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## Thoughts on Dyslexia

By Andrew Pudewa

“My child is ten years old and not really reading! He can barely write his name, let alone a whole sentence, and it’s scaring me. He’s so far behind!”

This is not uncommon for me to hear. During seminars and conference talks, I often mention my son—“the most dyslexic person I have ever met”—who didn’t read a book until he was twelve! I talk about it because I want people to ask me about it, so I can share with them that having a child who’s not reading isn’t the end of the world. I want them to regain hope and have confidence that home education is still the best option.

For most of my adult life, I’ve been teaching either music or writing. However, I do have training in the field of child brain development and have been blessed with a modicum of knowledge and experience that allows me to bring some perspective to this problem.

First, let us note that non-reading, often called “dyslexia,” is a symptom, not a cause. The dictionary defines the word as “a general term for disorders that involve difficulty in learning to read or interpret words but that do not affect general intelligence.” The more I’m at this business of teaching and parenting, the more I’m quite sure that reading is much more a brain function than an academic subject. You can bang your head against the wall trying to teach a child to read using the best phonics system in the world and still fail to do so; you can have another child (in the same family!) whom you don’t have to teach much at all and who learns to read as if by osmosis. So it’s important for us not to beat ourselves up because of having a non-reader; the causes may be outside our control.

In my experience, there are four general areas of function that can impede smooth development of reading and writing ability. While these are not exclusive and children can experience more than one of these issues, finding and focusing on the dominant one can bring breakthroughs. Another thing to contemplate is that no children are neurologically perfect—everyone has some degree of dysfunction; it’s just a question of what and how serious. This fact helps us realize that we shouldn’t compare children based on age or grade, even though the modern education paradigm pushes that way. Let’s look at these four possible causes of what is often labeled “dyslexia” and how to approach each.

The most common problem can be a lack of information. Many children, especially when in classrooms, can simply miss basic phonics instruction—the bits of information that allow independent decoding. Sometimes this is due to an inferior instructional model; at other times it can be the result of a distracting environment or a physiological condition that makes attentiveness difficult. In this case, intensive phonics instruction, usually one-on-one, can be tremendously beneficial for the student. While most phonics programs are similarly based on the Orton-Gillingham system, Susan Barton’s Reading and Spelling Page 2 of 2 System [www.bartonreading.com](http://www.bartonreading.com) has produced excellent results for a wide range of readers. So if children lack sufficient phonics information, decoding will be a struggle; however, this can be remedied.

Secondly, reading struggles can result from auditory processing difficulties. If children, especially at a young age, don’t hear the language consistently or accurately, their basic linguistic understanding—phonemic awareness and grammatical comprehension—will be impeded. Decoding not only requires children to connect sounds with symbols, it requires them to compare those possible combinations of sounds with their existing database of known words. Therefore, not only must children understand that “e-i-g-h” makes the long sound of the vowel “a,” they must also know the word “sleigh” and have some concept of its meaning. Otherwise, they are unable to decode or determine the context of its usage. Auditory processing issues can also be addressed, but oftentimes more phonics drill alone will not suffice. Nutritional or neurological issues may need to be considered. Two great sources for pertinent information in this regard can be found at: [www.familyhopecenter.org](http://www.familyhopecenter.org) and [www.diannecraft.org](http://www.diannecraft.org).

A third case where the label “dyslexia” may arise is with serious visual challenges such as convergence and laterality issues. While it is somewhat normal for a child under six or seven to still be settling their sidedness, if it persists long after that, mixed dominance (i.e., being right-handed and left-eyed) can slow down the acquisition of reading and writing ability. Sometimes difficulty with convergence of vision (tracking with both eyes) can frustrate reading and cause children to tire quickly when dealing with small print or busy pages. If this seems to be the problem, I would refer you to a behavioral ophthalmologist (an eye specialist who studies and treats how the eyes are used rather than acuity) and again to information from [www.familyhopecenter.org](http://www.familyhopecenter.org).

Lastly we have the “true” dyslexics, people who really see the world very differently. They think in three dimensions and try to wrap their brain around everything, which means two-dimensional things like text on a page can frustrate them. Rather than summarizing this complex idea, I refer you to *The Gift of Dyslexia* by Ron Davis and to the website [www.dyslexia.com](http://www.dyslexia.com). For my son, this approach provided the breakthrough we were praying for. While some of the techniques seemed quite odd to me, they worked for him, and it was after a week of Davis Program methods that I first caught him reading without being forced to do so. Having studied this further, I now believe that his way of seeing the world is a gift, and some of the greatest engineers and inventors were probably this sort of “true” dyslexic.

Late reading is not the great disaster that it might seem. Although the education establishment has made reading a god (because without reading one can't take standardized tests), we need not follow that disordered thinking. There's no reading test at the gates of heaven, and many successful people—even those who've gone on to get doctoral degrees—didn't read until in their teens. As parents we desperately want to help our children overcome obstacles to learning to read and write, and I hope I've offered a few thoughts on the different places to look for that help. But above all, we must keep things in perspective: God made our children the way they are, blessings are often hidden inside challenges, and with His guidance we can help them find help for the symptoms of dyslexia without falling into extreme frustration or despair.

**This article first appeared in IEW's June 2011 e-Newsletter.**

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