

# Positive strategies

Negative comparisons with peers and poor self-esteem can make a dyslexic child's school life a misery. **Barbara Riddick** shares her thoughts on helping these children to live with dyslexia



As parents and teachers know, children and young people are individuals so making generalisations about living with dyslexia is not easy. There is clear research evidence indicating the underlying processing difficulties that lead to dyslexia persist into adulthood but the coping strategies that individuals develop over time differ considerably. Like many cognitive differences, dyslexia is on a continuum from marked processing differences to mild differences that blend into the ordinary range of differences found among children.

The important point about dyslexia is because of the specific word decoding difficulties that it entails children have difficulties with reading fluency and accuracy and concomitant difficulties with spelling and writing. Because school and further and higher education are still essentially literacy based this creates problems for people with dyslexia in accessing the curriculum and 'out-putting' from it. An important aspect of living with dyslexia is developing effective coping

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strategies that enable learners to deal successfully with these input and output problems.

## Reducing negative comparisons

School is a highly comparative environment where children are usually learning with children of the same age on the same learning task so the danger is that dyslexic children will compare themselves unfavourably to other children or feel that they are being unfavourably compared by their teachers or peers.

Part of helping children to 'live' with dyslexia is changing the environment to reduce the number of negative or unhelpful comparisons that are made. Marking strategies that give separate marks for content and presentation or only identify a few key spelling or grammatical errors are one example. Another is not asking children to read out loud in class unless they want to do so. Sophie, a 16 year old who was five years behind in her reading and spelling scores, made the following comments about being made to read aloud at school, 'In lessons they make you read out loud all the time. They don't know how much it affects you – it really frightens you, being put through the trauma of it'. Her mother described what happened when Sophie was

asked to read aloud at school. 'When she came home she was so upset. She got stressed out. She cried. The first few times she did it she was so frightened she burst into tears and was completely humiliated.'

In 2006 I carried out some research with colleagues and we found that a third of dyslexic children were still being asked to read aloud in class, even in schools that had signed up to a dyslexia-friendly approach. When dyslexic children were asked if there was anything they dreaded doing in school, reading out loud came first, followed by spelling tests. Again, children found it particularly humiliating and upsetting if they had to give or receive their test scores in public rather than in private. An eight-year-old dyslexic boy, in discussing his poor performance in spelling tests, said, 'I felt I was not like one of them, and when you don't know anything and the other kids know more than you, you think you are the lowest thing on earth.'

## Dyslexia, self-esteem and attributions

An important issue raised by parents and specialist teachers and borne out by a wide range of research studies is that school children and students with dyslexia are a greater risk of low self-esteem. Studies of school-age children find that the most important influence on their academic self-esteem is comparison with peers of the same age. What seems to be critical is the kind of messages this gives to children. Where they 'blame' themselves (negative attributions) for their poor results by thinking they are stupid or careless this can lead to loss of self-esteem, whereas more positive attributions such as 'I'm good at making up stories even if I can't spell well' can help preserve self-esteem.

Children vary in personality but even so teachers and parents appear to play an important role in the kind of

## Features



messages children internalise about their performance and the kind of attributions this leads them to make about their literacy difficulties. One child was pleased because when he spoke to his teacher about how he wrote less than other children she told him that what she was interested in was the ideas that he wrote down and these were as good, or often better, than other children who wrote more than he did. Another boy was delighted when it was pointed out to him that rather than seeing himself as stupid because of his very poor spelling, it was English that was a 'stupid' language.

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Mothers spoke of their children coming home from school miserable or in tears due to performing badly in tasks because of their reading and writing. In instances like this children would often say they were 'thick' an 'idiot' or had a 'stupid brain'. Mothers would counteract these comments by pointing out that they only had a problem with one or two very specific activities and they were good at a whole range of other activities. They would also offer their children encouragement and say that if they tried they would find a way to cope.

These messages that children receive directly from teachers, parents, peers and indirectly through the way the learning environment is structured play an important role in how children learn to live with dyslexia. When carried out formally this is known as

attribution retraining but evidence from interviews suggests that at an informal level some educationalists and parents have already successfully used such an approach.

### Dyslexia-friendly schools and the learner's perspective

An issue that arises is whether the label dyslexia should be explicitly used or whether it is more helpful to address needs as they arise and adapt the environment so that difficulties are less likely to arise. The British Dyslexia Association argues that developing dyslexia-friendly schools improves teaching and learning for a wide range of children with literacy difficulties as well as those with clearly identified dyslexia. Many of the strategies adopted by dyslexia-friendly schools have been informed by the experiences of children and young people with dyslexia.

### A key mentor or sponsor

In my own research and research conducted with colleagues asking both children and adults with dyslexia about their views, we have found that despite the complexities a number of persistent themes arise. One theme is having parents and at least some teachers who 'believe' in them and can see beyond their literacy difficulties to their underlying ability and interests. Because there is a strong genetic component to dyslexia, many students will have a parent, siblings or other relatives with similar difficulties. Where parents are open about their own literacy difficulties and have successfully come to terms with them this can be very helpful. Many of the children I interviewed spoke about feeling more understood by their dyslexic parent and often cited a parent or relative as a positive dyslexic role model.

### Encouraging positive coping strategies

In living with dyslexia there are a number of strategic decisions that need to be made by educators, parents and the children or the young people in question. How much time and effort should be spent on direct

intervention to improve a child or young person's literacy skills. We know that early, focused, intensive literacy intervention is needed if children are to keep up with their peers, but evidence suggests that some children with severe literacy difficulties will lag behind their peers, particularly in the fluency and accuracy of their reading and writing, even with high quality, appropriate intervention. In other cases we know that because of lack of resources or trained personnel children don't get the degree of literacy intervention that they need.

Although it is vital to improve basic literacy as far as possible, it is also important as children get older to teach them positive coping strategies that help them understand their own strengths and weaknesses and how difficulties can be circumvented. Dyslexic children adopt a number of coping strategies to see themselves through school which vary with the age and stage they are at and the particular demands of the learning environment. As a rough rule of thumb it can be argued that the more negative the school environment the more likely they are to develop negative strategies like avoidance and denial. Children I interviewed who were attending schools that they perceived as negative in attitude towards dyslexia were more likely to say they avoided writing whenever possible and also avoided words they couldn't spell when writing. The more supportive the environment, the more likely they were to acknowledge their difficulties and employ positive strategies such as asking for help, spending extra time, using self-help strategies like a spellchecker, developing good key board skills and so on. One of the boys I interviewed who had high self-esteem and positive support at school and home commented, 'They said I would always be dyslexic 'cos they can't cure it, but I can be great at my work.'

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