dyslexia.

**Myth:** Dyslexia doesn't exist.

**Fact:** Dyslexia is one of the most researched and documented conditions that impacts children. Dyslexia is genetically based and has been shown to be clearly related to neurophysiological differences in brain function.

**Myth:** Learning disabilities are correlated to IQ.

**Fact:** Dyslexia is not related to intelligence. In fact, one of the clear signs that a child may have dyslexia is that there is a discrepancy between their intelligence (average to above-average) and their processing speeds and academic performance. Dyslexics are intelligent and lean towards creative strengths such as art, music, athletics, mechanical skills, people skills, 3D visual-spatial skills, intuition and global thinking (being able to see the big picture). [Click here](#) to read a list of over 200 'famous' dyslexics that have accomplished great things, not despite their dyslexia but because of their dyslexic gifts.

**Myth:** Children will outgrow dyslexia.

**Fact:** Research shows that if a child is struggling with reading, writing and spelling in mid-first grade, there is a 90% chance that the child will still be struggling in 8th grade and into adulthood. Knowing this, waiting for your child to improve is not a good option. In my experience, kids just get further and further behind, lose confidence and feel frustrated. It takes less time to fix reading and spelling difficulties when dyslexia is discovered and treated early. However, it is never too late.

**Myth:** Dyslexia is caused by bad diet, bad parenting or watching too much TV.

**Fact:** Dyslexia is genetically based. Although bad diet, bad parenting and watching too much TV aren't good for any child and certainly won't help the situation.

**Myth:** Dyslexia can be helped with medication.

**Fact:** There is no medication to help with dyslexia. However, as many as 60% of kids with dyslexia also have Attention Deficit Disorder {ADD}. There are some medications for ADD, but they won't help with reading, writing and spelling – only attention issues.

**Myth:** Dyslexia is a visual problem.

**Fact:** Most kids reverse letters or numbers while they are learning. Continued reversals after 2 years of instruction is considered a sign of dyslexia. This, however, is not a vision issue. Dyslexia is a language processing disorder – difficulty relating sounds to symbols.

**Myth:** Dyslexia affects more boys than girls.

**Fact:** More boys are sent in for dyslexia testing than girls, but research shows that an equal amount of boys and girls are affected by dyslexia. Because boys tend to act out their frustrations of not doing well in class, they are noticed and sent in for testing. Girls who aren't doing well in class tend to be more quiet and try to avoid being noticed. Sometimes they are only diagnosed in high school or college.

**Myth:** Dyslexics are just lazy and need to work harder.

**Fact:** Research has shown by the use of functional MRIs and brain mapping that slower readers use different parts of their brains when reading and working with language. The findings provide evidence that people with dyslexia are not poorly taught, lazy, or stupid but have an inborn brain abnormality that has nothing to do with intelligence.

**Myth:** Accommodations (more time for tests, not counting spelling, having a notetaker) for kids with dyslexia are a crutch.

**Fact:** Dyslexics are just as intelligent as their peers but may need more time on tests to be able to reflect what they really know. The difficulties in taking notes is so profound that students will often miss the entire meaning of a lecture just trying to copy down the pertinent words.

**Myth:** Dyslexia is untreatable.

**Fact:** There are successful treatments for dyslexia. It is not a disease that can be treated with a pill. It is a way of thinking, the way the brain is wired and how it processes information. [Research has shown](#) that the brain can actually be rewired if the individual is taught with systematic, explicit, sequential phonics taught in a multi-sensory way.

These myths are responsible for much misunderstanding among everyone from family members and friends to teachers and administrators in the school house. It is vitally important that the correct information is understood so that dyslexics can get the help they need without delay and so that they can understand that though reading, writing and spelling are harder for them to master, they possess many other gifts and talents that can more than make up for these losses.