

DYSLEXIA & LEARNING DIFFERENCES BETTER UNDERSTOOD

AN OVERVIEW OF THE MOST COMMONLY OCCURRING SPECIFIC LEARNING DIFFICULTIES, WHAT TO LOOK FOR, UNIQUE STRENGTHS, ROUTES TO IDENTIFICATION, AND SUPPORT STRATEGIES



Foreword

After years of supporting children, teachers and parents, my passion has moulded my philanthropic efforts, bringing all my support services together on one accessible platform: www.ChallengingChallenges.com. This journey doesn't have to be more difficult than it already is and I am here to support you every step of the way.

Learning Differences mostly overlap, and navigating the search for labels—whether it's Dyslexia, mixed with a bit of ADHD, a little Speech and Language Difficulty, and a couple of sensory Autistic traits—can be costly and emotionally draining. However, regardless of the label, there are proven, evidence-based strategies that can help, and with patience, understanding, insight and empathy, every learner can go on to reach their full potential.

So, grab a cup of tea and a folder every Friday, and download and print your FREE Learning Differences mini chapter. We'll explore each type of Learning Difference and equip you with practical, research-backed strategies.

Anxiety, at varying levels, is likely coupled with Learning Challenges and is always of concern. Helping students understand and manage their anxiety is essential in the recipe for success. Should you want to do my short course on Anxiety, it offers a wealth of support strategies, and includes evidence-based CHECKLISTS for ages 4–6, 6–11, 11–16, and 16+: <https://challengingchallenges.com/upcoming-events-and-digital-publications/>

Whilst these checklists cannot diagnose, they are a helpful tool to help identify whether learning challenges might be contributing to a child or teen's anxiety and whether further support or specialist referral is needed. Enjoy!

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Introduction

"I've come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or dehumanized."

Haim. G. Ginnott
(1993) Teacher and Child

Specific learning difficulties (SpLD) is an overarching term for a number of associated learning differences. They affect the way information is learned and processed, and can affect literacy, memory, coordination, and the manipulation of letters and numbers. These differences can appear across all ranges of ability and with varying degrees of severity or significance. They are often hidden (i.e. many pupils with SpLD will look and behave just like their peers and may even demonstrate no immediate learning differences) and a pupil may have more than one co-occurring difference. SpLD are lifelong conditions that can have a significant impact on a person's life.

This booklet contains a brief overview of the most commonly occurring specific learning difficulties. It should be kept in mind that this list is by no means exhaustive and is designed to provide a brief overview only. Further information, training and development are necessary to adequately support individuals with specific learning difficulties and to assist them in achieving their potential.

The profile of individuals with SpLD is affected by a range of factors, including the cluster of learning differences they experience, their ability, background and opportunities. Therefore, an individual should be supported in a way that not only meets the needs of their particular weaknesses, but also develops their strengths and abilities.

Focussing on a label is misleading and can be counter-productive; focussing on the specific needs, talents, desires and aspirations of the individual is likely to lead to far greater success.



DYSLEXIA

‘The trouble was that she (the teacher) gave me too many instructions. By the time I got to where I needed to be I had forgotten all but the last one and that didn’t make any sense on its own. So, I hid.’

Emma, age 11



What it is

The British Dyslexia Association (BDA) Management Board have adopted the definition of dyslexia published in 2009 from Sir Jim Rose’s Report on ‘Identifying and Teaching Children and Young People with Dyslexia and Literacy Difficulties’: It is recommended that this definition is used with the additional paragraph from BDA as shown below:

Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling.

- Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties with phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed.
- Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities.
- It is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points.
- Co-occurring difficulties may be seen in aspects of language, motor co-ordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation, but these are not by themselves, markers of dyslexia.



A new study in 2025, is still in working progress:

<https://acamh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcpp.14123>

A good indication of the severity and persistence of dyslexic difficulties can be gained by examining how the individual responds, or has responded, to well-founded intervention.

In addition to these characteristics, the BDA acknowledges the visual and auditory processing difficulties that some individuals with dyslexia can experience. It points out that dyslexic readers can show a combination of abilities and difficulties that affect the learning process.

What it means

Not all dyslexic children are affected in the same way. Some may have mild problems, whilst others will have more profound difficulties across more than one area. Difficulties can be exacerbated depending on the task and external factors. A dyslexic learner's performance is often variable, as they can have good days and bad days. Their difficulties can include phonological, visual and memory difficulties:

- **Phonological difficulties**

Dyslexic children with phonological difficulties can lack automaticity with sound/letter correspondence, which is needed for decoding and pronouncing words for reading, and encoding for spelling.

- **Memory difficulties**

Dyslexic individuals often have difficulty holding information in their short-term memory and also with retrieving it from their working memory.

- **Visual difficulties**

Dyslexic individuals can often have difficulty with tracking accurately; they may experience glare and fatigue from reading black on white, or difficulty reading certain fonts.

What to look for:

In general, a learner who has a cluster of the following may be dyslexic:

- Difficulty with learning to read and/or write despite intervention;
- Slow speed of processing spoken and/or written language;
- Poor word retrieval;
- Poor concentration/ easily distracted;
- Difficulty learning the days of week and months of the year;
- Difficulty telling the time and with aspects of time, such as yesterday and tomorrow;
- Poor time keeping;
- Poor personal organisation;
- Left/right confusion;
- Employing avoidance tactics, such as sharpening a pencil or looking for books;
- Acts as the class clown.

Written Work:

- A poor standard compared with oral ability;
- Poor pencil grip;
- Poor handwriting, with reversals and badly formed letters;
- Poor presentation and disregard of the margin;
- Messy appearance with many crossings out and spellings attempted several times;
- Persistent reversal confusion, e.g., b/d, p/g, p/q, n/u, m/w;
- Transposed letters, e.g., tired for tried;
- Produces phonetic and bizarre spellings which may not be age appropriate;
- Unusual letter sequencing.



Reading:

- Slow reading progress;
- Difficulty with blending letters together;
- Difficulty with syllable division and identifying beginning, middle and end sounds;
- Difficulty with pronouncing unfamiliar words;
- Difficulty with expression;
- Lack of automaticity, especially when reading aloud;
- Unable to recognise familiar words;
- Omits words, or adds or substitutes words;
- Loses the point in stories;
- Difficulty identifying the main points;
- Difficulty with comprehension.

Strengths:

Dyslexic learners may show strengths in the following areas:

- Creativity;
- The ability to visualise things;
- Practical and problem-solving skills;
- Lateral thinking skills;
- Being able to see the big picture (global thinkers) in terms of strategies and problem solving;
- Good visual-spatial awareness;
- Good verbal communication skills;
- High levels of motivation and persistence.

Routes to identification

- **Checklists:** A simple list of questions that give indicators of dyslexia.
<https://challengingchallenges.com/upcoming-events-and-digital-publications/>
- **Screening tests:** Commercially available tests (paper based or online) that can be administered by a non-specialist, although the tester should be trained and confident to interpret the results appropriately.
<https://challengingchallenges.com/screening-for-splds/>
- **Qualified Specialist Teacher/Assessor Diagnostic Assessment:** The assessor should have a Level 7 Specialist qualification for diagnosing dyslexia (e.g., AMBDA). A battery of tests is conducted to assess intellectual capacity, cognitive development and levels of literacy attainment. A profile of strengths and weakness is produced in a report with recommendations.
<https://challengingchallenges.com/screening-for-splds/>
- **Educational Psychologist Assessment:** The psychologist should be HCPC registered. They select appropriate tests, including closed tests only available to psychologists, to diagnosis any underlying difficulties and they produce a report with conclusions and recommendations.

Prevalence

- Around 1 in 10 of the population are thought to be dyslexic.

