

CLASSROOM ACCOMMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DYSLEXIA

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If you're a parent or a teacher of a child who is struggling with reading and spelling, that child might have dyslexia. (See warning signs of dyslexia in accompanying table.) If you suspect dyslexia, that child needs two things:

1. One-on-one tutoring by a professional trained in the use of an Orton-Gillingham-based reading and spelling system, and
2. Classroom accommodations until his/her reading, writing, and spelling skills reach grade level.

Although classroom accommodations can be obtained formally, through a 504 Plan or an I.E.P., many teachers are willing to implement them at the request of a parent, once they understand the child's strengths and weaknesses.

Good teachers want every student in their class to succeed. But many teachers don't know how to help dyslexic students—who, despite being smart, can't read, write, or spell at grade level.

A teacher who suspects a student's struggles may be due to dyslexia can greatly improve that child's ability to learn by implementing the classroom accommodations described in this article.

I've listed no-or low-cost accommodations for each weak area. These allow students to compensate for, or work around, their weaknesses. But first, let's discuss what an accommodation is—and is not.

WHAT IS AN ACCOMMODATION?

A regular education teacher is responsible for teaching the curriculum to every student in her class—but not every student learns the same way.

For instance, most students can learn by listening to a lecture and taking notes. But due to an inherited brain difference, dyslexic students can't always learn that way. They often have trouble processing rapidly-presented auditory information. Many also have difficulty with the act of handwriting, as well as spelling. So for those students, listening to a rapid lecture while trying to take notes prevents them from learning.

As a result, even though a teacher presents all the needed material in a lecture, she may need to change or supplement the way she *presents* that information so that students with dyslexia can learn.

Slowing the *rate* of a lecture will help. Inserting pauses between thoughts in a lecture will give dyslexic

students the extra time they need to process auditory information. That's why I recommend teachers insert breaks into their lectures—by stopping to write down a key word, demonstrate a concept, show a picture, or ask a question. That's an example of a simple, but effective, accommodation.

So an accommodation does *not* mean changing the curriculum. It means changing:

- the way a teacher *presents* information
- the way a student *practices* new skills, or
- the way a teacher *tests* students to ensure they have mastered the material

An accommodation is something the *teacher* does differently to ensure that a student does not fail due to an inherited condition over which the student has no control.

ARE ACCOMMODATIONS FAIR?

No two students learn exactly the same way. What one student needs in order to learn may differ from what another student needs.

Yet some teachers think it's unfair to treat one student differently from another. They believe fair means "one size fits all." Fair does *not* mean treating everyone the same. In fact, treating everyone the same is inherently unfair—because we're *not* all the same. Fair means giving every student a *chance* to succeed.

For example, some students have good eyesight. Others have a physical difference in the shape of their eyeballs that cause them to be nearsighted. Students who are nearsighted wear eyeglasses—an accommodation that allows them to read what's on the board despite their physical difference.

A teacher who truly believes that fair means all students must be treated the same might forbid *any* student in her class to wear glasses—because not everyone needs them. Her refusal to allow that accommodation would *force* students who happen to be nearsighted—a condition over which they have no control—to *fail*. Surely no teacher would actually forbid glasses. Yet refusing accommodations needed by a dyslexic student will have the same result. You will *force* that student to *fail*—due to a physical brain difference over which he has no control.

Of course allowing a student an accommodation, such as glasses, does not *guarantee* the student a good grade. He still must pay attention, study hard, and do

well on the tests. So an accommodation only makes success *possible*. Refusing an accommodation makes success impossible.

WHAT DYSLEXIC STUDENTS NEED

Dyslexic students need a teacher who understands the frustration of being smart, yet unable to do what other students do so easily: read, write, spell, and memorize.

They need a teacher who understands that these difficulties are due to a brain difference—not laziness, lack of intelligence, or lack of motivation.

They need a teacher who will not give up on them—a teacher who is willing to learn how to teach around their weaknesses.

They also need a teacher who knows that they suffer from extreme anxiety. More than anything else, these students fear that their teacher will make them look stupid in front of their peers.

FEAR & ANXIETY

Why do children with dyslexia complain of headaches and stomachaches right before school, and beg their parents not to send them to school? Why do students with dyslexia tend to sit in the back of the room? Why do they rarely make eye contact with the teacher? It's because they dread school. They rarely participate because they don't want to appear stupid in front of their friends.

Whenever a teacher shows the rest of the class what a dyslexic student cannot do, directly or indirectly, on purpose or accidentally, our student feels humiliated. If this happens often enough, our student may develop an anxiety disorder.

A student who is in a constant state of fear and anxiety cannot learn. So before you can teach our student, you must reduce his anxiety. You can do that by privately promising him that you will:

- NEVER force him to participate in a spelling bee. Instead, you'll let him be the scorekeeper or do some other administrative task.
- NEVER force him to read out loud in class, without getting his permission *in advance*, and without also showing him, in advance, the passage that he'll have to read, so he can practice ahead of time.
- NEVER force him to write on the board where other students can see his spelling mistakes and his terrible handwriting.
- NEVER collect or distribute tests or homework by passing papers down the row, where other students can see his handwriting, spelling, and mistakes.
- NEVER allow other students to correct his assignments or grade his tests.

READING

Students with dyslexia usually read very slowly, and they misread lots of words—which can lead to comprehension problems. Their reading skills are often way below grade level. So although they may be able to learn by listening, by watching demonstrations or videos, by participating in discussions, and through hands-on activities, they can't learn very much by reading.

It takes special training, and the use of an Orton-Gillingham-based system, to improve the reading skills of a student with dyslexia. I do not expect a regular education teacher to have that specialized training. But I do expect her to provide an alternative to reading the textbook.

One easy accommodation is to contact the *Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic*, a non-profit organization that offers audiotapes of nearly every textbook used in the United States. They will lend tapes and tape players to any school that has signed up as an agency. They will also lend to parents who pay a small membership fee. For more about Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic, call 800-221-4792 or visit their website: www.rfbid.org.

Other organizations provide leisure books, current best sellers, classic literature, and even magazines on audiotope. Those organizations are listed at the end of this article.

If a teacher provides time to read books during class (often called "silent sustained reading"), I recommend that she have five or six copies of the book on audiotope, (along with inexpensive tape players with headphones that cost less than \$10 at most large discount stores). She can allow *all* students to either just read OR to listen and read. Good readers will discover that listening while reading slows them down. So, generally, only poor readers will take advantage of the listen and read option.

By the way, it's better to have a dyslexic student *listen* to a book written at his grade level—so it will challenge him intellectually, improve his vocabulary, and allow him to participate in classroom discussions about the book—than *read* a book written for much younger students. (Forcing a sixth grader to read a third-grade book in view of his friends will not only increase his anxiety, but it will teach him to hate and resist reading.)

SPELLING

Unless a dyslexic student has had Orton-Gillingham tutoring, or has unusually good visual memory for words, his spelling will be far worse than his reading. Traditional methods of spelling instruction do not work for students with dyslexia.

The *only* way his spelling will improve is if he works with an Orton-Gillingham-based tutor who teaches a set of specific spelling rules that allow him to spell by sounding out—NOT by memorizing.

A dyslexic student must not be punished just because his teacher has not been trained to teach spelling in this special way. So I recommend three accommodations for spelling:

- Do not grade his spelling tests.

Instead, let him know, privately, that you have not been trained to teach spelling in a way that will work for him. Tell him not to waste hours every night trying to memorize the weekly spelling list. Tell him he can take the test along with everyone else, but it will not count as part of his grade. (If there's a place for a spelling grade on his report card, just leave it blank.)

- Ignore spelling mistakes on written assignments.

Grade on the *content* of his answers—NOT the spelling, grammar, vocabulary, or handwriting. Never hand back to a dyslexic student a written assignment that's bleeding with red correction marks.

- NEVER ask a dyslexic student to look up the spelling of a word in a dictionary.

Dictionaries are nearly impossible for our students to use. Most are unable to memorize the alphabet in order. They also can't read most of the words on the page. Instead, allow our students to type their assignments into a PC running a word processor program with a spell checker. Or allow them to look up the spelling using a computerized version of the dictionary. Or allow them to use a handheld electronic spell checker, such as a Franklin Spelling Ace—provided by their parent.

And to make sure our student don't feel different from others, allow any student in the class to use these tools.

HANDWRITING

Many dyslexic students also have dysgraphia—extreme difficulty with handwriting. For them, the act of handwriting is slow and painful. It requires so much thought and concentration that they cannot learn while writing or copying.

As a result, these students aren't able to learn by listening to a teacher, if at the same time, they must take notes or copy from the board. For a dysgraphic student to succeed in your class, you must reduce the need for handwriting to the bare minimum.

One way is to identify another student in the class who takes good notes, has legible handwriting, and is willing to help. Provide that student with Carbonless

Notebook paper. This special two-part, pressure-sensitive paper creates an extra copy of anything written on it, yet avoids the mess of carbon paper. (Sources for this NCR binder paper are listed at the end of this article.)

While the other student takes notes, our dyslexic student can focus all his energy on listening to the teacher. At the end of class, the other student can hand him the copy of his notes, including what was on the board.

If a reliable volunteer note-taker isn't available, the teacher should provide a photocopy of her lecture notes, along with a copy of what she wrote on the board.

For similar reasons, it's not a good idea to require a dyslexic student to copy a problem out of a textbook before answering it. Instead, either have someone else copy it for him, or allow him to photocopy (and enlarge, if he wishes) the page containing the questions, then have him write the answers on the photocopy.

By the way, if in-class or homework assignments require writing more than a few words, I recommend allowing our student to dictate his answers to a classroom aide, a volunteer, a parent; or into a tape recorder. He could even dictate into a PC running voice-recognition software, such as NaturallySpeaking by Dragon Systems.

Once a student with dysgraphia has learned to type (an absolutely essential skill), allow him to type all assignments, using a portable keyboard (such as an AlphaSmart Pro), a laptop computer, or a classroom PC.

WRITTEN EXPRESSION

If you've worked with dyslexic students for any length of time, you know that their reading skills are poor, and their spelling is worse. But the skill that is weakest of all is written expression. In addition to difficulty with handwriting, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar, they have extreme difficulty organizing their thoughts into main ideas and details.

That's why I strongly recommend that teachers provide alternatives to written reports. One way a teacher can accomplish this is to allow all students to choose between writing a paper, creating a video, or making a classroom presentation.

Another way is to make writing a report a team project. The entire team brainstorms the project, then assigns each part of it to a different member. The dyslexic student might be assigned the task of illustrating the report, or of participating in a panel discussion.

If the teacher insists that a dyslexic student write a composition or report, allow that student to dictate the information—to a parent or classroom aide who will write it down, into a tape recorder, or into a computer using the NaturallySpeaking software program.

HOW PARENTS CAN GET ACCOMMODATIONS FOR A DYSLEXIC CHILD

The accommodations I've mentioned are practical, require little teacher preparation time, and cost the school almost nothing. Even so, accommodations like these are not usually implemented unless a parent asks for them. So if these accommodations are not part of your child's I.E.P. or 504 Plan, add them to the plan. To do that, a parent must write a letter requesting a meeting to modify their child's IEP or 504 Plan.

If your child does *not* have an IEP or 504 Plan, accommodations like these can be agreed upon informally at a parent-teacher conference.

But here's a word of advice for parents: if your dyslexic child has never received *any* accommodations, do not go into a meeting asking for every single accommodation I've mentioned. Instead, pick three or four that you and *your child* feel will be most helpful.

Then, get all of your child's teachers to agree to try those three or four accommodations for one month. At the end of that time, hold a follow-up meeting to see if the accommodations are working, or if they need to be modified.

Once it's obvious to teachers that the accommodations do provide your child with a *chance* to succeed, and that they aren't a significant burden, you won't encounter much resistance when you request a few more.

BE PROACTIVE

Here's my last piece of advice for parents. Once you discover accommodations that work, be proactive. Meet with your child's new teachers at the start of each new school year. Share with each teacher your child's strengths and weaknesses, and the accommodations that worked well the prior year.

If his new teachers don't know much about dyslexia, encourage them to visit informative websites. Since dyslexia affects almost one in five students, the same accommodations that help *your* child succeed will help many other students as well.

Proactive parents who approach teachers in a friendly manner, and make sure the teachers understand their child's strengths and weaknesses, get much better results than those who do nothing and merely hope for the best.

REFERENCES:

BOOKS ON TAPE:

Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic
for textbooks
800-221-4792
www.rfbd.org

Recorded Books Rentals

for best sellers, leisure books, and classics
800-638-1304
www.recordedbooks.com

Books on Tape Rentals

for best sellers, leisure books, and classics
800-88-BOOKS
www.booksontape.com

Your Local Library

can obtain many recorded books for you listing of sources of NCR paper

CARBONLESS NOTEBOOK PAPER:

Mayer Educational Products

734-207-7600
www.mayerproducts.com

Star Forms

800-859-7150
www.starform.com
Click on Educators
Click on Peer Scripting Forms

LDR Catalog

800-869-8336
www.learningdifferences.com
Click on LDR Catalog
Click on DoubleTake Supplies
Look at DoubleTake Notebook Paper

VOICE RECOGNITION SOFTWARE

NaturallySpeaking

by Dragon Systems, Inc.
800-4-DRAGON (800-47-2466)
www.dragonsys.com

Via Voice

by IBM
www-4.ibm.com/software/speech/

PORTABLE KEYBOARDS

AlphaSmart Pro

by AlphaSmart Inc.
888-274-0680
www.alphaSMART.com

WARNING SIGNS OF DYSLEXIA

If a child has three or more of the following warning signs, encourage that child's parents and teachers to learn more about dyslexia.

In Preschool

- delayed speech
- mixing up the sounds and syllables in long words
- chronic ear infections
- severe reactions to childhood illnesses
- constant confusion of left versus right
- late establishing a dominant hand
- difficulty learning to tie shoes
- trouble memorizing their address, phone number, or the alphabet
- can't create words that rhyme
- a close relative with dyslexia

In Elementary School

- dysgraphia (the slow, non-automatic handwriting that is difficult to read)
- letter or number reversals continuing past first grade
- extreme difficulty learning cursive
- slow, choppy, inaccurate reading:
 - guesses based on shape or context
 - skips or misreads prepositions (at, to, of)
 - ignores suffixes
 - can't sound out unknown words
- terrible spelling
- often can't remember sight words (they, were, does) or homonyms (their, they're, and there)
- difficulty telling time with a clock with hands
- trouble with math
 - memorizing multiplication tables
 - memorizing a sequence of steps
 - directionality
- when speaking, difficulty finding the correct word
 - lots of "whatyamacallits" and "thingies"
 - common sayings come out slightly twisted
- extremely messy bedroom, backpack, and desk
- dreads going to school
 - complains of stomach aches or headaches
 - may have nightmares about school

In High School

All of the above symptoms plus:

- limited vocabulary
- extremely poor written expression
 - large discrepancy between verbal communication and written communication
- unable to master a foreign language
- difficulty reading printed music
- poor grades in many classes
- may drop out of high school

In Adults

Education history similar to above, plus:

- slow reader
- may have to read a page two or three times to understand it
- terrible speller
- difficulty putting thoughts onto paper
 - dreads writing memos or letters
- still has difficulty with right versus left
- often gets lost, even in a familiar city
- sometimes confuses b and d, especially when tired or sick

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