

Language and Literacy: Helping with Spoken Language, Reading, Spelling and Writing

Helping Spoken Language Develop

Dyslexia can involve difficulties in spoken language. Research has shown that drawing children's attention to those aspects of oral language that are most critical to the reading process can help early literacy development. Evidence also indicates that dyslexia is associated with differences in how the brain processes both oral and written language. These differences can interfere with the development of early language and literacy skills.

This suggests an important connection between the development of listening and speaking skills and learning to read. Most children seem to learn to speak and understand English naturally, but reading is a skill that must be taught and learned. Parents through play and directed activities with a child can be vital in the development of early language skills that can help the child develop skills that will be needed to learn to read.

If your child has specific problems in speaking, you should discuss this with your family doctor or the child's pre-school or school teacher. For example, if by age three, a child is not speaking in phrases or if a parent has a lot of difficulty in understanding the child's speech, the child may require speech and language therapy.

1. Developing Listening Skills:

- Make your child alert to sounds which he/she can understand.
- Identify new sounds for your child. Ask her/him to listen. Next time, you hear it ask them what it is.
- Help your child to listen to the sounds around and to identify them – the telephone, pots and pans, water, doorbell, clapping, footsteps, animal sounds
- Tell or read stories, fairy tales and nursery rhymes to your child frequently.
- Help your child develop an ear for rhymes by singing rhyming songs and reciting short rhymes with them.

2. Learning to Listen to Sounds in Words:

- Talk about rhyming words and how they sound alike. Say pairs of words and ask your child if

they rhyme. "Do the words 'cat' and 'rat' rhyme?" Answer: yes. "Do the words 'cat' and 'dog' rhyme?" Answer: no.

- Encourage your child to find words that rhyme. Say a word and ask him or her for a rhyme. "What words rhyme with 'see'?" Answers include free, be and ski.
- Talk about words that begin with the same sound (alliteration). Say pairs of words and ask your child if they begin with the same sound. "Do the words 'cat' and 'car' begin with the same sound?" Answer: yes; "Do the words 'cat' and 'dog' begin with the same sound?" Answer: no.
- Encourage your child to find words that begin with the same sound. Say a word and ask him or her for another word that begins with the same sound. "What words begin like 'see'?" Answers include: sun, soup, city
- Play oral word games with your child based on rhyme or alliteration such as 'I Spy' ("I spy something that begins like top." Answer: "Is it the table?") Or 'Odd-One-Out' ("Which is the odd one out? Is it 'pan', 'knife' or 'pot'? Answer: It's knife because it doesn't begin with the same sound as 'pan' and 'pot'.)

3. Developing Speaking Skills:

- Encourage your child to talk to you and take time to talk to your child.
- Try to give your child your undivided attention for at least a short period every day.
- Let your child tell you what he/she did and how.
- Ask her/him questions and encourage her/him to speak.
- Listen to your child's ideas.
- Answer questions when they are asked.
- Take every opportunity to talk to your child.
- Ask her/him what she/he thinks about matters which she/he can understand.
- Help the child to look at pictures and to describe in detail what is seen.
- Encourage your child to retell stories you have read to him/her.
- Reward your child with verbal praise, i.e. 'that's good', 'well done'.
- Stimulate your child to speak. Put pictures or posters on the wall or give her/him objects to talk about.
- While you are cooking talk to your child about what you are doing and the food you are making.
- Name things for the child and help to call things by the right name.
- You can play a game with your child by making sounds and asking him/her to tell you what was heard.

- Whenever you go anywhere with your child, try to talk to her/him about where you are and what you see, hear and do.
- On a trip to a shop, tell your child what you are buying and why. Name the items for your child.
- Help your child to notice the things in the environment. Point out things to her/him and play a game of counting how many different things she/he sees or how many of one thing she/he sees.
- Take your child for a walk and talk about the things you see and hear.

4. Promoting Language Development with Older Children:

- Make time to discuss issues in their life related to home, school, hobbies and leisure activities.
- Talk about books or newspaper articles that you or they have read
- Discuss the films, television programmes and sports matches that you have seen together.
- Include your child in family discussions on such decisions as what to have for dinner, what colour to paint their bedroom, what plants to put in the garden, where to go on holidays etc...
- Involve your child in planning trips, writing shopping lists and helping you at home.
- Playing board games such as Monopoly or Risk can provide good opportunities for conversation and language use.
- Just find time to talk with your child on a regular basis. Be sure to talk with your child and not at him.

HELPING WITH READING

1. Developing Pre-Reading Skills

Parents of children who may be at risk of developing dyslexic difficulties will notice that progress in developing important pre-reading skills is slow. There is much that parents can do during the early stages - up to 6 years of age - that can support the work of the school in developing these skills. As you engage in these activities, the approach should be informal, and you should not show anxiety about your child's progress. The following are some of the activities that parents and children can profitably engage in:

- **Reading together.** Just before bedtime, or some other fixed time everyday, can be identified as a suitable time for sharing books. In addition to reading and enjoying a story together, parents can informally invite children to identify parts of a book: the top and bottom of the page, where the story starts and finishes, and important features of print such as capital letters, full stops, question marks, and even quotation marks. As children develop and become more confident, attention can gradually shift to recognising letters and words. However, even if the child shows little interest in letters or words, reading together should continue, as it offers a range of other benefits in the area of language development.

- **Reading words in the environment.** Many opportunities will arise where parents and children can read words in the environment - words like shop, restaurant, book, and so on. It is often useful to draw attention to important features of words - for example, shop begins with the letters 's' and 'h', or 'car' begins with the same sound as 'cat'. Otherwise there is a danger that children will recognise words only using the context in which they occur (for example, McDonalds, Shell).
- **Informal rhyming activities.** Identifying words that rhyme, reciting nursery rhymes and playing rhyming games are useful activities for preparing children to learn to read. Rhyming games can be informal, and might include asking questions such as 'What word rhymes with 'car'?' 'Which is the odd one out - mat, sand or cat?
- **Recognising letters.** Children at risk of developing dyslexia may not acquire knowledge of the letters of the alphabet along with the same ease as their peers, and may therefore lose out on opportunities for learning to read, both at home and at school. Activities that can help younger children with letter recognition include manipulating plastic or magnetic letter of the alphabet, drawing or painting letters, and identifying known letters in a set of letters or in a word.
- **Grouping or sequencing objects.** Grouping objects can provide practice in classification skills. Children can group many objects in the house by size or colour - clothes, dishes, books etc. Activities in which children put words or numbers in sequence (for example the days of the week) can also be very helpful.
- **Writing letters and words.** Informal writing activities, including 'pretend writing', where the young child writes even though handwriting and spelling are not well developed, and adults can only read the child's text with great difficulty. Young children should be given opportunities to read their own writing to their parents.

2. Practising Letter Recognition Skills

If your child can not rapidly recognise and name all of the letters of the alphabet, you should spend time helping him or her to try to learn them. Only do one letter at a time. You can buy or make a pack of alphabet cards, plastic or wood three-dimensional letters or sandpaper letter cards. Try to choose ones with letters that are in the same style that your child is being taught in school. Play games that encourage your child to name the letter correctly. You can also ask him or her to copy the letter over and over again. Finger tracing over a sandpaper letter or in a tray of salt or sand or making the letter in the air might also help.

Try helping your child to make letters out of clay or plasticine.

When your child can rapidly name each of the letters, help him or her to learn the alphabetic sequence. Practice with short sequences first. For example, try giving him or her the letters a, b, c, d, and e in random order and asking him or her to put them into the correct sequence. When these five are known in order, try the next five - f, g, h, i and j.

3. Practising Word Recognition Skills

Learning to recognise individual words rapidly is a major problem for learners with dyslexia and they need a lot of revision and practice. Ask the teacher which words your child should be learning. For words that are hard to remember, try making word cards. Carefully print the word in large, lower-case letters onto an index card and on the back put a picture of the word. You might ask your child to draw the picture. This can aid memory.

Many of the hard-to-remember words are words that are not easily pictured. These are often function

words like 'was', 'of' and 'across'. Ask your child what he or she thinks of when they think of that word and then ask them to draw it on the back of the card. The cards can be used for daily revision of the words or for playing games like matching, pelmanism or snap. Regular and frequent exposure to these words is essential.

While looking at a word encourage your child to say the names of the letters in each word in left to right sequence. Repeat a few times. If necessary use a finger to point to each letter.

Review these words regularly. Every night spend a few minutes going over words that were learned in the previous weeks.

4. Practicing Reading with Paired Reading

Fifteen or twenty minutes a day can be enough to promote reading as a positive and enjoyable activity. Success depends on the relationship between the learning reader and the parent helper and on the level of difficulty of the chosen book. Get advice from a teacher as to the child's independent reading ability. You must allow the learner to select the type of book he or she wants to read, but you must ensure that it is readable. A learning reader should not make more than five mistakes out of every 100 words read. Otherwise the book is too difficult and this will be a very frustrating experience for both of you.

Paired reading is a developmental reading activity that all learners can benefit from. It can help develop fluency, speed of word recognition and overall reading comprehension.

Paired reading should be an enjoyable experience, if it proves not to be, don't do it. It will only discourage the child from reading. There are a number of variations on paired reading and below is a suggested method.

- a. Sit side by side so you can share the book. Be comfortable. Make sure you will not be disturbed and that the room is quiet.
- a. Agree on a time that you will read daily and a time when you will stop and the signal that the child will use to tell you he or she wants to read alone. The signal might be a tap on your arm or an elbow nudge. It should be silent so the reading is not interrupted.
- a. Always begin by reading aloud together in unison. Slow down your reading to suit your child. Don't force them to try to keep up with you.
- a. When the child is feeling confident and wants to read aloud on his or her own, he or she should give the signal.
- a. When the child comes to an unknown word, skips a word or reads a word wrong, you should wait 2 or 3 seconds to see if he or she corrects him- or herself. If not, you should interrupt the reading by pointing at the appropriate place in the text and reading it correctly. Then let him or her read it correctly. Praise your child and let them read on. You might need to read together again for a little while, if his or her confidence has been shaken by the error. Don't encourage your child to sound out a word or to say the letters. Treat the word as a whole. Just say it correctly, let him or her repeat it and then read on.
- a. Read for no more than fifteen minutes. Afterwards talk about what has been read. Don't just ask questions, but talk about what you think or like about the story or even what you don't understand or found interesting. Be sure to answer any of your child's questions about words or content.

5. Promote Reading

If you want your child to become a reader, you must encourage them.

- Let your child see you reading. Reading should be seen as positive pastime.
- Let your child read what he or she wants. This includes comic books, the TV or sports page
- Let your child read what their peers are reading. Materials related to recently released films and television programmes are often attractive. As reading such material will be difficult, be available to help
- Let your child listen to books and stories on tape. These can be borrowed from libraries or bought in most book shops. This activity is more helpful if your child can follow the text while listening.
- Give books or book tokens as part of your family presents for birthdays or other occasions.
- Take your child to the local library regularly so that they become very familiar with its use.

6. Reading Textbooks

You may find that when your learner is in post-primary school, or even in the latter stages of primary, that he or she cannot read the set subject textbooks quickly and accurately enough to understand and retain information. The best advice is to offer to read it to them. Don't be condescending. Just point out that if you do the reading they can concentrate on listening and understanding. Some parents have carefully and patiently read whole textbooks onto audio-tape so their students can listen while following the text and learning. Others just tell their children that all they have to do is ask and they will read anything to them, anytime, without question. Many of the novels and plays studied in English are available commercially on audio-tape through larger bookshops and libraries.

HELPING WITH SPELLING

Very often, children with dyslexia will experience difficulty in learning to spell. Parents (and indeed teachers) will need to make a distinction between spelling errors that are expected, given the child's level of development, and spelling errors that are of a serious and persistent nature. Research shows that, in the early years, many children pass through a series of stages as they make the transition from novice to expert spellers. These stages include pre-phonetic spelling (ages 1-6); semi-phonetic spelling (ages 4-7), letter-name spelling (ages 5-9), and the within-word patterns stage (6-12). In the case of the letter-name spelling stage, for example, children may represent each sound in a word with a letter, and make errors such as bak (for back), tabl (for table), or spidr (for spider). While these errors may be viewed as a natural part of development in children who are making steady progress in spelling, they may indicate more serious difficulties in the case of children with dyslexia who make them repeatedly, and do not seem to respond to feedback or conventional instruction.

1. Learning to Spell

When a child gets a list of spelling words to learn, she/he needs a method to learn them. Every child must learn how to learn. Learners with dyslexia need a multi-sensory method, which provides written repetition. They will always require frequent reviews of the words they are learning. Spellings should always be practised in writing and never orally. Limit the number of words learned to what your child is capable. If your child, despite effort and your support, cannot learn the number of words given as spelling homework, try to negotiate with your child's teacher. It makes more sense for your child to learn two words that are remembered forever, than to try to learn ten words that none are remembered.

A common approach to learning spelling that is often taught in school is called

Look - Say - Cover - Write - Check

- This approach encourages the child to first look carefully at the word and notice the letters in it and the sequence they are in.
- Secondly, the child should say the word aloud while she/he is looking at the word so that she/he thinks about how the letters and sounds work together.
- Next, the child is asked to cover the word so it cannot be seen and then to write it from memory.
- Finally, the child is encouraged to check or compare.
- Parents should ensure that their child is following these steps to learn spellings

For some children, Look - Say - Cover - Write - Check is not enough. They need to do more with words to store them in their long term memory. Talk to the teacher who may recommend an alternative method.

Parents could also try the following sequence, one word at a time, with their child.

1. Print the word neatly in lower case letters on a card, or make the word out of plastic, three-dimensional letters. Ask the child if he or she knows what the word is. If he or she cannot read the word or names it incorrectly, you should say the word clearly and ask him or her to repeat it several times.
2. Now again look at the word together carefully. You should point out anything visually striking or unusual about the word.
3. Ask your child what the word means and to use it in a sentence. If he or she does not know the meaning, tell them. Discuss all common meanings and uses of the word.
4. Have your child neatly copy the word and to say the word again. Check to make sure it is copied correctly.
5. Have your child trace over the word at least four times while saying it.
6. Ask your child to say the same or a new sentence with the word in it and then to write that sentence. Help him or her spell any unknown words.
7. Finally, ask your child to try to write the word from memory without any help.
8. Together compare what he or she writes to the original word. Give praise if it is correct. If it isn't, try to be as positive as possible and point out what parts of the word are written correctly and which parts still need work.
9. Begin the procedure again for each new word.

Helping With Writing

1. Helping With Pre-Writing Skills

Try to:

- Encourage the early development of fine motor coordination skills by encouraging your child to finger-paint and to play with clay and building blocks.
- Encourage your child to draw and paint and to colour in colouring books.
- Play games with your child to help her or him to learn left and right.
- Play games to encourage sequencing items by size, number, events
- Practice quick and accurate letter naming.
- Play games that involve matching lower and upper case letters.
- Buy a triangular or stetro grip to encourage your child to hold a pen or pencil correctly. These can be bought at many stationery shops or shops that sell educational supplies.
- Practice writing activities such as completing mazes and line copying.
- Trace over model letters or shapes.

2. Writing

Although this will probably be the area which will be most difficult for your child, try to encourage writing activities at home.

Try to:

- Develop a family habit of leaving notes and messages for each other.
- Establish the habit in your child of writing thank you notes for presents.
- Help your child to find a pen pal. If you have access to the internet, this might be done by e-mail with adult supervision.
- Teach your child to answer the telephone and to take written messages for family members.
- Encourage your child to draw pictures and then write about them.
- Encourage your child to write about stories that you have read together.
- Suggest your child keep a diary to write in daily.
- Make a book with your child. They might tell you the story or tape-record it. You then write it down carefully using clear print. Then your child might copy it. Your child can also be encouraged to read it aloud.

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