The Emotional and Social Effects of Dyslexia

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Abstract

Dyslexia, is one of the disorders with a greater prevalence among the group of the learning disorders. With the passing years many studies (observations) to explain the causes of dyslexia and to show the newest interventions in this field has been made. People with dyslexia have to overcome quite a few barriers during their lives in order to be able to fulfil their dreams and achieve their targets. The fact that some of them are not assessed at an early age can affect their self-esteem and their self-concept. Once they are assessed research has proved that people with dyslexia learn better once they are taught in their preferred learning style (Mortimore, 2003). In dyslexia one of the most commonly missed areas is the emotional side. Teachers and parents are very good at noticing problems with reading, writing, spelling and even maths. They can miss the growing element of lack of motivation, low self-esteem and upset which develops as the child goes through school and the pressures grow greater and greater. The frustration of children with dyslexia often centers on their inability to meet expectations. Their parents and teachers see a bright, enthusiastic child who is not learning to read and write. Time and again, dyslexics and their parents hear, "He's such a bright child; if only he would try harder." Ironically, no one knows exactly how hard the dyslexic is trying. The pain of failing to meet other people's expectations is surpassed only by dyslexics' inability to achieve their goals. This is particularly true of those who develop perfectionistic expectations in order to deal with their anxiety. They grow up believing that it is "terrible" to make a mistake. However, their learning disability, almost by definition means that these children will make many "careless" or "stupid" mistakes. This is extremely frustrating to them, as it makes them feel chronically inadequate. This in the long term can cause them a lot of problems in their personal and social life.

Keywords: dyslexia, self-esteem, self-concept, self-image, anxiety, anger

Self-esteem

Everybody has an inner picture of his/her strengths and weaknesses, which are being affected from the positive and negative responses he/she receives from the people he/she thinks that are important to him/her (Mosley, 1995). The idea we have about ourselves and the value we ascribe to it is our self-esteem. Self-esteem is created by our experiences and begins to be shaped from the earliest years of our lives (Stenhouse, 1994). William James (1982 quoted in Griffiths, 1993: 301)) originally proposed that *self-esteem is the ratio of one's success to one's pretensions*. He divided the self into two components, the 'me' and the 'I' (Mussen et all, 1984; Cowie and Pecherek, 1994). The 'me' is the individual's ability to view the self as the sum total of his/her abilities, personal characteristics, qualities and material possessions. The 'I' is the individual's awareness of self as an entity separate from others, of self as unique and distinctive, and of self as having continuity over time (Cowie and Percherek, 1994: 69). The former refers to the individual's process of understanding its role in society, its cultural identity and people's evolution over time, whereas the latter is self-reflective and explains experience, people, objects and behaviour in a subjective manner.

Writing in the context of children William's beliefs were later translated by psychologists into the idea that self-esteem is best understood as *the discrepancy between the 'ideal self' and the 'self-image'* (Griffiths, 1993: 301). Ideal self is the person's picture of what he/she would like to be or the picture that he/she thinks the others would like him/her to be (Smith, 1998). When the child is growing up and becomes able to understand and value the things better, he/she gains more awareness of the demands and the standards that society might apply to its members. For example, the higher the person's

socio- economic status, the more chances he/she has to be successful and accepted by the society. The child attempts to fulfil these standards in order to be socially accepted and become a respected member of society.

The media is a big influence in forming an ideal self as it provides a lot of images and models of aspiration (Lawrence, 1996). In addition, the family's ideas and the pressure this might pose to the learner could make him/her form an ideal image in his/her mind and try to accomplish this image in order to make his/her family proud of him/herself. The more demands a society might have, the more pressure might be put on a person's shoulders in order to fulfil them; especially when the person is a child as he/she is not mature enough to evaluate his/her strengths and capabilities or to see if the goal that has set in his/her mind is realistic or not. Children look up to their parents and long for their acceptance and approval. Children with dyslexia fear that due to their academic failure they will lose the support and love of their families (Scott, 2003). Without the appropriate help and support children with dyslexia can become part of a vicious circle by feeling guilty and inadequate. There are people that confuse self-esteem with self-concept (Mussen et al., 1984). The two are not identical. '*Self-concept can be broadly defined as a person's perceptions of him- or herself*' (Shavelon and Bolus, 1982: 3). Self-concept is a set of ideas about one-self that is *descriptive* rather than *judgmental* (Mussen et al., 1984: 356). One can describe some of his/her qualities without trying to categorise them as good or bad whereas when it comes to self-esteem the person tries to evaluate his/her own abilities comparing them with someone else's. We can see self-concept as an '*umbrella term'* (Lawrence, 1996: 2) because under the self there are three aspects: self-image, ideal self and self-esteem. For example, a person by saying his/her occupation (student) reveals something about his/her self-image. At the same time he/she might say he/she is very brave and intelligent and that he/she would like to become a millionaire. This might reveal things about his/her self-esteem whereas the latter reveals his/her ideal self. Throughout the years a number of definitions have been used to describe self-esteem depending on the psychological knowledge and understanding of each individual (Davies, 1995). Usually, it is defined as *a personal judgement of worth lying along a dimension with 'positive' and 'negative' ends* (Cottle, 1965; cited in Davies and Brember, 1995: 171). Coopersmith (1967: 4) defines self-esteem as: '*The evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself – it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval and indicates the extent to which an individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful and worthy'*. Lawrence (1981: 246), from his research on children of 8 to 11 years old, defined self- esteem as:*' The child's affective evaluation of the sum total of his or her characteristics both mental and physical'.*

In his research, Lawrence found out that children of that age tended to be concerned about others' opinions in three areas: 1) the opinion of peers, 2) the opinions of teachers and 3) the opinion of parents (Lawrence 1981: 246, Davies, 1995).

Research has also showed that there is a strong and positive correlation between a child's self-esteem and his/her school achievement (Gurney, 1987; Watkins and Dong, 1994). The more children feel good about themselves, the easier they learn and the longer they retain information (White, 1990). The more children have a positive image about themselves, the more chances they have to handle difficult situations in life such us prejudice, failure, solitude, violence, and so forth.

Empirical research conducted by Morgan and Klein (2000) confirms that adults that were not diagnosed early in their lives with dyslexia went through life feeling inadequate, frustrated and angry. Some of the students that took part in their study experienced low- self esteem due to the fact that dyslexia was not picked up when they were young (school) and a feeling of bitterness for the emotional pain that they had to go through. Dale and Taylor (2001) report in their study the feelings of personal failure that adults with dyslexia expressed due to their academic failure. Most of them had negative memories from school as some of them had experienced ridicule and physical punishment due to their difficulties.

Nevertheless, recent research has shown that there is a high percentage of dyslexic adults and young people among offenders. The percentage varies from 31% - 52% depending on the definition criteria, the methods and the age and nature of the individuals that took part (BDA report, 2005; Kirk and Reid, 2004; Morgan and Klein, 2000). Dyslexia if undiagnosed can result in anti-social behaviour as a result of low self-esteem, social exclusion and educational failure (BDA report, 2005; Kirk and Reid 2004).

Kirk and Reid (2004) in their study uncovered that 50% of the young offenders that took part showed at least borderline indicators of dyslexia. Only three of these participants were officially diagnosed with dyslexia. The subjects that had indicators of dyslexia also experienced signs of low self-esteem. Although the participants completed a computerised self-assessment screening test, informal discussions with the offenders revealed '*histories of school refusal, exclusion for disciplinary matters and, in many cases, a bitter dislike of school education'*.

The previous results are supported by the BDA and HM Young Offender Institution Wetherby report (BDA, 2005). In 2005 31% of the young offenders at Wetherby reported to have dyslexia with a further 32% showing borderline symptoms of dyslexia. Their outcomes are similar with comparable studies that have used cognitive tests for data collection.

The previous reports confirm the need for assessing and diagnosing dyslexia early in the individuals' lives. The earlier the screening takes place the better it is for their self-esteem and their future choices.

Why is dyslexia discouraging and frustrating?

The frustration of children with dyslexia often centers on their inability to meet expectations. Their parents and teachers see a bright, enthusiastic child who is not learning to read and write. Time and again, dyslexics and their parents hear, "He's such a bright child; if only he would try harder." Ironically, no one knows exactly how hard the dyslexic is trying.

The pain of failing to meet other people's expectations is surpassed only by dyslexics' inability to achieve their goals. This is particularly true of those who develop perfectionistic expectations in order to deal with their anxiety. They grow up believing that it is "terrible" to make a mistake.

However, their learning disability, almost by definition means that these children will make many "careless" or "stupid" mistakes. This is extremely frustrating to them, as it makes them feel chronically inadequate.

The dyslexic frequently has problems with social relationships. These can be traced to causes:

Dyslexic children may be physically and socially immature in comparison to their peers. This can lead to a poor self-image and less peer acceptance.

Dyslexics' social immaturity may make them awkward in social situations.

Many dyslexics have difficulty reading social cues. They may be oblivious to the amount of personal distance necessary in social interactions or insensitive to other people's body language.

Dyslexia often affects oral language functioning. Affected persons may have trouble finding the right words, may stammer, or may pause before answering direct questions. This puts them at a disadvantage as they enter adolescence, when language becomes more central to their relationships with peers.

What does the dyslexic children feel?

Anxiety

Anxiety is the most frequent emotional symptom reported by dyslexic adults. Dyslexics become fearful because of their constant frustration and confusion in school. These feelings are exacerbated by the inconsistencies of dyslexia. Because they may anticipate failure, entering new situations can becomes extremely anxiety provoking.

Anxiety causes human beings to avoid whatever frightens them. The dyslexic is no exception. However, many teachers and parents misinterpret this avoidance behavior as laziness. In fact, the dyslexic's hesitancy to participate in school activities such as homework is related more to anxiety and confusion than to apathy.

Anger

Many of the emotional problems caused by dyslexia occur out of frustration with school or social situations. Social scientists have frequently observed that frustration produces anger. This can be clearly seen in many dyslexics.

The obvious target of the dyslexic's anger would be schools and teachers. However, it is also common for the dyslexic to vent his anger on his parents. Mothers are particularly likely to feel the dyslexic's wrath. Often, the child sits on his anger during school to the point of being extremely passive. However, once he is in the safe environment of home, these very powerful feelings erupt and are often directed toward the mother. Ironically, it is the child's trust of the mother that allows him to vent his anger. However, this becomes very frustrating and confusing to the parent who is desperately trying to help their child.

As youngsters reach adolescence, society expects them to become independent. The tension between the expectation of independence and the child's learned dependence causes great internal conflicts. The adolescent dyslexic uses his anger to break away from those people on which he feels so dependent.

Because of these factors, it may be difficult for parents to help their teenage dyslexic. Instead, peer tutoring or a concerned young adult may be better able to intervene and help the child.

Self-Image

The dyslexic's self–image appears to be extremely vulnerable to frustration and anxiety. According to Erik Erikson, during the first years of school, every child must resolve the conflicts between a positive self–image and feelings of inferiority. If children succeed in school, they will develop positive feelings about themselves and believe that they can succeed in life.

If children meet failure and frustration, they learn that they are inferior to others, and that their effort makes very little difference. Instead of feeling powerful and productive, they learn that their environment controls them. They feel powerless and incompetent.

Researchers have learned that when typical learners succeed, they credit their own efforts for their success. When they fail, they tell themselves to try harder. However, when the dyslexic succeeds, he is likely to attribute his success to luck. When he fails, he simply sees himself as stupid.

Research also suggests that these feelings of inferiority develop by the age of ten. After this age, it becomes extremely difficult to help the child develop a positive self–image. This is a powerful argument for early intervention.

Depression

Depression is also a frequent complication in dyslexia. Although most dyslexics are not depressed, children with this kind of learning disability are at higher risk for intense feelings of sorrow and pain. Perhaps because of their low self–esteem, dyslexics are afraid to turn their anger toward their environment and instead turn it toward themselves.

However, depressed children and adolescents often have different symptoms than do depressed adults. The depressed child is unlikely to be lethargic or to talk about feeling sad. Instead he or she may become more active or misbehave to cover up the painful feelings. In the case of masked depression, the child may not seem obviously unhappy. However, both children and adults who are depressed tend to have three similar characteristics:

First, they tend to have negative thoughts about themselves, i.e. a negative self–image.

Second, they tend to view the world negatively. They are less likely to enjoy the positive experiences in life. This makes it difficult for them to have fun.

Finally, most depressed youngsters have great trouble imagining anything positive about the future. The depressed dyslexic not only experiences great pain in his present experiences, but also foresees a life of continuing failure.

A loss of confidence

A child's early years are spent developing their self-image. If these years are full of frustrations from school, they will lead to feelings of inferiority. If not helped quickly this can lead to feeling powerless and incompetent.

Research also suggests that these feelings of inferiority develop by the age of ten. After this age, it becomes extremely difficult to help children develop a positive self-image. *This is a powerful argument for early intervention and homeschooling.*

Loss of interest or zeal for learning

If a child is consistently performing below expectations and no matter how hard they try, they are still falling short, it is easy to understand that they may lose interest in learning.

Low tolerance or patience with difficulty

Without regular success, kids with dyslexia can develop a low tolerance to difficulty, causing them to give up quickly when a project is perceived as being too hard.

Family Problems

Like any handicapping condition, dyslexia has a tremendous impact on the child's family. However, because dyslexia is an invisible handicap, these effects are often overlooked.

Dyslexia affects the family in a variety of ways. One of the most obvious is sibling rivalry. Non–dyslexic children often feel jealous of the dyslexic child, who gets the majority of the parents' attention, time, and money. Ironically, the dyslexic child does not want this attention. This increases the chances that he or she will act negatively against the achieving children in the family.

Specific developmental dyslexia runs in families. This means that one or both of the child's parents may have had similar school problems. When faced with a child who is having school problems, dyslexic parents may react in one of two ways. They may deny the existence of dyslexia and believe if the child would just buckle down, he or she could succeed. Or, the parents may relive their failures and frustrations through their child's school experience. This brings back powerful and terrifying emotions, which can interfere with the adult's parenting skills.

How dyslexia can affect children social life?

Most people with Dyslexia in their family know how much of a struggle reading and writing can be, but did you know Dyslexia can also affect social skills?

Here are some common social skill challenges and things you can do to aid in development of these important skills:

Your child doesn´t understand jokes or sarcasm–Children with Dyslexia have trouble understanding humor. Tell jokes or funny stories at the dinner table to help your child practice responding.

Your child have trouble finding the right words-Children with Dyslexia have trouble finding words especially if they feel strongly about a subject or need to respond quickly. Give your child time to think before responding and slow down the overall pace of the conversation.

Your child misses' social cues-Children with Dyslexia may not pick up on body language and other social cues. Watch your child´s favorite shows with the volume turned off. Ask your child to guess how a character is feeling based on their body language and facial expressions.

Your child hesitates to message their friends-Your child may shy away from texting because they have difficulty understanding abbreviations, to help show them how abbreviations work. Some are based on spelling ("I don´t know"= idk) and others on how letters and numbers sounds ("later"=l8tr).

Your child remembers things inaccurately-Children with Dyslexia usually have trouble with their short term memory. Help improve memory skills by playing games like having your child name the different cars on the street and having them repeat it back to you a few minutes later.

How to Overcome Common Emotional and Social Issues with Dyslexia

The main factor that determines whether a person with dyslexia will thrive or not is *the presence of someone in their life that is supportive and encouraging.* Know that your support and advocacy on the part of your child will be the most effective thing you do, whether you have made or are making mistakes long the way or not.

Other factors that help a dyslexic overcome their emotional struggles are:

Education

Parents aren't the only ones who need to understand dyslexia. Kids with dyslexia need to know what dyslexia is and is not. Read all the information needed regarding to dyslexic children and help them to really understand that they are smart but learn differently.

Testing

It is not always necessary to have your child tested for dyslexia, especially if you are homeschooling and you aren't needing to qualify for special services from the school. Dyslexia is the most common cause for reading and spelling difficulties. If your child is bright and struggles in these areas, it is most likely that they are dyslexic. What testing can provide, however, is an explanation for their struggles. Many people are relieved to learn that they have average to above-average IQ and that there is a scientific explanation and solution for their learning difficulties.

Self-Advocacy

This goes hand in hand with education. A dyslexic person who understands their diagnosis can then be taught to advocate for themselves. This means they can tell teachers, or friends or Boy Scout leaders what their needs are up front and not wait until a situation has gotten out of control before beginning conversation.

Finding talent

Find an area in which your child can succeed, whether it is athletics, arts, mechanical or whatever they have a bend for.

Take a break

Studies have shown that people who are anxious cannot learn. If your child is anxious about schoolwork, it may be best to back off of the academics for a time. There is a lot of freedom in homeschooling. Taking a break can seem counterintuitive, especially if a child is already 'behind' their peers who are traditional learners.

Taking a break doesn't mean you stop learning. Taking a break can simply mean stepping away from the books for some real life learning. Go to the beach, museums, conferences, expos or anything that your child likes. Use these opportunities for learning. Read, research and learn together. Show them that learning can be fun and rewarding and they will gradually come around.

Listen to your kids feelings

Listen to your kids and hear what they are saying about how they feel. Remember, some dyslexics have processing and speech lags so be quick to listen and slow to speak.

Talk to your child - discuss their day or their feelings. Vocabulary has been shown to have a major impact on developing literacy skills.

Look at the whole person rather than focus on your child's difficulties. Encourage then to get involved with things that they are good at as this will help build self-esteem.

Don't let homework become a battle ground. Little and often is more effective, reading one page or practicing one word is better than nothing at all.

Spelling practice can be done with a whiteboard or with plastic letters. Try to find a way to make it fun.

Reading does not always have to be from a book. Perhaps use sets of word cards to make sentences, play matching or pairs games. Don't let your child view it as a chore that has to be done.

Out shopping- ask your child to read out the shopping list or the signs around the store. We are surrounded by words, use them as resources.

Talk to the school about any concerns you may have. Working together with the school can lead to a more coordinated response to any difficulties.

Self-organization can be a key difficulty leading to forgotten books, kit, pens etc. Encourage your child to develop a routine. Is it swimming tomorrow? – Get the kit ready tonight!

Encourage the use of memory joggers such as checklists, 'to do' lists or school planners. Perhaps a large chalkboard or whiteboard could be used as a family planner.

Remember reading and spelling are skills, and, like any skill, they need lots of regular practice. Footballers, swimmers and tennis stars also have to work hard to improve their skills!

Daily encouragement

Reward effort not the finished product

Avoid using labels like 'lazy' or 'stubborn'

Help them set realistic goals – learning takes longer but can be achieved

Implement effective accommodations

Not all families experience these struggles but most will experience at least a few of them. Homeschooling your dyslexic child, BY FAR, eliminates many of these issues, giving your family the freedom to individualize your child's school/educational experience.

What schools can be done?

Schools need to train teachers to recognise dyslexics in their classes. Research suggests that 20% of all school-aged children will have a learning difficulty at some point in their education, and dyslexia is the single most common difficulty. Seen severely in 5% of schoolchildren and another 5-10% more mildly, that's at least one to two dyslexic children in each classroom.

Teacher training needs to teach recognition of learning difficulties.

All teachers are required by the UK government to be qualified to teach all children with special educational needs in their classrooms, but most lack this ability, so additional training is urgently required for them to 'differentiate' their lessons effectively.

Schools need to identify early and provide specialist teaching to children with special educational needs.

Schools need to provide counsellors for children who experience difficulty learning at school, as the emotional effects of failure can lead to social exclusion, depression and self-harm.

Teachers need to recognise the avoidance by children, ask themselves why, and act to question if there is a learning difficulty or another barrier to their learning e.g. avoiding reading and writing.

Parents need to praise the effort not the end result, and support their children to focus on strengths not weaknesses.

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