

Defining Dyslexia

Many definitions have been put forward regarding the question of a dyslexia “diagnosis” or “label”. The two most recent are from the British Psychological Society¹ and the Rose Committee Report².

The British Psychological Society’s working definition of developmental dyslexia is based on a careful consideration of a vast collection of relevant literature. This definition states:

“Dyslexia is evident when accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling develops very incompletely or with great difficulty. This focuses on literacy learning at the ‘word level’ (reading a word with no cues from any context in a sentence, no pictures, etc.) and implies that the problem is severe and persistent despite appropriate learning opportunities. It provides the basis for a staged process of assessment through teaching.”

The BPS report says that, for any individual, this approach encompasses explanations based on many factors rather than a single factor which might cause dyslexia. It also differs from some earlier definitions in not specifying any particular IQ level for dyslexia and it finds no relationship between any particular profile of cognitive skills and dyslexia; the report also finds that an earlier definition which relied on statistically unexpected contrasts between actual literacy attainments and those predicted on the grounds of IQ scores, is not supported by evidence.

The Rose Committee Report contains most recent definition of dyslexia accepted by the Department for Education. This report, based on a review of a wide array of evidence by an Expert Advisory Group, put forward a new definition of dyslexia, as follows:

- i) *Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling*
- ii) *characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, memory and verbal processing speed*
- iii) *dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities*
- iv) *it is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points*
- v) *co-occurring difficulties may be seen in aspects of language, motor coordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation but these are not, by themselves, markers of dyslexia*
- vi) *a good indication of the severity and persistence of dyslexic difficulties can be gained by examining how the individual responds or has responded to well-founded intervention*

¹ Dyslexia, Literacy and Psychological Assessment: Report by a Working Party of the Division of Educational and Child Psychology of The British Psychological Society 1999.

² The Rose Report (2009): Report on Identifying and Teaching Children and Young People with Dyslexia and Literacy Difficulties. DCFS Publications, www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications Ref DCSF-00659-2009

Whichever definition of dyslexia we use, we must bear in mind that the combination of "symptoms" will vary from person to person, from age to age, and from one situation to another. No single definition will fully encompass all the possible patterns of signs and symptoms that we might see in children and adults with dyslexia in the real world. In addition, some dyslexic individuals experience elements of other specific learning difficulties (SpLD).

Difficulty with phonological processing is a major issue for most individuals with dyslexia. The explanation given by Dr Kate Saunders in *The Dyslexia Handbook 2012* is helpful here. She explains that these difficulties are evident in the individual who is having trouble hearing the difference between letters sounds, linking the shapes and sounds of letters together, building strings of letter sounds up into words, breaking words down into their constituent sounds, understanding how word structure works, word retrieval and speed of processing.

In addition to the characteristics described in the Rose report, **The British Dyslexia Association (BDA)** acknowledges that some individuals with dyslexia can experience visual processing difficulties (including visual stress, visual tracking problems, problems with binocular vision, and difficulties with visual motor perception). They can experience letter and number reversals/mis-sequencing, lose their place when reading, see "moving" letters when looking at the page, experience symptoms of fatigue with close work, show difficulties with visual word recall, and experience copying difficulties. They may also be sensitive to the "glare" from the white page/board/screen and find that their eyes tire easily with reading. These difficulties can also affect reading musical notation. However, the strengths of these individuals can be many and varied: these can include artistic/design skills, verbal/visual creativity, and an original way of visualising/solving problems.
