



Better Understanding **Dyslexia** and Learning Disabilities in Reading



If your child has difficulties with reading, you might wonder if he or she has dyslexia or a learning disability in reading. It's important to understand the general difference between these two terms, especially when you want to identify the best plan of action to improve your child's reading skills. This resource explains the basic differences between dyslexia and a learning disability in reading and effective interventions for both.

What Are the Keys to Strong Reading Skills?

The National Reading Panel has identified five areas of reading instruction that are necessary to develop strong reading skills:

1. **Phonemic Awareness** – understanding and pronouncing the sounds that make up words
2. **Phonics** – accurately blending together all sounds in a word
3. **Reading Fluency** – reading smoothly and accurately
4. **Vocabulary** – understanding what words mean
5. **Reading Comprehension** – understanding main ideas and supporting details in a passage, article or story

Students begin developing these skills in preschool when they learn letter names and sounds. Reading instruction continues throughout elementary school as students grow in their abilities to read smoothly and accurately. Abilities transition from learning to read to reading to learn in third grade. If students have not mastered the five areas of reading instruction before this time, they may experience difficulties learning in other subjects as well.

Reading skill deficits may include reversing the order of letters or words, difficulties with accurately identifying and combining letter sounds, reading slowly and trouble with comprehension. If you notice that your child is having these problems and is falling behind in school, you may consider asking for extra help from your child's school or a private tutoring service. You also may consider having your child tested for dyslexia or a learning disability in reading.

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What Is the Difference between Dyslexia and a Learning Disability in Reading?

Policy makers, psychologists and school administrators have not yet identified one specific way to distinguish between dyslexia and a learning disability in reading. However, it may be helpful to think of “a learning disability in reading” as a common name for general difficulties with reading and think of “dyslexia” as a medical term that refers to very specific reading skill deficits.

Definitions of both learning disabilities in reading and dyslexia include difficulties in the five major reading skill areas identified by the National Reading Panel. It is possible that children who have a learning disability in reading may show signs of dyslexia.

How Is Dyslexia Assessed and Diagnosed?

There is no one assessment for dyslexia. Assessments for dyslexia should examine all five areas of reading instruction identified by the National Reading Panel (on front side). It is important that anyone who evaluates your child to determine if he or she has dyslexia not only conducts an assessment but also interviews you and your child, observes your child’s reading, and reviews his or her education records and recent homework assignments to understand all of his or her reading skills and needs.

What Are Some Effective Interventions for Dyslexia and a Learning Disability in Reading?

High-quality reading interventions will have similar components, whether or not a student has dyslexia or a learning disability in reading. Because dyslexia commonly includes difficulties with phonemic awareness, decoding and spelling that may impact reading fluency and comprehension, effective interventions for dyslexia should target skills in these areas. High-quality interventions for children with a learning disability in reading are also designed to improve these skills. Essential components for improving reading include direct instruction in decoding strategies, phonemic awareness, reading fluency and reading comprehension. Direct



instruction is another way of saying that children will have frequent opportunities to practice specific skills, and that they will receive corrective feedback and rewards for accurate responses. Any reading intervention that is implemented should be evidence-based, which means scientific research has demonstrated that the intervention is effective for improving reading skills.

Additional Resources

→ ***Overcoming Dyslexia: A New and Complete Science-Based Program for Reading Problems at Any Level*** by Sally Shaywitz, M.D.

➡ **For more information** or to make an appointment at the Boys Town Center for Behavioral Health, call **531-355-3358**.

Visit **BoysTown.org/Parenting** for more information from the parenting experts at Boys Town.