

Dyslexia and other SLDs

What is a specific learning disability (SLD)?

It is an unexpected and unexplained condition, occurring in a child of average or above average intelligence who has a significant delay in one or more areas of learning. SLDs are more common than realised and affect about 10% of children.

What learning areas are affected?

- Reading
- Spelling
- Writing
- Arithmetic
- Language (comprehension and expression)
- Attention and organisation
- Co-ordination
- Social and emotional development

What causes general learning difficulties?

General learning difficulties have many causes, including deafness, immaturity, intellectual handicaps, absence from school, poor teaching, visual handicaps, chronic illness, head injuries, meningitis, language disorders, autism, environmental and emotional disadvantages and SLDs.

What causes SLDs?

SLD is really a descriptive term. The primary cause is unknown. There may be multiple subtle factors causing the SLD.

How are SLDs diagnosed?

If the problem is not picked up by parents, any undiscovered learning problem will soon be picked up in the classroom. Sometimes the disability is not picked up until later (from the age of 8 onwards), when more demanding school work is required. SLDs vary from very mild to quite severe. Speech delays, reading problems and calculation problems are among the first signs. The child will then be assessed medically, including his or her hearing and vision. If a physical problem such as poor vision can be detected, the child will be referred to a specialist in this area.

What effects do SLDs have?

Apart from having delayed learning at school, many children with SLDs have difficulty in coping with life in general. They are subject to ridicule by other children and

tend to develop a poor self-image and low self-esteem. The problem may manifest as a behaviour disorder. Both the child and the family suffer, especially if the cause is not clear to them.

What is dyslexia?

Dyslexia is an SLD with reading. A dyslexic child has below-average reading skills yet has no physical problems and has a normal IQ. Other SLDs may be present, particularly with spelling, writing and clear speaking.

Dyslexia is a term derived from the Greek for 'difficulty with words'. It was originally called 'word blindness'.

What are the features of dyslexia?

The two main features are reading and spelling difficulties because the child confuses certain letters whose shapes are similar but have different positions, perhaps mirror images. Examples include confusing *b* with *d* and *p* with *q*. This means that the child cannot properly use and interpret the knowledge that he or she has acquired.

Characteristics include:

- a reluctance to read aloud
- a monotonous voice when reading
- following the text with the finger when reading
- difficulty repeating long words.

The above features, of course, are seen in all or most learners, but if they persist in a bright child dyslexia should be considered. The most important factor in management is to recognise the problem, and the earlier the better.

What is the management of SLDs?

It is important to build the child's self-esteem by explaining the problem carefully, removing any sense of self-blame and encouraging efforts towards progress. Parents can play an important role in building up their child's self-esteem and in helping learning. Parents are the most important teachers.

Children with SLDs are usually referred to an experienced professional or to a clinic such as a dyslexia clinic for assessment. The management may involve a clinical psychologist, an audiologist, an optometrist or a speech pathologist. A specific method of correcting the problem and promoting learning will be devised. It is also worthwhile seeking the help of a support organisation.