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Creating a Dyslexia-Friendly Classroom

By Bernadette McLean, Principal, Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre



"The bonus of creating a dyslexia-friendly classroom is that it will facilitate learning for everyone in the school."

The Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre estimates that 10 per cent of children are noticeably dyslexic, with about 4 per cent being severely dyslexic. Bernadette McLean offers some proven strategies for meeting their needs in mainstream classrooms.

Speaking and listening

The main difficulty that dyslexic children have is with listening to and processing the spoken word at speed. If teachers can slow down their speech and make sentence structures simpler, this will help all children's understanding. Give plenty of time to practise listening. Teach children how to use visualisation and make pictures in their heads. Pictures are more easily remembered than lots of auditory words. Take pauses to give children thinking time.

Setting appropriate tasks

Dyslexics can take longer to name well-known objects, even up to higher education level and beyond. Slower word retrieval means they cannot offer speedy contributions in class, even when they know the answer. The stress affects their working memory. They have a far slimmer chance of ever reaching automatic retrieval of knowledge, which makes it hard to multitask. Avoid setting rote-learning exercises for anything: times tables, scientific formulae, French vocabulary.

The process of reading and memorising will take a dyslexic child much longer, so allow extra time for such activities.

Rather than having low expectations of children who have difficulties reading and writing, give them opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding in other ways, for example through mind mapping, visual presentation or discussion.

Homework

Homework can be stressful for children with dyslexia because, whatever the subject, the homework often turns into English homework. Do not ask dyslexic children to copy down homework instructions. If you are not able to give all the class written instructions, ask someone else to do the copying for dyslexic children. If you give verbal instructions, check that they are being remembered. Set up a homework buddy system and give parents the buddy's details, in case there is confusion over homework instructions.

Spelling and punctuation

It's a good idea to mark separately for content and for spelling and punctuation. If there are a lot of mis-spellings, only mark high-frequency words and compile a personal checklist of the words the child most often gets wrong. Display high-frequency spellings on posters around the classroom, and when you introduce a new word write it on the whiteboard.

In secondary school, where time is not spent learning spellings by looking at the structure of words, it is particularly important for students to have a handy reminder of words they find difficult.

Reading

Don't ask children to read aloud unless they want to. Reading silently may work better. To read aloud successfully they have to link the sound and the look of the word, which can be effortful.

Paired reading has been around for a long time and is as useful as ever. The benefits of reading at home with parents are enormous.

Little and often is the key to success.

Classroom layout/resources

While not all dyslexic children can sit in the middle of the front row, they should be within peripheral vision of the teacher so you can pick up on non-verbal communication.

Clearly mark resources with pictures as well as words, and display a pictorial timetable.

Have an alphabet strip on each desk and a number square on each table to cut down on memory work.

Display the topic, keywords, date and day on the whiteboard. Display an analogue and digital clock side by side for reinforcement. The digital clock is easier to read but does not help the child understand time.

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Teaching tips

From [A Whistle-stop Tour of Special Educational Needs](#) by Clare Welsh and Rosie Williams (Barrington Stoke)

- Check that the pupil is secure with their knowledge of phonics
- Re-visit any gaps
- Allow plenty of time for practicing phonic skills
- Practise memory skills
- Use a multi-sensory approach
- When practising spellings, try the 'Look, say, copy, cover, write and check' method
- Remember that pupils with dyslexia may tire quickly and be careful not to overload with homework
- For older pupils, allow alternative methods of recording their work
- Keep self-esteem healthy by building on areas of strength and praising effort
- A visual timetable which uses symbols as well as words can help a dyslexic child confidently negotiate the school day