

Dyslexia and Challenging Behaviour

No one can experience years of failure in school without it having a detrimental effect. A lack of confidence and a low self-esteem are often consequences of learning difficulties. There are serious emotional outcomes for the learner who has been unable to develop effective skills and strategies in certain key areas of the curriculum due to the presence of a learning difficulty. Emotional damage is done when poor school attainment is attributed to inattention, distractibility, laziness, immaturity or defiance and when parents and teachers are unable to manage the learning difficulty appropriately. Many pupils with learning difficulties report experiencing verbal and physical abuse from their peer group which causes them to become defensive and secretive to avoid situations in which they will be ridiculed.

Often these pupils are so used to being wrong that they are afraid to take risks and lose all belief in themselves and their abilities. They often underestimate their skills and knowledge and seem to assume, that because they have difficulty in reading, spelling and writing, that they cannot do anything well.

The following secondary emotional factors are often present in pupils with dyslexia:

- a lack of self-confidence
- a low self-esteem
- subject to verbal and physical abuse
- defensive and secretive to avoid ridicule
- afraid to take risks
- underestimation of skills and knowledge

Schools have an essential role to play in the prevention of behavioural difficulties that may develop as a reaction to learning difficulty. The link between learning difficulties and behaviour difficulties will be firmly established in the primary school years, if appropriate intervention and support is not available.

Whole-School Behaviour Management Strategies

1. **Establish school-wide classroom rules.** These should be agreed by all of the staff, kept to a minimum and prioritised. In each class, explain the reason for each rule, discuss them, role-play them and display them. Explain sanctions.
2. **When correcting pupils,** draw attention to the rule, repeat the reason for the rule and the

sanction. Insist that the pupil verbalise the misbehaviour, the rule and his/her intention to not break the rule again. Don't threaten and don't change the sanction, but do carry it out. It may be better not to do this in front of a class but rather on a 1:1 basis. When dealing with pupils with learning difficulties, avoid raising your voice or talking too fast. Use vocabulary appropriate to their linguistic and conceptual abilities. Be aware of short attention spans. Monitor your own mood. Don't overact because you're having a bad day. Trust pupils. Give pupils the benefit of the doubt, if you can't prove otherwise.

3. **Make considerable effort to know pupils well** by talking with them, observing them, discussing them with parents and colleagues and trying to seek out some of the reasons for their behaviour. This may lead into counselling.
4. **Schools must teach/train some aspects of social behaviour** because some pupils do not actually know how to behave and others are unable to see the effects of their behaviour on others. Group work may be conducted by a class teacher. Individual work with particular pupils should be done by someone who already has a positive rapport with the pupils concerned. A guidance counsellor, a resource teacher or a learning support teacher may have a role here.
5. **Try behaviour modification** by observing the concerned pupil's behaviour. Devise a system where over a full week, the teacher monitors and records the concerned pupil's daily behaviour in class using an analysis grid to detail time, current activity and type of behaviour. Compile the results and use them to guide teaching methodology selection, to modify daily organisation, e.g. type and length of activities and to change classroom organisation. The information can also be used to demonstrate to the pupil what is unacceptable about his or her behaviour. The teacher and the pupil should then agree behavioural objectives and set very specific goals which appear to be within the pupil's capacity to attain. The attainment of each goal is acknowledged and rewarded.
6. **Metacognitive behaviour modification strategies** can help pupils take some control over their own behaviour. The FAST strategy is an aid to personal problem solving. It involves the four steps: **F**reeze & think, **A**lternatives, **S**olution and **T**ry it. The SLAM strategy is to help pupils accept and assimilate negative feedback and remarks by others. The letters stand for the actions: **S**top what you're doing, **L**ook the person in the eye, **A**sk the person to explain what he or she means and **M**ake an appropriate response to the person.
7. **Use Positive Intervention.** With information from observation, intervene before misbehaviour occurs and reinforce positive behaviour verbally. Defuse potentially dangerous situations. Humour often works, but it should never be at a pupil's expense. Never publicly humiliate a pupil. Any pupil with learning difficulties, who has a low self-esteem, will be very sensitive to what she/he perceives to be being picked on. Sometimes just standing or moving to a different place will help.
8. **Provide Opportunities.** With any pupil who has a short attention span or who is hyperactive, try to provide legitimate reasons to come off task or at least an escape route. Talk to them periodically while they are working or let them come to your desk to ask questions or to show you their work.
9. **Avoid over-rigid structures or sanctions** for misbehaving. A sanction like detention may be successful with the majority of pupils, but most schools find that they have a hardcore group who are consistently in detention and it has no effect on their behaviour. Someone like the year head should monitor the re-offenders. Their consistent appearance in detention should be a signal for an investigation as to why. It should involve considering personal, behavioural, social, learning or academic difficulties.

10. **Time-out** is a technique to manage disruptive behaviour by briefly (fifteen minutes) isolating the pupil from the group and the activity. The teacher and the class should ignore the pupil during the time-out. This should be used cautiously and only after previous correction. Actively assist the pupil's return from time-out by directly engaging the pupil in ongoing activities.

11. **Home-School co-ordination** is a means of involving the home in the monitoring of a pupil's behaviour and in providing support for his or her efforts to improve. Many schools use a form to record and comment on behaviour class-by-class. The pupil takes the form home to be read and signed and then returns it to the school. Pupils find carrying the form from class to class a good reminder of the behaviour required.

12. **Research** suggests that pupils expect and want teachers to be firm, fair, consistent, friendly and supportive and to teach them and respect them.

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