

# Understanding Dyslexia:

## Advice for Parents



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**Education**

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OIDEACHAIS  
AGUS EOLAÍOCHTA | DEPARTMENT OF  
EDUCATION  
AND SCIENCE

## INTRODUCTION

This booklet contains some advice for parents of pupils with dyslexia. The ten sections listed in the table of contents have been taken from the DVD/CD-Rom, **Understanding Dyslexia: A Guide for Teachers** which is a joint initiative of the Departments of Education in Ireland, North and South. Copies of this booklet can be printed free of cost directly from the DVD/CD-Rom in accordance with the copyright. More information and strategies are available on the DVD/CD-Rom

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## **GENERAL ADVICE FOR PARENTS**

1. Accept your child's learning difference. Accept that your child is not deliberately not learning. Almost all children, and in particular young children, desperately want to learn and want to please you and their teachers.
2. Do not feel guilty. Do not blame yourself or anyone else. Do not blame your child or the teachers. Trying to apportion blame is a normal reaction but will not help anyone.
3. Talk honestly and be open with your child. Be gentle and be tactful, but don't pretend that you don't know that school is difficult. Reassure your child that she or he can talk to you and that you will listen and help them however you can.
4. Discuss the learning differences with your child. Whether or not you use the word dyslexia with your child is up to you. Some children may be confused by it, but others may find it therapeutic as it gives a name to the reason they are finding some aspects of learning problematic. Children should never be ashamed of who they are.
5. Make home a safe haven and a refuge for your child. Don't always greet your child with questions about school. Remember many children feel a lot of stress and anxiety during school and need to relax when they arrive home.
6. Inform yourself about the learning difficulty. Read books, go to lectures, and talk to informed professionals and ask questions.
7. Keep a master file of your child's development with reports, schoolwork and personal observations. Bring this with you to any assessment session or meeting when plans for your child are being discussed.
8. Support your child's school and work with the staff. No one is trying not to teach your child. Regrettably, many professionals just do not know how to help. You can help by providing information about your child and how he or she learns.
9. Help your child to be organised. Establish patterns and routines in the home. Be specific with instructions and explanations. Make lists of jobs and chores that must be done. Gently insist that things are done and not forgotten. Expect lapses of memory and the need for frequent reminders. Arrange a specific place to always keep the schoolbag and set a time each evening to organise the bag for the next day.

10. Provide alternative learning opportunities. School is not the only place where children can learn. Take them to places like museums, galleries and exhibitions. Encourage them to watch educational television programmes by watching with them and discussing informally what you learn afterwards. Share your knowledge and opinions with them and let them do the same.
11. Read to your child from books that are appropriate to their age group but which they may not be able to read or enjoy reading by themselves. Ask your child's teacher and local librarian as well as the child about what books would be of interest. Take note of what their friends are reading.
12. Ensure your child is receiving appropriate help and support in and out of school. Visit and talk to your school regularly and monitor what the school is providing. Be aware of the kinds of provision that are available.
13. Reinforce learned skills. Ask the professionals working with your child about what you could do at home to help.
14. Don't overprotect your child. Give responsibilities appropriate for age. Provide guidance and advice, but let them make their own decisions. Help your child develop decision-making and problem-solving skills. Look for opportunities to offer him/her choices to allow him/her to practice decision-making skills.
15. A variety of skills including decision-thinking and problem-solving as well as turn-taking and general social skills can be promoted through playing board games and interactive games with the family.
16. Encourage a work ethic. Emphasise the positive aspects of your child's behaviour or performance, even if the task was not completely successful. Reward direction, not perfection.
17. Help your child develop good social skills by modelling appropriate behaviour that they can imitate. Respect them as individuals.
18. Monitor your child's physical and mental health. Have hearing and sight checked regularly. Be aware of the importance of adequate sleep and a balanced diet to facilitate learning.

## **SELF-ESTEEM**

A reciprocal relationship exists between self-esteem and skill development. As self-esteem improves, academic skills will increase. And as academic skills increase, self-esteem will improve. The caring and concerned parent must accept that positive self-esteem is both a prerequisite and a consequence of academic success.

Self-esteem can be defined as the belief that a person is accepted, connected, unique, powerful, and capable. Self-esteem issues take on a particular significance for pupils with dyslexia because self-assessment of this concept requires the ability to evaluate and compare. As these are skills that are extraordinarily challenging for pupils with special needs, they are often unable to accurately measure their own self-esteem.

Because self-esteem is a feeling, it can be measured by observing the way in which a person acts or behaves. Parents must become keen and insightful observers of their children in order to assess their self-esteem.

Pupils with **high self-esteem** will:

- Feel capable of influencing another's opinions or behaviours in a positive way.
- Be able to communicate feelings and emotions in a variety of situations.
- Approach new situations in a positive and confident manner.
- Exhibit a high level of frustration tolerance.
- Accept responsibility.
- Keep situations (positive and negative) in proper perspective.
- Communicate positive feelings about themselves.
- Possess an internal locus of control (belief that whatever happens to them is primarily the result of their own behaviour and actions).

Conversely, pupils with **low self-esteem** will:

- Consistently communicate self-derogatory statements.
- Exhibit learned helplessness.
- Not volunteer.
- Practice perfectionism.
- Be overly dependent.
- Demonstrate an excessive need for acceptance: a great desire to please authority figures.
- Have difficulty making decisions.
- Exhibit low frustration tolerance.
- Become easily defensive

- Have little faith in their judgment and be highly vulnerable to peer pressure.

### **Developing and Maintaining Self-Esteem**

Remember that success should be measured against self and not others. Never make comparisons with brothers and sisters, neighbours or friends. While academic success is important, it is not the same thing as life success or even happiness.

Self-esteem means self-confidence, self-respect and self-worth. Develop self-esteem by giving genuine praise whenever possible. Promote activities that will yield success. Encourage your child to partake in social, sport and recreational activities that are available locally. Be aware that you should always speak privately and confidentially to the activity leader/organiser about your child's learning difficulty. Reading and writing skills are too often assumed by everyone.

1. Value your child as an individual with unique strengths, needs, interests and skills. Focus on your child's strengths. Emphasise and celebrate whatever he or she can do well.
2. Remember that your sincere interest can be more effective and meaningful than your praise. Demonstrate a genuine interest in your child's activities and pastimes.
3. Establish realistic, achievable goals for your child. Anticipate success.
4. When discussing an issue or a problem, avoid bringing up past difficulties.
5. Understand and show your child that mistakes are an inevitable and valuable part of any learning experience. This can provide opportunities to teach and assist.
6. Divide large tasks into smaller, manageable ones. This will ensure a greater chance of success, mastery, and retention.
7. Maintain a file of his/her academic work. Use this to demonstrate her/his progress and development when your child is feeling down.
8. Encourage him/her to maintain "collections" (e.g., football cards, stamps, rocks, etc.). This allows your child to be the resident expert on a topic.
9. If he or she does not enjoy team sports, promote individual sports (e.g., swimming, gymnastics, and golf). This will provide opportunities for success, exercise, and peer interaction.

10. Communicate your confidence in the child and in their future.
  
11. Permit and encourage the child to follow the normal fads of his/her peer group (e.g., clothing, music). This will enhance his or her acceptance at school and in the local community.
  
12. Anticipate that your child will have plateaus, failures, backslides, setbacks, and regressions. Support and encourage him/her at these times. Children need love most when they deserve it least!
  
13. Never, ever, communicate disappointment to your child. The disappointment of an adult may be too great a burden for a child to carry.

**Remember:**

- Your child's self-esteem will be determined by the conditional acceptance that she/he receives from others - and the unconditional acceptance that she/he receives from you

and

- Your child's self-esteem will be determined by success and progress in four areas:
  - Social (acceptance, friendships)
  - Competence (in a skill area)
  - Physical (clothing, attractiveness)
  - Character (effort, generosity, etc.)

Emphasise, recognise and reinforce all four areas!

## **HELPING WITH ORAL LANGUAGE**

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 also contribute to learning 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 heard around the house 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 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 cannot 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.
- b. 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.

- c. 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.
- d. When the child is feeling confident and wants to read aloud on his or her own, he or she should give the signal.
- e. 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.
- f. 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 of which 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.

## **HELPING YOUR CHILD AT HOME**

### **1. Helping with Homework**

#### **Establish a Daily Routine at Home.**

- Homework should be done at the same time and in the same place.
- Make a timetable with your child.
- Decide together when homework will start and how long your child will work until taking the first break.
- Keep work periods as short as is necessary.
- Breaks should be short but frequent.

#### **Provide a Quiet, Warm, Well-lit, Comfortable Place for Your Child to Work.**

- Use a table or a desk rather than on the floor or a bed.

#### **Find Out What Exactly is to be Done**

- Check with your child beforehand on what exactly is to be done and how it is to be presented. This can eliminate a lot of later frustration. Ensure that your child has a journal or notebook in which to record homework.

#### **Supervision and Help**

- If necessary, sit with your child to keep her/him working and to provide help as needed.
- Be there when your child needs your help. Make it easy to ask for help.

- If your child can work on his or her own, you should still try to stay nearby. For example, he or she might work at the kitchen table while you are ironing or preparing dinner or reading the newspaper.

### **Control the Amount of Time and Energy Spent on Each Activity**

- Be aware of the amount of time and energy spent on each activity
- Ask the teacher how long it should take to do the homework and tell the teacher how long it actually takes.
- Discuss with the teacher if you feel that too much time was spent on any one task, or you feel it was too hard for your child;
- Negotiate the length and amount of homework with the teacher by suggesting things such as learning five spellings rather than ten or allowing the child to just write the answers and without having to copy out the questions.
- Try to negotiate a compromise so that your child can get all the homework done within a reasonable time for her/his age and class.

## **2. Working with Your Child**

While it is not advised that parents teach their children, parents have a role to play in supporting their child's learning and can be of great assistance in practising and reinforcing what has been taught at school.

- Talk regularly with the class teacher and any specialist teachers on what you could do and how to do it. This may simply be playing a game together, reading together, reviewing some word cards or doing a page of a workbook.
- Talk to your child about working together. It will not work if the child is unwilling to work with you. Suggest trying it even for as little as five minutes daily. If you can keep it enjoyable for both of you, it will work. Do not try to work with your child, if your child is unwilling to do so. This activity should not cause arguments or tears. If it does, don't do it.
- Set aside specific times during the day to work with your child. Let these times be for you and your child alone. Find a time and place when and where you will not be disturbed.

- Start with short work periods and gradually increase them if it is going well. A good rule is to stop when your child is at the peak of success. Don't push to the point of failure.
- Be as objective and as patient as you can. Speak to your child in a quiet and firm voice. Make commands or directions short and simple.
- If a task is too difficult for your child, move on to something easier. Then go back to the first task after changing it so that your child can succeed. Never introduce a task by saying or implying that it is easy.
- When your child is capable of doing a task, gently insist that he or she finish it.
- Be aware of your child's abilities as well as his or her weaknesses. Don't continue using activities that are too easy for your child. There should be some challenge to hold your child's attention.
- Praise your child for even the smallest success. Don't emphasise failure.
- Really listen to your child. He or she can often tell you the best ways to help.
- Relax with your child. Both of you should enjoy your time together.

## **USING ICT AT HOME**

As a parent, you may be interested in how information and communications technology (ICT), such as a computer, can be used to support your child both at school and at home. Perhaps you or your child has access to a computer after school hours, or perhaps you are considering buying ICT for home use? If so, you may be overwhelmed by the amount of products available and find it difficult to know what type of hardware and software would be most appropriate to use with your child. Below you will find some tips to help you get started.

1. Find out from your child's teacher how ICT is being used, or how it might be used, to support your child in the classroom. Ask the teacher if there is anything you can do at home to complement this work (you don't always have to have a computer at home to support work being done on the computer in school).

2. If your child is given some technology by the school for home use, do your best to ensure that it is used appropriately and kept in good condition. Report any technical problems or difficulties to your child's teacher as soon as possible so that the use of ICT at home does not become a barrier to your child's achievement, rather than being of help.
3. Take an interest in what your child is doing in relation to ICT. Ask your child to demonstrate to you how ICT works and what programs they are using.
4. Keep computers in a family room where you can keep an eye on what the child is doing, especially if the computer can be connected to the Internet. There is lots of information available for parents on Internet safety. See, for example, the Internet safety section of the NCTE website.
5. If you are considering purchasing ICT for home use, explore ways in which it might be used to support the needs of your child together with your child's teacher. Ask your child's teacher about specific tasks that you could do with your child at home using ICT (e.g., letter recognition, word recognition, reading comprehension), as these might influence your purchase.
6. Ask your child's teacher to identify what hardware and software or websites, if any, are being used with your child at school and determine if it would also be appropriate for you to use something similar at home to reinforce learning. If your child has frequent access to a computer or similar technology at school (e.g., laptop equipped with talking word processing software or word prediction software), you may find it beneficial for your child to use the same tools at home to complete homework. If the tools are portable, discuss with the teacher the possibility of also using them at home.
7. You may also want to consider using different software programs / websites at home than what is used at school to provide sufficient stimulation as your child may become bored using the same software time and time again. Your child's teacher may be able to suggest some easy-to-use software programs or web resources that are geared towards home use which reinforce skills/concepts with which your child needs assistance. In addition, some websites, such as the Parents Information Network (PIN), provide evaluations of software and websites that are suitable for use at home.
8. If you are in a position to purchase a computer but don't know anything about the technology, try to get some technical help and advice from someone in the know, other than the salespeople.

9. Bear in mind that the right technology in one setting may be entirely wrong in another. Different types of learning take place at school than at home so it is not always a good idea to try to replicate the classroom at home. As students with dyslexia can sometimes feel stressed and overwhelmed during the school day, home learning should be more relaxed and ICT use at home should be both enjoyable and motivating. Some software programs that may not seem to have any educational value (e.g., some computer games) can offer your child an opportunity to work on problem-solving skills, memorisation and collaboration. They can also offer opportunities for increasing self-esteem and building confidence.

## **THE MOVE TO POST-PRIMARY**

Moving from primary school to post-primary can be problematic for all pupils.

One important aspect will be the size of the school – the number of pupils in the school, the number of staff, the number of subjects, the physical size of the school.

Never again will your child have the close one-to-one relationship she/he had with the class teacher in primary school.

The post-primary school will provide initial support to all pupils in adjusting to life at post-primary, but it will also expect your child to show an increasing degree of independence and self-responsibility.

No one in a post-primary school will know all of the pupils. Find out who has the main responsibility for your child. It may well be a few weeks before even this person knows your child. Unfortunately, teachers get to know the good, the bad and the delinquent quicker. If you have a quiet, well-behaved child, despite a learning difficulty they may go unnoticed longer.

### **Before Entry:**

1. Ask for an appointment at least six months before entry.
2. Before going in, photocopy all relevant information. A summary of the main points of the psychological assessment would be useful as well as the assessment itself.

3. Sit down with your child and brainstorm a list of his/her strengths and weaknesses, interests and difficulties.
4. List what types of support would help. Be prepared for the fact that dyslexia may affect the child in different ways at post-primary.
5. If your child has been given extra provision or support at primary level, you need to speak to the post-primary school about the continuity of this help.
6. Generate a list of questions of things you and your child want to know about the school. Some areas of interest to you will be:
  - a. What is the school's policy on SEN (Special Educational Needs) including dyslexia?
  - b. What option subjects are available? Will the school prioritise according to need?
  - c. Is it necessary to take a second or third language as an option?
  - d. Is there a good range of practical subjects available?
  - e. Is there access for all pupils to a guidance counsellor?
  - f. What extra provision or support will be available for your child? How will it be organised?
  - g. Mainstream support; how aware are the subject teachers of dyslexia and inclusion issues? Has the school staff had in-service training on the topic? If not, would it possible to consider having one?
  - h. Is there access for all pupils to pastoral care?
  - i. Extra curricular activities; what is available?
  - j. If streaming or setting is used in the school to organise teaching groups, how is this done? Is it by past achievement, general ability, potential? Timed written achievement tests can militate against pupils with dyslexia. Is there help available at entrance assessment?
  - k. If the child has very good maths ability and weaker verbal skills, will it be possible to do higher level maths?
  - l. If the pupil has difficulty in taking legible and complete notes in class, could photocopies be made available?
  - m. Does the school provide any alternative curricular programmes?
7. During the interview, ask your questions and offer the photocopied information to the school.
8. Express your willingness to work with the school and to take a role in the development and implementation of an individual learning plan for your child.

9. Suggest that the school have a look at the file and then arrange a second meeting to discuss the development of an individualised plan to address your child's needs.

### **After Entry:**

1. Ensure continuity - be persistent – talk to all teachers every September. Supply them with the written summary of the assessment. Negotiate with individual teachers as necessary.
2. Maintain contact with the school – meet the teachers individually if necessary or with a school representative co-ordinating special needs (e.g. SENCO, resource or learning support teacher) and ensure every teacher is aware of your child's dyslexia and any special educational needs.
3. Every time your child changes a teacher – you need to approach him/her and ensure that they are aware.
4. Discuss with the school whether special arrangements or reasonable accommodation in state exams are appropriate for your child. If such help is appropriate, can it be provided in house exams from first year?
5. Is it acceptable for the pupil to use a word processor for homework or class work? Is there training in keyboarding skills available? If not, arrange it yourself.

### **SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD AT POST-PRIMARY**

1. Your child may need help in organising and planning homework, revision schedules, filing of notes, timetables, etc.
2. Your child may need training in the use of the homework journal both for remembering to do homework and packing the bag at night for the next day might be necessary.
3. Revision handbooks are available for examination courses from school supply shops. Many condense courses into key points. These can help the pupil who has difficulty in reading and understanding the main text to make his/her own notes.

4. For the pupil who has difficulty writing answers at sufficient length, parents might discuss a plan or mind map.
5. Self-esteem is so important that parents should continue to foster its development through extra curricular activities, community activities or familial and friend relationships.

## **COPING WITH CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR**

Many factors influence children's behaviour. Some children present behaviour problems at the time of school entry. However, many children do not develop behaviour disorders until after they enter school, and for these children, one must consider the possibility that the school experience is a primary factor in the origin of their difficulty.

For many children, success or failure at school equals success or failure as a person. Success at school is of fundamental importance for healthy development and post-school opportunity. Many studies suggest that children with reading and other learning difficulties may be more than usually vulnerable to emotional and behavioural problems. Links have been reported with a wide range of difficulties including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, dysfunctional attributions, poor achievement motivation, inattentiveness and over-activity, disruptive behaviour problems, aggression and delinquency.

**DO** establish reward systems to reinforce and recognise appropriate behaviour. Be willing to recognise and reinforce even the smallest signs of good behaviour.

**DO** encourage all members of the family to assist in the creation of a support system for the child. Siblings play a particularly important role in such a system. Create a non-competitive home environment where the child learns to celebrate his/her own small victories. The child must learn to view progress in relation to their own previous performance, not the performance of others.

**DO** provide the child with choices whenever possible. (e.g., "I want you to clean your room now. Do you want to pick up your toys or make your bed first?") This approach fosters independence and problem solving skills. It also increases the child's ownership of the task or activity.

**DO** provide the child with a positive model of appropriate social skills. Be certain that your behaviour mirrors the skills that you are teaching your child. (e.g., temper control, courteous listening).

**DON'T** place the child in highly-charged competitive situations. These are often a source of great anxiety and failure for pupils with learning problems. Focus on participation, enjoyment, contribution and skill development in competitive activities, not on winning or losing.

**DON'T** assume that the child understood your oral directions or instructions because he did not ask any questions. Ask her/him to repeat the instructions in her/his own words before beginning the activity.

**DON'T** view praise as the only verbal reinforcer - interest works, too! Expressing a genuine and sincere interest in a child can be as positive and motivating as praise. (e.g. "I watched you playing football. Do you play at home with your brothers?")

**DON'T** encourage the frustrated child to relieve stress via pointless physical activity (e.g. punching a pillow). Rather, teach him/her to relieve stress through an activity which has definable and observable goals (e.g. shoot some goals, run five laps)

### **What about punishment?**

**DON'T** expect punishment or negative reinforcement to have a meaningful or lasting impact upon your child's behaviour. Punishment may stop specific behaviours in specific settings, but positive reinforcement is the only effective strategy for meaningful and lasting changes in behaviour.

Overuse of punishment usually doesn't work because:

- it does not teach appropriate behaviour- the child merely learns what he/she should not do;
- the child often becomes passive in the face of punishment and merely avoids situations rather than learning how to behave
- the child may develop a concurrent set of inappropriate behaviours, such as lying, cheating, or blaming others, in order to avoid punishment;
- the child may adapt to punishment, which will require you to intensify the level and severity of the punishments.

**DO** use punishment only for behaviours that are intolerable, dangerous to the child or others and seemingly unaffected by a well-planned positive discipline approach. Let your child know it is the behaviour you don't approve of, not them. Remember punishment for something that a child cannot do is different from punishment for something a child knows is wrong.

- Punishment should be applied immediately following the offending behaviour and should be consistently applied.

- Fair warning should always be given (e.g., "If you do that again at the table, you will not be allowed to play.")
- Avoid giving a great deal of attention to the child when applying the punishment and tell them briefly why they are being punished.
- Avoid numerous threats.
- Never take away something that you had previously given or promised as a reinforcer for positive behaviour.
- Literacy activities like extra reading or writing are NEVER appropriate punishments.