

# The Dyslexia Checklist

**A Practical Reference for  
Parents and Teachers**

Sandra F. Rief  
Judith M. Stern

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## Praise for *The Dyslexia Checklist*

“The authors have compiled a very comprehensive and current list of resources for parents, teachers, and clinicians involved with the prevention and remediation of dyslexia. This is a valuable and unique contribution to the field.”

—*Louisa C. Moats*, EdD, nationally known authority on literacy and author of *Speech to Print: Language Essentials for Teachers*

“Comprehensive and accessible. . . . *The Dyslexia Checklist* presents a clear delineation of areas that must be addressed in literacy instruction. Each section describes the literacy component, provides useful background information—including a solid research base for each component—and lists helpful activities that can be used to teach skills and strategies to introduce lessons and strengthen learning. Classroom teachers, learning specialists, administrators, and parents will find this straightforward guide indispensable as a resource compendium and as a professional development tool.”

—*Esther Klein Friedman*, PhD, director, Academic Intervention Services, New York City Department of Education

“Contains the hottest topics and information for understanding, supporting, and teaching children with dyslexia. The authors’ knowledge, practical focus, and down-to-earth strategies make this book an essential read for educators and parents.”

—*William N. Bender*, PhD, coauthor, *Reading Strategies for Elementary Students with Learning Difficulties*, 2nd edition and *Response to Intervention: A Practical Guide for Every Teacher*

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—*Jone Bycel*, MS, BCET, board-certified educational therapist



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*To the students who have motivated us, the  
colleagues who have shared with us, and  
the parents who have inspired us*



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## About The Authors

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# Introduction

We have each been in the field of teaching students with learning disabilities for more than thirty years. During this time, we have worked with students in a variety of school settings and have been privileged to teach students at a wide range of grade levels, with and without special learning needs. Our own teaching experiences, training, and work with many gifted, dedicated colleagues have taught us much about helping students with reading difficulties. Along with other educators, we continue to seek new information about developments in the field and to strengthen our skill and understanding of how to best help children with reading disabilities. As good teachers know, there is always new research to consider and there are always new methods and techniques to learn in order to better reach and teach our students.

The inspiration for writing this book comes from our firm belief in children and their ability to succeed when provided with the proper instruction, intervention, and support, as well as the tenacity of committed parents and teachers to do what it takes to help students succeed. During our years in the classroom, we have watched students struggle with written words and suddenly make the exciting reading connection. We have seen children who adamantly avoided reading become avid readers. Parents have shared their worries and stories with us as they have continually looked for ways to help their children.

Technique and methodology are very important in teaching children with dyslexia. Humor, flexibility, and an understanding of each student's unique strengths and weaknesses are also significant in effectively teaching children with learning challenges. Students with dyslexia need the encouragement of parents and teachers, along with interventions that will enable them to achieve academic success.

A wealth of information has come to light about how children learn and the nature of reading disabilities, thanks to the work of many dedicated scientists and researchers. Newly developed reading materials, modern technology, and ongoing research continue to help those who teach students with dyslexia.

It is an exciting time to be working with students who have dyslexia, but this work places many demands on educators and parents. In this book, we have created an easy-to-use, up-to-date reference for parents, teachers, and other professionals who work with dyslexic students. Our goal is to present practical information and collect useful ideas and resources in one place. Many topics in this book lend themselves to extensive explanations. We have attempted to present as much as we can on specific topics in a concise format while encouraging the reader to explore topics further by making use of the resources that are shared throughout the book and listed at the end of each section.

We hope that you find this book to be a valuable resource, and we wish you and your children with dyslexia much success as you meet the challenges ahead.

SANDRA F. RIEF AND JUDITH M. STERN

# The Dyslexia Checklist



# 1

## **BASIC INFORMATION ON DYSLEXIA**

### Introduction

- 1.1. Clarifying the Terms *Dyslexia* and *Learning Disabilities*
- 1.2. Important Facts and General Information About Dyslexia
- 1.3. Signs and Symptoms of Dyslexia
- 1.4. Decades of Research: What We Now Know About Dyslexia
- 1.5. Other Common Problems
- 1.6. Common Strengths and Positive Characteristics of People with Dyslexia
- 1.7. Diagnosing Dyslexia
- 1.8. Research-Based Intervention Programs for Struggling Readers
- 1.9. What Children with Dyslexia Need from Parents and Teachers
- 1.10. Key Instructional Components and Interventions for Students with Dyslexia
- 1.11. Dual or Multiple Exceptionalities (Gifted and Dyslexic)

### Resources

## **Introduction**

Knowledge about dyslexia continues to be updated and clarified. Research, better assessment tools, professional training, and availability of effective intervention programs all contribute to a positive outlook for today's students with dyslexia.

An understanding of both the diagnosis and the treatment of dyslexia will help parents and educators work together with students who have the disorder to maximize students' school success.

## 1.1 Clarifying the Terms *Dyslexia* and *Learning Disabilities*

Question: My fourth-grade child was diagnosed at school as having learning disabilities. He had great trouble learning the letters of the alphabet and their sounds when he was younger. Reading is a struggle. When he reads, it is slow and very frustrating for him. His spelling is so poor, it's hard to decipher what he writes. My friend told me it sounds like dyslexia. Could this be?

- The answer to the preceding question is yes. *Dyslexia* refers to a language-based learning disability in basic reading skills and spelling. The problems of children with dyslexia most commonly stem from difficulty in processing speech sounds within words and making the connection between sounds and written symbols—letters and patterns of letter combinations—that represent sounds in words.
- Most school districts throughout the United States typically do not use the term *dyslexia*. Some states, like Texas, now do.
- Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the federal special education law, there are thirteen categories of disabilities. “Specific learning disabilities” is one of those categories. *Specific learning disabilities* (SLD) or *learning disabilities* (LD) are the terms typically used in schools.
- *Learning disabilities* is an umbrella term that describes specific problems with processing information and learning skills. Dyslexia is one of the disabilities that is included in *learning disabilities*.
- Dyslexia is the most common learning disability. Approximately 80 percent of students identified as having learning disabilities who qualify for special education have reading disabilities (dyslexia).

## Definition of Dyslexia

The International Dyslexia Association (2008a) defines dyslexia as “a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or 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 knowledge” (adopted by the board of the International Dyslexia Association, November 2002, and the National Institutes of Health, 2002).

## Commonly Accepted Descriptions of Dyslexia

- *Dyslexia* is a Greek word meaning “poor language.”
- Dyslexia is a language-based disorder that involves weaknesses in phonological awareness, word decoding, and the ability to do rapid naming (quickly name common items or symbols such as colors, numbers, and familiar objects) and quick recall.
- Dyslexia is a brain-based disorder that causes difficulty in using and processing linguistic (speech) and symbolic (letter) codes—that is, letter-sound correspondence.
- Primary characteristics of dyslexia include
  - Difficulty in decoding individual words
  - Slow, inaccurate oral reading—poor reading fluency
  - Spelling weaknesses

Often, dyslexia produces difficulties in other reading and language areas such as reading comprehension, vocabulary, and written language. Individuals with dyslexia exhibit these characteristics to varying degrees, but the characteristics frequently appear in some combination.

## What Are Learning Disabilities?

The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD, 2009) defines a learning disability (LD) as “a neurological disorder that affects the brain’s ability to receive, process, store and respond to information. The term *learning disability* is used to describe the seeming unexplained difficulty a person of at least average intelligence has in acquiring basic academic skills. These skills are essential for success at school and work, and for coping with life in general. LD is not a single disorder. It is a term that refers to a group of disorders” (n.p.).

- Learning disabilities are neurologically based problems with processing information. These affect one or more processes of input (taking in), integrating (organizing, sequencing, remembering), and output (expression) of the information.
- The problems associated with learning disabilities interfere with one or more of the following: learning reading, writing, or math, and may affect a person’s ability to speak, listen, reason, recall, or organize information.
- Children with learning disabilities have difficulties with learning and performing particular skills, and demonstrate underachievement in certain academic areas. For those with dyslexia, the particular skill deficits and underachievement are predominantly in reading and spelling.
- Learning disabilities (including dyslexia) are called hidden disabilities because they are not visible and are not physically obvious.
- Specific learning disabilities are unexpected in relation to a child’s age and cognitive and academic abilities. One would not expect the problems the child is experiencing in learning, given his or her average or above-average intellect and other skills and abilities.

- There are school districts that, in practice, do not require average or above-average measured intelligence in order to be classified as learning disabled.
- Federal special education law (IDEA, 2004) defines a *specific learning disability* as “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. . . .”
- The law’s definition also states that the term *specific learning disability* “does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage” (United States Code [20 U.S.C. §1401 (30)]).

## 1.2 Important Facts and General Information About Dyslexia

- Estimates of the number of people in the United States with dyslexia vary from 5 to 17 percent of the population.
- Approximately 3 to 4 percent of students in U.S. schools receive special education services for a reading disability. Far more children who have dyslexia do not receive special education.
- Dyslexia is not caused by
  - Poor parenting or lack of educational opportunities
  - Poor teaching or type of reading instruction
  - Environmental factors
  - Visual or hearing problems
  - Lack of motivation
- Dyslexia affects people all over the world.
- Dyslexia is a lifelong condition. However, intervention can have a very positive impact on a person's ability to read and write.
- Contrary to what many people believe, children with dyslexia do not see letters and words backward. Letter reversals (*b/d, p/q*), as well as errors in directionality and sequencing of letters within words (*was/saw, on/no*), are common in young children with and without dyslexia but may be symptomatic of dyslexia after the early grades.
- Dyslexia is found in both boys and girls in similar numbers, although it is more commonly diagnosed in boys.
- Many characteristics and areas of difficulty are commonly associated with dyslexia. (See Checklists 1.3 and 1.5.) However, each person has his or her own combination of strengths and weaknesses, and the areas of weakness may vary from mild to severe.

- Early identification and intervention (that is, when a child is in kindergarten through second grade) are most effective in preventing reading problems.
- Research shows that with appropriate early intervention, 75–90 percent of children who are at-risk readers can overcome many of their difficulties and increase their reading skills to an average level.
- Although early identification and intervention provide the greatest chances for success, most children with reading disabilities are not diagnosed until they are in the middle or upper elementary grades.
- Many children, teens, and adults with dyslexia go undiagnosed, particularly those with mild degrees of dyslexia. Many fall through the cracks of their school system and never receive the specialized instruction they need to build reading competency. Remediation is more difficult as a person gets older, when remediation must be more intensive in order to overcome years of reading failure. However, it is never too late to help almost anyone with dyslexia learn to read and improve skills.
- Students with dyslexia may have been evaluated at some point but did not meet the eligibility criteria at that time for special education and related services.
- Research tells us what type of instruction is necessary for students with dyslexia and what works best in teaching them to read. (See Checklist 1.10.)
- Dyslexia is not a developmental lag that will eventually go away. Waiting to intervene does not benefit a child.
- Children as young as four or five years old who are at risk for reading problems can be identified through reliable screening measures of phonological awareness and other language-based tasks. Once diagnosed, they can receive early intervention.