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Dyslexia Defined

Dyslexia is a language-based learning disability. The Tennessee Department of Education has adopted the International Dyslexia Association's definition of dyslexia, which is as follows:

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin and is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.

International Dyslexia Association (2002)
<https://dyslexiaida.org/definition-of-dyslexia/>

School-based Identification of Characteristics of Dyslexia

Tennessee public schools are required to screen students for characteristics of dyslexia and provide dyslexia-specific interventions to those who are identified (Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229). Public schools do not assess and formally diagnose dyslexia; however, the identification of characteristics of dyslexia is sufficient to plan for and implement reading intervention for those students. Schools have procedures in place through the Response to Instruction & Intervention (RTI2) framework (or other similar means) to support this screening and identification.

Step 1: Universal Screener

Step 2: Dyslexia-specific Diagnostic Screener

Step 3: Tiered Interventions

Step 4: Progress Monitoring

School-based Identification of Characteristics of Dyslexia, cont'd

Step 1: Universal Screener

A skills-based universal screener for reading is given to all students in grades K-8 three times a year (in grades 9-12, multiple data sources are considered). This is a general indicator which checks if your child is meeting grade level expectations. This information is then compared to the student's performance with other classroom-based assessments. Students who are within the at-risk range (for example, a score below the 25th percentile on the universal screener) are then given dyslexia-specific survey-level screeners to identify specific intervention needs.

Step 2: Dyslexia-specific Diagnostic Screener

Students identified as "at-risk" based on the universal screener and other performance data are given dyslexia-specific survey-level assessments to identify specific skills deficits. In accordance with state law, this process assesses skills in the areas of phonological (sounds of language) and phonemic awareness (individual sounds in words), sound-symbol recognition (letter sounds), alphabet knowledge, decoding skills, rapid naming (the ability to name familiar items quickly from memory), and encoding (spelling) skills.

If your child does not show characteristics of dyslexia on this assessment, he/she should be placed in a tiered intervention group for direct instruction to address his/her specific skills deficits.

If your child does show characteristics of dyslexia, parents/guardians should be notified and provided with information about dyslexia, and your child should be placed in a tiered intervention group for dyslexia-specific intervention. A student does not have to be formally diagnosed with dyslexia in order to receive appropriate intervention. The school's survey-level assessments are sufficient to identify your child's needs and plan for dyslexia-specific intervention.

Step 3: Tiered Interventions

Tier I instruction is high quality, standards-based instruction that all students receive in the general education setting. If your child's screening scores indicate a need for additional skills-based support and instruction beyond the time allotted in his/her core reading class, he/she is placed in a Tier II intervention group, which is in addition to the Tier I instruction. This additional time is used to provide your child with high quality, dyslexia-specific intervention that addresses his/her specific area of need. If your child does not make adequate progress with Tier I and II interventions, or scores below a designated cut score on the universal screener (for example, below the 10th percentile), he/she is placed in a Tier III intervention group, which is in addition to the Tier I instruction. Tier III groups are smaller in size with more explicit and intensive interventions that target each student's specific needs. Students may be moved between the tiers depending on their progress over time. Dyslexia-specific interventions should be used in Tier II and Tier III if your child showed characteristics of dyslexia on the survey-level assessments.

Step 3: Tiered Interventions, cont'd

Dyslexia-specific Reading Intervention

Dyslexia-specific intervention is specialized instruction provided by a highly trained teacher. The teacher may use a commercial program that includes these principles:

- evidence-based: there is valid evidence through research that children can make gains when using the program to support reading, writing, and spelling skills
- multisensory: links the senses together during instruction; for example, the student hears the word, sees the word, says the word, and writes the word
- direct instruction: all skills are explicitly explained by the teacher with an I do, we do, you do sequence of modeling
- systematic: start with the easiest and most basic elements then progress to more difficult concepts
- cumulative: each step builds on the ones before it

This instruction should target your child's documented specific area of weakness in reading, as determined by the screeners, progress monitoring data, and other reading assessments conducted. Dyslexia-specific instruction should target the following skills:

- phonological awareness: the sounds of language, including phonemic awareness (for example, recognizing the three distinct sounds in the word *cat*)
- sound-symbol association: sounds matched to letters
- syllable structure: predictable patterns that support word decoding and spelling
- morphology: meaningful word parts such as prefixes, suffixes, and root words
- syntax: sentence structure
- semantics: word and phrase meanings

Step 4: Progress Monitoring

Students in Tier II and Tier III groups are regularly assessed (every one to two weeks) with reliable and valid measures that reflect their targeted instructional skills in order to gather data to make decisions regarding their progress during the intervention. You should receive notification of your child's progress about every 4.5 weeks while he/she is in Tier II or III intervention. These data are considered along with your child's progress on other school measures and along with teacher observations. Progress monitoring data is used to support a change in intervention intensity (for example, adding intensity by changing tiers, or increasing the frequency, length, or duration of the intervention sessions). The characteristics of dyslexia vary in severity from child to child. Some students may require the most intensive intervention while others may experience less difficulty and require less support.

Referral for Special Education Evaluation

If your child does not make adequate progress over time with increased intensity and differing instruction during tiered intervention, he/she may be referred for an evaluation in order to determine eligibility for a Specific Learning Disability in the suspected area of weakness. Please note that you may request a special education evaluation at any time. The RTI2 process cannot be used to delay or deny an evaluation. The school psychologist will conduct psychoeducational testing that is relevant to your child's suspected area of academic weakness. This information will be considered along with progress monitoring data, performance on district and/or state-wide testing, and school-based academic performance. If your student is in private school or homeschooled, you may request an evaluation by contacting your local public school district.

Referral for Special Education Evaluation, cont'd

Eligibility for Special Education Services/Section 504 Plan

Your child's testing may reveal that he/she does not meet the standards for a Specific Learning Disability in reading. In that case, your child should continue to receive intervention services in the appropriate tier setting and will continue to receive progress monitoring in order to regularly assess his/her skills growth and tier placement. If your child continues to struggle in general education classes, you may choose to request a Section 504 plan to support your child through accommodations. Students with characteristics of dyslexia should be eligible for a 504 plan if the impairment limits their learning, and parents are not required to obtain a private diagnosis to prove their child has a disability that is substantially limiting learning. A Section 504 plan contains specific accommodations your child may need to fully access the curriculum.

Your child's testing may show that he/she meets the standards for a Specific Learning Disability in Reading Comprehension. A Specific Learning Disability in Reading Comprehension does not meet the definition of dyslexia and will require focused

intervention to address areas of weakness specific to reading comprehension.

Your child's testing may reveal that he/she meets the standards for a Specific Learning Disability in Basic Reading Skills or Reading Fluency. This meets the definition of dyslexia ("...is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities"). Your student support team will meet to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) which should include dyslexia-specific reading intervention (refer back to step 3) through special education services to address his/her areas of underachievement. The most intensive intervention efforts are provided through special education (for example, intensity can be impacted by group size, frequency, length, and duration of intervention, and type of intervention). Accommodations (changes to how a student learns the material) and modifications (changes to what the student is taught or expected to learn) included in the IEP should be based on your child's individual pattern of strengths and weaknesses.

Accommodations and Modifications

Discussions about accommodations and modifications at a 504 meeting or an IEP meeting should focus on allowing full access to the teaching curriculum and full expression of your child's knowledge. Modifications should be carefully considered to ensure that learning expectations are not reduced.

Following are examples of accommodations that may support the needs of a student with dyslexia:

- Audio books
- Text-to-speech technology
- Oral testing or prompting
- Extended time on assignments involving reading and writing
- Extended time on assessments
- Writing options: print, cursive, or word processing
- Grading assignments for content without penalizing for spelling errors
- Audio recorder for orally presented information
- Avoid having child read or spell aloud
- Use spelling words that assess specific features (ie., syllable types)
- Provide copies of teacher's or peer's notes
- Use of graphic organizers
- Pre-teach new, essential vocabulary words when introducing content

Evaluate your Child's Support at School

Use this information to guide an informal evaluation of your child's current level of support in school. You may choose to request a student support meeting to benefit from the insight your child's teachers and other team members will offer regarding your child's performance. Your review can then be used to reinforce and/or modify your child's current school-based reading intervention supports.

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- I know my child's universal screener scores for reading:** yes / no
reading scores below the 25th percentile indicate a need for survey-level screening and intervention
- My child was assessed with a dyslexia-specific screener that showed characteristics of dyslexia:** yes / no
list areas of strengths and weaknesses revealed from the testing
 - phonological and phonemic awareness
 - sound-symbol recognition
 - alphabet knowledge
 - decoding skills
 - rapid naming
 - encoding skills
- My child's specific needs are identified and targeted with individualized, specific instruction:** yes / no
List tier placement and the specific skills and instruction used to address needs
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- My child is receiving dyslexia-specific interventions:** yes / no
List programs and materials used that match dyslexia-specific instruction principles
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- I am receiving a monthly update on my child's progress in Tier II or Tier III:** yes / no
review the progress reports to determine growth with skills
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- Due to ongoing struggles with reading skills in class, and a lack of progress in Tier II or Tier III, I have requested a formal evaluation at school for special education eligibility:** yes / no
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