

## **Dyslexia: A Biblical Guide For Christian Parents**

### **WHAT IS DYSLEXIA?**

I would like to say that I am not a person in a professional capacity, but I am a Mother who had a very bright son, with an above average IQ with this problem, and I sought not only professional help, but looked for ways to improve his difficulties through self help, reading, joining groups and listening to visiting Specialist people from overseas at the University. I was able to put so much valuable information to work in my own home, and improved my son's learning dramatically. At 36yrs old, he is working in Computers and he has travelled the world, both for business and for pleasure. However, there were times when we wondered if we would ever rear him.

The British Dyslexic Association, says: "Dyslexia is best described as a combination of abilities and difficulties that affect the learning process in one or more of reading, spelling and writing. Accompanying weaknesses may be identified in areas of speed of processing, short term memory, sequencing and organization, auditory and/or visual perception, spoken language and motor skills. It is particularly related to mastering and using written language, which may include alphabetic, numeric and musical notation." Dyslexia is a different way of thinking that may affect one in every 10 New Zealanders - based on international statistics, there maybe over 70,000 New Zealand school children who are Dyslexic and up to 10% of New Zealand adults - this maybe more than 400,000 individual New Zealanders whose lives are affected to varying degrees by their Dyslexic thinking.

### **CAUSES OF DYSLEXIA:**

There are different theories about what causes Dyslexia and how best to provide support for Dyslexic individuals. Many Dyslexics find that it is a family thing, and they may have a brother, sister, parent or grandparent, who has the problem. However, no matter what the cause, the difficulties for Dyslexic children in the education sector and for Dyslexic adults in the wider community are evident. Many Dyslexic learners are at a disadvantage in our 'mainstream' education system as the classroom environment and teaching strategies are not designed to support learning that suits their way of thinking and learning. In addition, each child's problems may be vastly different. And in the wider community, Dyslexic adults continue to be challenged by the lack of understanding for their way of perceiving and viewing the world. Many courses, programmes and methods are now available to assist Dyslexic individuals. It is important to seek a range of information and opinions about what type of programme would suit you, your family, budget and time.

The brain is wired differently, with the more creative parts being used. It was explained to me by a Neurosurgeon, that the other side of the brain is more dominant in Dyslexics. We are either "right brained", or "left brained", and Dyslexics learn to read and write with the other side of the brain to "normal". Many Dyslexic children are like our son, ADHD as well.

### **WHAT DYSLEXIA IS NOT:**

Dyslexia is not a disease or an illness. Dyslexia is not caused by brain or nerve damage, eye or inner ear defects. Being Dyslexic does not mean that you or your child should be labeled as ‘slow to learn, not trying hard enough, suffering from learned helplessness’. Children can be devastated by such terms, and this leads to severe low self esteem that builds up over the years of struggling. “Stupid”, “Lazy” and “Dumb”, were often expressions we had to deal with.

### **WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES OF DYSLEXIA?**

When a young Dyslexic child starts school full of curiosity, their journey into a world that does not understand their way of thinking.....begins. Many teachers and schools have not been trained to recognize Dyslexia in their students, and they are not resourced or equipped to provide specific learning opportunities that best suit Dyslexic learners. The resulting self doubt, frustration and despair often leads to predictable and counterproductive behaviours and coping strategies. Examples include inattention, day-dreaming, becoming ‘invisible’ or the ‘classroom clown’, to name a few. The good news is that Dyslexic children, and adults can overcome the challenge of learning in a world of ‘words’. Firstly, and most importantly, there needs to be recognition and celebration for their alternative way of thinking by both Dyslexics and non-Dyslexics.

### **WHAT ARE THE UPSIDES OF DYSLEXIA?**

The upside of Dyslexia is the ability to perceive the world from many perspectives; to view the same thing from many different angles allowing special talents and skills in fields such as art and creativity, design, engineering and leadership.

### **SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR IN YOUNG CHILDREN:**

All parents of children are automatically testing their children every day. It is only natural for parents to be comparing their child with others in their own family and with the children of relatives and friends. The parents will be the first to notice there are differences – especially if something begins to show up before the child goes to school. Once at school it may be the other way around. The teacher may be the first to notice something and report to the parents, that there is a possible problem.

The first and easiest step in this process of ‘testing’ is to record your natural everyday observations of your child’s behaviour and interactions with you and other children and adults. If your child is too young to go to school, there are still signs you may have been able to pick out, that will alert you to the fact that he may have some difficulties when he goes to school. Here are a few characteristics that are compiled for parents by the Dyslexic Association. Of course all of these children will show some of these signs some of the time – what is interesting to note is if any of these behaviours start to become consistent and persistent.

- Speaking clearly later than expected
- Jumbled phrases, eg ‘cobbler’s club’ for ‘toddler’s club’, ‘teddy dare’ for ‘teddy bear’.
- A quick thinker and a quick doer.
- Use of substitute words or ‘near misses’.
- Mislabelling, eg lampshade for lamp post.

- A lisp – ‘duckth’ for ‘ducks’.
- Inability to remember the label for known objects, eg colours.
- Confused directional words, eg ‘up/down’ or ‘in/out’.
- Excessive tripping, bumping into things and falling over nothing.
- Enhanced creativity – often good at drawing, good sense of colour.
- Obvious good and bad days for no apparent reason.
- Aptitude for constructional or technical toys, eg bricks, puzzles, Lego Blocks, remote control for TV and video, computer keyboards.
- Enjoys being read to but shows no interest in letters or words.
- Difficulty learning nursery rhymes.
- Difficulty with rhyming words, eg ‘Cat. Mat. Fat’.
- Difficulty with odd-one-out, eg. “cat, mat, pig, fat”.
- Did not crawl – was a ‘bottom shuffler’.
- Difficulty with ‘sequence’, eg coloured bead sequence.
- Appears ‘bright’ – seems an enigma
- Mixed laterality – no preference for left or right.
- Inability to follow a sequence of instructions.
- Does not pay attention.
- Cannot sit still.
- Disturbs others.
- Becomes irritable and shows frustration easily.
- Stubborn.
- Does not finish work.
- Immature for age.
- Acts out ideas rather than using words.

As each form of Dyslexia is different, no common recommendations can be made, and each child’s needs must be assessed individually.

### **WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT THAT YOUR CHILD HAS DYSLEXIA.**

The very first thing I did was to get down on my hands and knees and pray for my son, and ask for His help and guidance in his learning and life process. I have experienced amazing miracles through prayer, and parents should never underestimate the power of prayer. I joined all the related groups that I could, and went to classes to learn how to help my child. I learnt about chemicals in his diet. I learnt about his poor co-ordination, and with help of professionals, we started the very first class for in-cordinated children in New Zealand. Although I leant on people with professional skills, I was a quick learner, and soon learnt how to help my son myself. I read with him day and night, and chose exciting books, to give him a love of reading – we wrote stories together and we did projects together, and most of all, I taught him phonics and how to sound words out, and thus he learned to read and write, as well as having a special tutor. I also taught him to learn his Times Tables thru rote learning, and tactile methods. **Don’t ever underestimate the power of prayer, or the love of a good Mother.**

If you suspect that your child has a specific learning difficulty, arrange to speak to his teacher. Make a time when you can speak in private. Find out how your child behaves at school, and how he compares with his peers. Ask your child's teacher, if they feel that an evaluation of your child's problem is needed. This takes professionally skilled people, who can work in together to find out what can be done to help. An Educational Psychologist is a good place to start. Maybe your child still has speech problems, and requires a Speech Therapist, or co-ordinative difficulties requiring a Physiotherapist or Occupational Therapist. In children with handwriting difficulties an Occupational Therapist's assessment is usually needed. Some children are very clumsy. There are also social skills groups and parent support groups, who will be able to give you information all about alternative school options if necessary. You may be able to find out about such places through your child's teacher, or your family doctor, or another way to find your local learning disabilities clinic, is to phone the nearest children's hospital, or your Citizens Advice Bureau. It is best if both parents can attend the assessment. This enables both of them to give their views about the child, and to hear the results and recommendations firsthand.

The Psychologist for learning disabled children, will test your child's intelligence, and test other special abilities. The commonest test here in NZ is the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC), and the tests are grouped together to give a 'verbal score', which is a measure of the child's ability in language related tasks, and a 'performance' score which is related to visual and manual tasks. A comparison of these scores will show if a child is having particular difficulties in one of these areas. Our son had an above average intelligence, but couldn't read or write, and was so unable to cope, he was running away from school and home. If your child does this, then please don't despair!

#### **HOW PARENTS CAN HELP:**

Parents of a child with Dyslexia often feel great anxiety about their child. They worry about how their child will cope at school, both academically and socially. They worry about how he will manage if teased, and if made to feel inadequate. They are concerned about his future, and how will he cope when he is a teenager, and whether he will get a job or be able to cope in life. When he gets home from school, they are sensitive to his feelings, saddened by his disappointments, and made anxious about his concerns.

Parents often feel guilty about their child's difficulties, wrongly imagining that they are somehow to blame. They may feel angry much of the time too; angry with teachers who fail to understand their child's problems, and angry with doctors who cannot explain their child's difficulties. They may feel other emotions as well. They may be embarrassed by their child's difficulties, hurt by other people's insensitive remarks, and overwhelmed by the task of teaching their child to overcome his problems.

#### **SIBLINGS' NEEDS:**

Parents will be aware of the special pressures their other children may face. Siblings need to understand that their brother or sister is not being lazy or naughty when he or she has difficulties with learning. They need to feel that they are not being discriminated

against when their parents need to spend more time helping their brother or sister. This can often lead to resentment in siblings and parents.

### **BUILDING UP YOUR CHILD'S SELF-ESTEEM.**

Children compare themselves with their peers from an early age. Children with learning difficulties soon realize that they face hurdles that other children do not. Parents can play an important role in building up their child's self esteem. Parents need to encourage their child to enter the cycle of success. The development of self-esteem has important implications for the child's future. Encourage your child to set realistic goals so that he can experience success. If your child is going to attempt something that is too difficult for him, guide him to a more suitable activity in a tactful way. Your child needs special time with you to feel loved. Children need to feel they belong to something. It may be a hobby group, a sport or even Sunday School. Encourage him to feel proud of his school, his neighbourhood etc. Children need to feel they have the power to make some of the choices that affect their lives. Whenever possible, let him select things for himself, such as which clothes he wears, in what order he does things. Admire his choices and praise him for his self sufficiency. Another way of increasing your child's self esteem is by enriching his experiences. Take him on excursions, teach him to do new things like gardening, fishing or make a photo album with pictures of himself – all these things increase self worth. Give him opportunities to make him more self reliant, e.g. to be responsible for some household task, answer the telephone etc. Give him a 'rest' day from school occasionally, on his own, and do something special and build self esteem.

### **TELL YOUR CHILD ABOUT HIS LEARNING DIFFICULTY:**

It's a good idea to talk to your child about his specific learning difficulty at an early stage. After our son had an assessment at a local children's hospital, he asked us at 7 years old if he had brain damage, and we were pleased to tell him that he certainly did not, but that his brain was wired in a different way, and that we were going to help him. Don't wait until he becomes confused and discouraged. Explain that different people are talented in different ways. Tell him that some things are difficult for you too. Then explain about the things that are very difficult for him too, even when he tries hard. You can possibly tell him stories of famous people with Dyslexia like Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein, or Thomas Edison. You might be able to find their biographies in the local library.

### **PARENTS AS TEACHERS:**

Parents have an important role in helping their child to learn. They teach by example, often without realizing it. For a child with a specific learning difficulty, the parent's role as teacher becomes even more important. No other teacher can spend as much one-to-one time with a child as a parent. No other teacher has the opportunity to extend what the child has learned in so many different situations. Put some thought into how you can become a good teacher. Try not to overdo it. Short daily sessions work better than long sessions. Attempt small units of work at a time. Choose a time when you are both feeling calm. Don't try to have a teaching session with TV on where there is background noise, or when other siblings are around. Try to make these sessions enjoyable. I used

to help my son in the mornings before school, and arranged my whole day around this process, which paid dividends in the long run.

Some parents do not have the time, or the ability to teach their child. If this is the case, then best to find a teacher or coach to help your child after school. Its important they have the skills and the temperament to do this well.

**Work in with the school, and use all the organizations that you can.**

**If all of this fails, then go to the library, and get a good book on Dyslexia, and start reading it, with a view to helping your own child. Remember to pray about it first.**

### **TEACHING A CHILD WITH A SPECIFIC READING DIFFICULTY TO READ:**

The first step in teaching a child with a specific reading difficulty to read is to recognize that he has a special problem. A study in New Zealand shows that children who were identified as having specific reading difficulties improved dramatically once they received appropriate help. These children gained an average of nearly two years of reading progress over a one-year period, compared with six months progress per year before this. Ideally each child should be individually assessed in conjunction with the child's teacher, and this assessment team should plan a method that suits the child best.

Most children who have difficulties have great trouble with phonological skills – they are unable to pick up these skills with the same natural ease as other children. The “Look and say” and language experience methods in most schools, are not appropriate for children in whom such skills are lacking. A carefully structured phonetic scheme works best, that teach sounds first, and work up to chunks of words. They emphasize the need to revise continually what the child has learned to compensate for the poor retention of many children with specific reading difficulties. I found this quite a job at home as a Mother, and it took a whole year to learn phonics properly and phonic blends, such as sl, bl cr, dr, etc, and blends on the ends of words such as ck, st, at etc. If you go to a good book store, you will be able to find a good book, to go right through the exercises. I was able to go thru these exercises daily, and use ticks and stars, and much needed praise for the work done correctly. This in itself builds self esteem. The child will see that he is achieving quickly.

Parents can play a major role in starting their child's first reading programme. Discuss this with your child's teacher, so that you best know how to help your child, and perhaps you can provide practice that is consistent with the programme at school. Here are a few tips that I learned teaching my son to read through trial and error:

- Choose a time for reading practice when you are both in a good frame of mind. If you try to do this when he is hungry tired or irritable, it wont work. Also try to do this so that other members of the family don't disturb you.
- Choose a book that is within his capability to read, and one that has clear print. Many of these children like my son, had “jumpy eye tracking”, and his eyes would jump down several lines. This was a difficult problem, and he was about 10 when he recovered from this. We took him to a developmental optomotrist,

who gave him exercises. Chose a book that your child would like to read.....an exciting book. As for advice at the local library.

- Make sure the child is comfortable and there is good lighting. It's usually best if the child sits at the table, with you on his right hand side (unless you are left handed).
- Start by looking at the cover of the book and discuss what the book may be about for a short while, then open it and let the child read.
- Encourage your child to follow the words with his finger, or with a pencil placed horizontally below the line he is reading. Later he can dispense with these aids.
- Sometimes it's a good idea to share the reading – you and the child reading alternate pages. This is good for the child's self esteem as he feels under less pressure, and helps you cover more of the story in a long book. The child will learn from following the print while you read your section.

Paired reading is another technique – where you and your child read aloud in unison. You should follow the text with your finger and take care not to read too quickly, so that your child does not have difficulty keeping up.

- Do not try to cover too much, particularly in the early sessions. At first a five minute session is enough; this can be increased to 10 or 15 minutes. Cut a session short if your child seems to be tiring. Aim for daily sessions.
- If your child misreads a word that does not affect the meaning of the text, ignore it. If he misreads a word that affects the meaning of the text wait for a natural break in the text (at the end of a sentence or paragraph), and say something like “Wait a second, that did not quite make sense, did it?” or “What is this word again?” Then encourage him to go back and check the word again. If your child hesitates over a unfamiliar word, wait for a short time to see if he can manage to read it. If he has trouble, you may encourage him to sound it out, but if this does not help, read it clearly and slowly for him. Don't forget to praise him for his efforts.
- If there is an interruption, get your child to re-read from the beginning of the sentence, so that the flow of meaning is restored.
- Do not worry if your child's reading is monotonous. Let him read with as much or as little expression as he wants. When kids are struggling to read, they cant give attention to reading with expression; that comes later.
- At the end of the reading, discuss the book with him. As for his opinion about the story. It may be a good idea to go thru the book page by page and look at the pictures while you talk. Most Dyslexic children have problems with comprehension, so make sure he knows what each page is about. Check at the end of each chapter to make sure he has comprehended the story. Altho' my son learnt to read, his comprehension skills were very poor, and the school kept him back, until he could comprehend with his reading. This is very important for a Dyslexic child.
- Avoid negative comments. Do not make comments like “Look what you're doing”, or “Concentrate, you got it right before”. Do make comments like “Good Reading”, and “You pronounced that difficult word clearly, well done!”

- Keep reading to your child at other times. Do not feel that because he is reading, you should no longer read him stories, or let him listen to story tapes. These will only increase his love of books and stories, particularly since they will be more age-appropriate than those that he can read himself. Anything that encourages enjoyment of literature will be beneficial.
- In older children with reading difficulties, it should be realized that their poor reading may deprive them of exposure to information that other children of their age have access to. This can be compensated for by reading books to the child, that he is not yet able to read to himself.
- You can help your child with his reading by playing games with him, as well as by listening to him read. Games like “Snap”, and “Snakes and Ladders” can be adapted so that reading is involved. “Snap” cards can be made with words that match corresponding pictures, and “Snakes and Ladders” can be played with cards on which words are written instead of a dice; if the word is read correctly the player moves by the number of letters in the word. It is important that these games are played with a sense of fun.

### **TACTILE LEARNING THROUGH THE SENSES.**

When I was teaching my son phonics, I made a big cardboard sheet and drew large thick letters of the alphabet on it. I brought some glitter to put on each letter (or you can even cut out shapes in the shape of each alphabet letter in sand paper), and I glued them on the board. We painstakingly learnt each letter by sound and phonic blends this way too, so that it would go in through more senses than one – touch, sight, and hearing (by saying the letters or blends out loud). We would say “a” (as in cat,), “d” (as in dog), over and over, while he touched, looked and felt the surface, then moved his two index fingers over the letters...until he learnt them. We went over and over and over his times tables in this way, until he grasped them.

There are other problems that arise with reading and writing difficulties such as Visual Perception deficits – its not a disorder of the eyes, but is due to a problem with the way the brain interprets the messages transmitted from the eyes. He may be v. clumsy and in coordinated. There is Visual Memory deficit, where a child can copy words, but is unable to write from dictation. There are auditory and visual problems, where perhaps a child may count well, but be unable to read letters or numbers. Low muscular tone in the small muscles affects the pencil grip when trying to write. Plastic pencil grips can aid this problem. You can buy them from most bookshops. These types of problems need to be looked at by a Specialist person. I made a small bean bag (as big as a large tennis ball), to throw to him. I put eyes and whiskers on it, to make it look interesting. It was housed in a separate drawstring bag, with a small hole in the side, so the nose and whiskers poked out like a mouse. He loved that ball and it increased his dexterity quickly.

### **SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT:**

Some learning disabled children also suffer from social and emotional problems. This is due to the way that the brain understands social interaction. Many children with specific learning difficulties adjust well to their disability while others may have emotional



difficulties. Children who have difficulties in academic areas and are also clumsy, and particularly accident prone, and are more likely to suffer than children who have difficulty in only one sphere of their lives. Although parents play an important role in this regard, children experience many stresses that lie beyond their parents' control.

Other children, teachers, relatives, and society in general play an important part in determining how a child sees himself and how he copes.

Some children dislike school so much that they avoid going. They may be frightened of failing, or are being teased or ostracized.

If this is happening to your child, speak freely to him about this, and you should also speak to his teacher to see if there are any stresses that can be sorted out. It's important to prevent school avoidance becoming a regular pattern of behavior. Of course there are other things like homework avoidance and TV addiction to be worked through.

Aggressive behavior can happen after one's child has been bullied for long enough, and he may retaliate. Listen carefully to what your child says and put steps into place to stop it. Some children withdraw, and others quit, or get depressed, so communication with your child and believing in him, is the best way to go. Being bullied as a child DOES matter – it affects a child for life and gives feelings of low self worth.

I believe my son is still affected by those awful childhood taunts, even though he is now a successful businessman.

#### **ADULTHOOD:**

**“Although I was happy as a child with my toys in the nursery, I have been happier every year since I became a man. But this interlude of school makes a somber, grey patch upon the chart of my journey”. “My Early Life” by Sir Winston Churchill.**

All children with specific learning difficulties, improve as they grow. In some, the difficulties resolve completely, while others continue to have some degree of difficulty in the areas of learning that are affected. The first step for an adult with persisting difficulties is to accept that he has such difficulties. An adult with these difficulties should tell people close to him about his condition. This avoids embarrassing situations and allows these people to provide appropriate support. People can improve their basic skills throughout their lives if they wish. Computers with spell checks in today's business world, help Dyslexics, so all one needs to say is “I am not a good reader”, or “I am not a good speller”. There are so many ways in which an adult can get around his difficulties. As for careers, many dyslexics are exceptional with their hands, making for wonderful trades persons, or perhaps they may have personal skills and are good with people. If you have to read out loud at the Meeting, practice the reading over and over again, until you can read it fluently, then get up on Sunday morning, and read it with the confidence, that you can do it. My husband has coped a lifetime like this, and exhorted extremely well too. It is harder for a Dyslexic adult to do this, but it can be done with lots of practice and encouragement from the rest of the family. Don't forget, that God knows all about it, and that is the biggest comfort.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

The pattern of difficulties seen in children is now well recognized. Parents can be reassured that their child does not have a serious disease, that the problems are very real

and not imaginary, and that they are due to constitutional factors in the child, and that it is not their fault or the fault of the child. Assessment of the child's difficulties is now far more precise. This makes help in teaching much easier. The greater awareness of the needs of such children has resulted in better provision of specialized teachers and a wider range of support. The future will no doubt bring a greater understanding of why some children learn to read and write with ease, while others struggle to learn. More knowledge will lead to the development of better treatments.

For the present, there are no easy remedies for children with specific learning difficulties. But there is nevertheless, a great deal that can be done to help them. The website for the New Zealand Dyslexia Association is [www.dyslexiafoundation.org.nz](http://www.dyslexiafoundation.org.nz) I encourage you to find out all the information you can if you have a child with this problem, and act on it, so that each child can have the advantage of reaching his full potential.

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PS. In the back of my Bible, there is a tatty piece of yellow paper written some 30 years ago now, but it still carries the same message, by Dr. Jean Ayes of California, a champion of Dyslexics.....

**“MOTHERS of children with problems, carry a TREMENDOUS EMOTIONAL LOAD. Few occupations carry as much, and those that do, carry a different kind.**

**FATHERS of neurologically handicapped children do not escape from the burden, but they carry it differently. Sometimes the weight of the problem seems too much to bear, and the presence or severity of the problem is denied in order to cope. Wise parents recognize the severity of the problem and then they search and search for better answers to a difficult situation”.**