DYSLEXIA

Tennessee Center for the Study and Treatment of Dyslexia

Spring 2020

Taking a Step Back to Consider the Whole Child

Typically, we start off each newsletter with a message from me. And other members of the center's team write the other pieces that go into the newsletter. To date, readers have not known who has written our newsletter. However, those of us who write it all agreed that I should put my name to the words that I write for this one. And we decided that what I write would be a little longer than usual.

I wear many hats. I am a published and recognized researcher in the area of memory and language. I am a full professor of Psychology. I hold an endowed chair. I am the editor of a peer-reviewed research journal. I serve as a regular theme editor and on the editorial board of a publication on language and literacy written for educators. And I am often asked to review the research and grants of other researchers to help determine if their research will be published or funded.

I am also a person who has struggled in the past and continues to struggle as a result of dyslexia. And I am the parent of a child who struggles due to dyslexia. Something that might come as a surprise to you based on what I have just shared, I am a trained reading therapist. I completed two years of training at Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Children. One of the hardest things that I have ever done in my life but also one of the most rewarding has been to teach children with dyslexia how to read and spell. Sure, being a neuroscientist is no walk in the park, but neither is being a reading teacher.

All of the training that I have received makes me a research practitioner. I am trained and qualified to practice what I study. And vice versa. I am trained and qualified to study what I practice. Even though I do not spend most of my days teaching reading, I continue to work with children and families using my practical skills. As a research practitioner, this is a must for me because it keeps my practical skills fresh. It keeps me honest when I work with teachers in schools across the country. It also helps me when I teach graduate students in various programs within the College of Education at MTSU. One way that I keep my practical skills sharp is to consult with parents about their children's literacy skills and school experiences. I recently provided such a consultation for a family. Their child was in the fifth grade, and he had been identified as needing support within the general education setting in tiers 2 and 3. This happened early in grade 1. He then received a structured intervention to target his reading and spelling deficits for several years. Those efforts remediated his deficits in phonological awareness and word reading skills. And when I met him, he was making A's and B's in his classes. However, he was still a slow reader, he struggled with spelling, and writing was a challenge for him. These continued struggles had been documented by testing recently conducted by his school.

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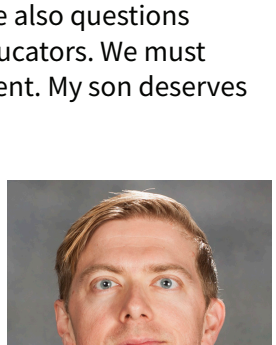
His parents consulted with me because the school was struggling to justify continued intervention for their son. So, the family came in, and I looked at the kiddo and asked, “What do you need to help you in school?” He said, “I have a hard time writing because of my spelling and handwriting." That seemed reasonable. Then I looked at the little boy and asked, “How are the spelling tests going?” He said, “Well, not so good. I study 45 minutes every night, and then I go in and take the tests and do not do very well on them. Last week my teacher graded my test and looked at me and said, ‘You obviously are not working hard enough at home on this.’” I could see the pain in his eyes as he said that.

So, I took a breath and said, “You have a long life ahead of you to keep learning how to forgive people for what they do not know. Your teacher cannot see the work that you do outside of school to get that grade. She does not see the extra time that it takes you to get through your nightly readings for school. It was hurtful to you that she said those things based on what she did not know. It would have been more helpful if she had asked you how much time you had spent studying and what you had done to prepare for the test.” I continued. “But this is not going to go away. People often do not see the effort that goes into what each of us does to get by in life. It is invisible to them. We have to learn to have the compassion to forgive people for things that they do not know—as we hope that they will have the compassion to forgive us for those things that we do not know. And we have to always remember that their words do not define who we are as people. It is how we respond to their words that defines who we are.”

The words I spoke to him in those moments rang true with his experiences and my own. I encourage those of you reading this to think of ways that you can make what is hidden visible. Also, I would ask you to consider the following questions: How can you choose your words to reflect your strong desire to help others and build them up, not inadvertently tear them down? What systems of support can we put around children like this one to allow him to experience success in school and life? There is no one right or wrong answer to these questions. However, they are questions that we all should ask ourselves if we are educators or advocates for children and families. They are also questions that parents should ask themselves when considering how they interact with educators. We must keep in mind that compassion flows both ways. I share that perspective as a parent. My son deserves compassion, and so does his teacher.

Returning back to the needs of the students, one way to address the needs of this student and all students is through instructional support. We can also keep in mind that literacy is reading and writing. Writing requires an ability to spell, and spelling is impacted by dyslexia. Spelling is a skill that many children who are not affected by dyslexia struggle with as well. Another way that we can address concerns that raise these questions is through accommodations, which is the focus of this newsletter. ■



Tim Odegard, Ph.D., chairholder, Murfree Chair of Excellence in Dyslexic Studies

Tim Odegard serves as the associate editor of *Annals of Dyslexia* and on the editorial board of *Perspectives on Language and Literacy*. These official publications of the International Dyslexia Association feature peer-reviewed research, as well as practical articles for educators, respectively.

Recent Findings

Assistive Technology May Improve Reading

A student with dyslexia may struggle to read grade-level materials. Leveraging an accommodation such as text to speech may help them access it. Further, many technological tools exist to support individuals with reading difficulties. Some examples include text-to-speech programs, audio books, and reading pens. Yet, there is less empirical research about the effectiveness of these tools. A big question is whether using the tools improves a student's comprehension of material.

A recent article published in *Journal of Learning Disabilities* in 2018 by a respected group of reading researchers starts to answer this question. We spoke to the lead author of this article, Sarah Wood, M.S. Wood and her co-authors examined 22 separate studies that met research standards. All of the studies involved students with reading difficulties. They measured reading comprehension ability under different conditions. The materials were read aloud by either a human reader, recorded human voice, or computerized text-to-speech program. The authors examined several features of the studies. They examined characteristics of the tests used, and the individual participants. The studies used several different tools and tests. This highlights the wide range of available tools. Despite these many differences, a pattern emerged. Using text-to-speech tools significantly helped students with their reading skills.

Overall, the study found text-to-speech to be helpful. When the participants used text-to-speech tools, their reading comprehension scores improved. Yet, how much the tools helped to increase a student's scores depended on several factors. The material to be read and the specific assistive technology tool chosen mattered. A specific tool may help one student more than another. One insight from this review article is the potential impact of individual differences. There are several things to consider when choosing assistive technology tools. These things include the task at hand and a student's own strengths and weaknesses. The tools exist to help the student gain independence when exploring texts. The tools do not replace the need for Structured Literacy instruction. Students can use assistive technology anytime they interact with written material. It enables them to engage with written material across subject areas in the classroom and beyond. ■

Using text-to-speech tools significantly helped students with their reading skills.

The full citation for this review article is below for those interested in exploring it themselves.

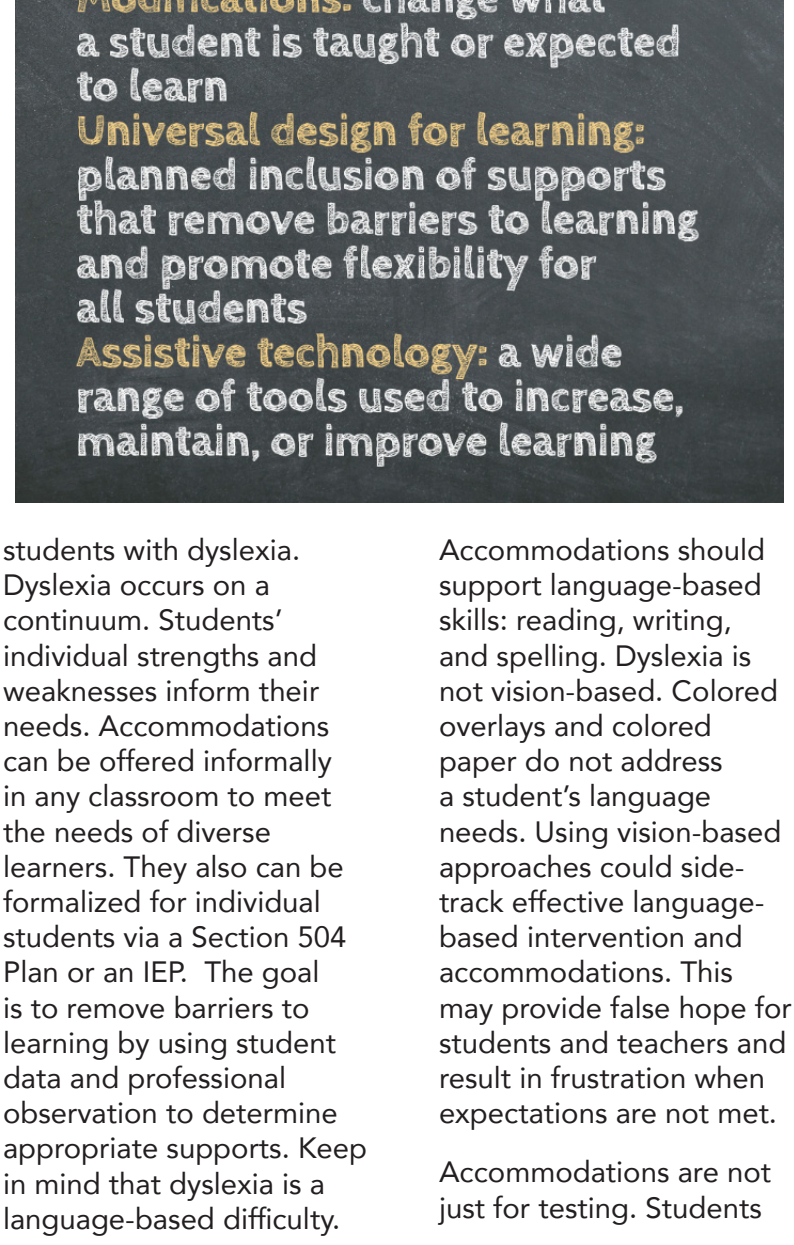
Wood, S.G., Moxley, J.H., Tighe, E. L., & Wagner, R. K. (2018). Does use of text-to-speech and related read-aloud tools improve reading comprehension for students with reading disabilities? A meta-analysis. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 51(1), 73 – 84.

Emily Farris, Ph.D., assistant director for educational services and research initiatives

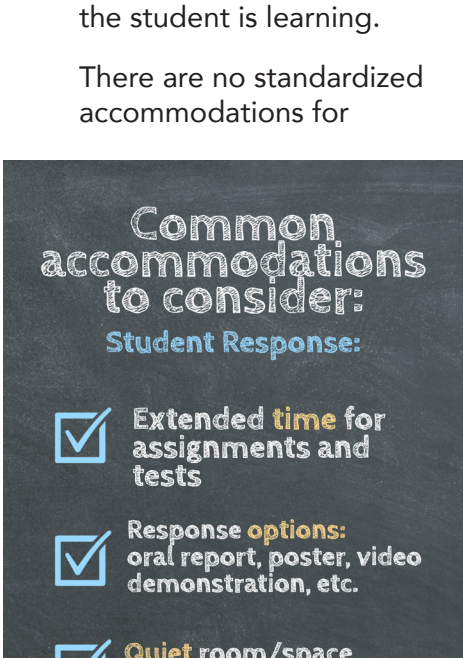
Instruction Matters

Embracing Accommodations in the Classroom

Dyslexia impacts language skills, such as reading, spelling, and writing. Many students with characteristics of dyslexia need supports during the school day to fully access instruction and materials. Students also may benefit from accommodations that offer flexibility in how they show their learning. Accommodations adjust how information is presented (by both the teacher and the student). They do not change or lower expectations for what the student is learning.

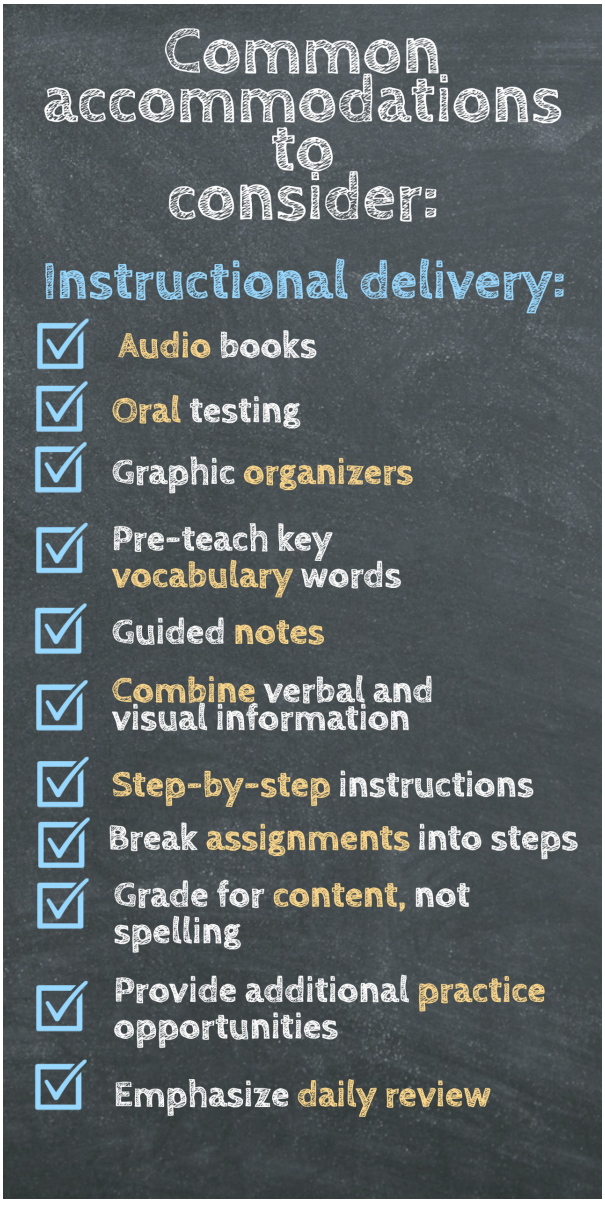


There are no standardized accommodations for students with dyslexia. Dyslexia occurs on a continuum. Students' individual strengths and weaknesses inform their needs. Accommodations can be offered informally in any classroom to meet the needs of diverse learners. They also can be formalized for individual students via a Section 504 Plan or an IEP. The goal is to remove barriers to learning by using student data and professional observation to determine appropriate supports. Keep in mind that dyslexia is a language-based difficulty.



Accommodations should support language-based skills: reading, writing, and spelling. Dyslexia is not vision-based. Colored overlays and colored paper do not address a student's language needs. Using vision-based approaches could side-track effective language-based intervention and accommodations. This may provide false hope for students and teachers and result in frustration when expectations are not met.

Accommodations are not just for testing. Students



need daily access to instruction and materials in all classes. Most students do not need modifications, which would change or lower learning expectations. Accommodations give access to grade-level curriculum and allow students to show what they know despite their reading skills weaknesses. Consider the student and the learning environment to select appropriate accommodations. Student considerations include grade, strengths, and weaknesses. Learning environment includes instructional materials, presentation of concepts, assignment, and testing requirements. Student needs can change over time as skills build, so accommodation needs may change as well.

Students are more likely to use their accommodations and self-advocate when they are part of a school culture that welcomes their ability to thrive using accommodations. Universal design for learning (planning daily instruction with built-in supports for all students) can de-stigmatize the use of accommodations and benefit the learning of all students. Flexibility with instructional methods and student response encourages success for all students. ■

Melinda Hirschmann, Ed.D., CALP, assistant director for educational services and school outreach

Center News

Presenters at the International Dyslexia Association Conference

Congratulations to MTSU Ph.D. in Literacy Studies students Tamera Hutchings and Jessica Dainty for achieving national recognition in the field of literacy as presenters at the Reading, Literacy, and Learning Annual Conference for the International Dyslexia Association in Portland, Oregon. ■

Symposium presenters at the 2019 International Dyslexia Association Conference (l to r): back, Stephanie Al Otaiba Ph.D., and Tim Odegard Ph.D.; and front, Jennifer Stewart; Kristi Baker, M.Ed.; Tamera Hutchings, M.S. CCC-SLP; and Jessica Dainty, M.F.A.

Recent International Conference Presentations

Recent presentations at the Reading, Literacy, and Learning Annual Conference for the International Dyslexia Association in Portland, Oregon, Nov. 7 – 10, 2019:

"Persistently Poor Responders: How are They Different, How to Find Them, and How to Help Them Succeed?" presented by Emily A. Farris and Anna E. Middleton.

"From Assessment to Instructional Planning: Using Data to Identify and Teach Students" presented by Erin Alexander and Emily A. Farris

"Meeting the Needs of Individuals with Dyslexia Requires a Focus on All Teachers of Reading" presented by Timothy N. Odegard as part of a symposium on "Consensus on the Dyslexia Definition: Then, Now, and Next"

"Reading Profiles of Students in Response to Instruction and Intervention and Special Education" presented by Tamera Hutchings, and "Analysis of Diagnostic Information Provided by Published Tests of Decoding and Word Reading" presented by Jessica Dainty as part of a symposium chaired by Timothy N. Odegard and Stephanie Al Otaiba on "Data-Based Individualization: Intensifying Interventions for Elementary Students"

In Focus

Parent to Parent: Strategies to Help Your Child Succeed

One night this past May, I found myself visualizing a dream I had conjured many times before; only, this time my dream was reality! As I gazed at my son Aaron wearing his high school graduation robe, I recounted how quickly time had passed since his first day of kindergarten. Yet, I had to admit that there were moments when time stood awkwardly still, leaving me uncertain of how the next day would unfold. You know those moments: when the teacher suggests that something is "not quite right" with the way your child is performing; when a diagnosis leaves you frantically searching for the perfect cure; when tempers flare over late night battles to finish homework; when a new school year forces you to find a new "norm"; and when you realize you don't have all the answers and desperately need help. You know these moments because, you, too, know someone who struggles with reading.

Dawn Lile with son Aaron Lile at the Tennessee Center for the Study and Treatment of Dyslexia

Building Strengths

Can your child be paired with a classmate that struggles in areas where your child is strong? Aaron was teamed up with a student who struggled with social skills during part of the school day.

Can your child be the team leader for "hands-on" class projects? Science is a great subject to try this.

Can you relate your child's special interests to class assignments and projects to take the "dread" out of completing the task? Maybe a research paper topic can be LEGOs or sports.

As your child ages, can your child help with school jobs like being an office helper or filming announcements? Aaron filmed the morning announcements at school. He felt a responsibility that took the dread out of going to school each morning. Encourage your child to take "hands-on" classes as electives outside of his/her pathway in high school. These classes provide a nice break in the academic rigor of the school day.

In Focus

Parent to Parent: Strategies to Help Your Child Succeed, *continued from page 7*

As a mother who shares your anxiety and has cried your tears, let me offer you hope and encouragement as you battle the challenges of dyslexia. Not everything we tried worked and I certainly did not handle every situation well, but the challenges Aaron overcame and the surprise successes along the way made the results of our journey WELL worth the effort.

Fortunately, school systems today are better equipped to detect reading challenges early and implement appropriate intervention. Whether your child has an official diagnosis or you are still in the discovery phase accommodations may be necessary to help your child perform on grade level. Struggling readers need to learn to read, but don't halt the learning process by making "independent reading" the focus of every subject. With the right accommodations, a young historian can comb the pages of history and a mathematician-in-training can sieve through a word problem. Since schools have limited resources, "read-aloud" services are often reserved for major tests only. For this reason, I challenge you to "think outside the box."

To develop your child's sense of independence and lessen the strains of school resources, seek help from classmates, older student volunteers, and assistive technology. To keep your teacher from developing a separate set of assignments, consider the following: abbreviated homework assignments and tests, "hands-on projects" instead

Continuation of Accommodations

Can your child be paired with a classmate to read the assignment aloud? Can you request copies of lengthy class assignments be sent home the evening before to help prep your child or the evening of for you to help complete assignments? Can your child use assistive technology to aid in reading assignments at home or tests at school? Is another school instructor trained in a skill that your child needs to develop?

Once we identified a reading program that worked for Aaron, our elementary principal assigned a teacher from another area of the school to instruct Aaron's small group reading class. So many students benefited from this effort of "thinking outside the box." Keep in mind that struggling readers may also find note-taking and spelling to be difficult.

Would it be helpful to request a copy of the teacher's or a classmate's notes? Instead of blank note-takers, could the teacher provide a "filled-in" copy for your child to highlight the words others are writing?

If classwork needs to be copied off the board, ask permission for your child to take a picture with a device so that transcribing can be done with fewer errors.

Can a classmate review your child's agenda to make certain assignments and tests are documented correctly before going home each day? Perhaps spelling leniency can be requested as an accommodation for non-spelling tests and assignments.

Sometimes the length of the assignment or test precludes the struggling reader from completing it as accurately or independently. Can you request that on those, your child complete fewer questions—maybe only even or odd? Is it possible for your child to complete a dimensional project for an assignment instead of a written report? Most textbooks today are available online, but wireless connections and technology updates completed in the evenings can sometimes cause difficulty accessing the online versions when you need them most.

of written ones, filled-in note takers to highlight instead of taking notes, and advance copies of lengthy class assignments to review at home PRIOR to being assigned. While you search for the right accommodations, also look for ways to promote your child's strengths both at school and at home.

Remember to review accommodations periodically. Ask your child what is or isn't working. Keep open communication with your child's teacher so that necessary changes can be made to improve your child's performance and hopefully reduce dependency. As your child improves his or her reading deficit, extended time for testing is a helpful transition from "read-aloud" services. Remind yourself often that the ultimate goal for any struggling reader is to improve reading skills, develop coping mechanisms that lead to independence and lessen the need for accommodations. Once we found the right reading program for Aaron, we were amazed at how his spelling, penmanship, and writing skills also improved. Along with these skills, he developed a desire to become more independent and try more difficult tasks. As beneficial as accommodations are, I caution you to not allow them to become a crutch that hinders the academic gains your child can achieve. Most struggling students will admit that they long to be "normal." Choose accommodations that best mainstream your child.

Accommodations are crucial for leveling the playing field for struggling readers, but they are not effective if never implemented or done so out of obligation only. For this reason, fostering teamwork with faculty, staff, and administration is imperative for the success of your child's education. Consider each one to be a teammate and not an opponent. My asking "How can you help us?" was far more beneficial for Aaron than when I demanded that accommodations be met. A formal document affording accommodations should not be worn as a badge of honor. Resist the temptation to discuss accommodations until both your child and teacher have acclimated to the new school year and to one another. Keep open communication throughout the school year so that best practices can be implemented both at school and at home. Before you are tempted to complain out loud or send an accusing email to your child's school, take a moment to reflect on the goals for your child. Often the fire you might start with such actions will burn bridges that are difficult to rebuild, further distancing help that could benefit your child. Perhaps just as important, thank the team members working with your child. Accommodations require extra effort from faculty and staff. Offering to assist your teacher with other responsibilities can fortify this team approach.

In Focus

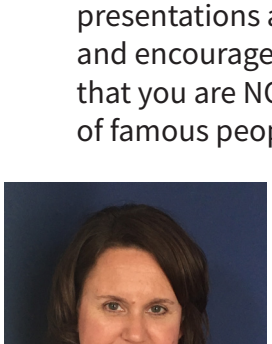
Parent to Parent: Strategies to Help Your Child Succeed, *continued from page 9*

Tips for Parents

- Work as a team with your child's teachers
- Attend workshops to gain knowledge and encouragement
- Review accommodations periodically to be sure they meet your child's current needs
- Consider assistive technology
- Teach your child to advocate for himself or herself
- Build on your child's strengths
- Celebrate achievements

One of the more challenging, yet surprisingly successful efforts in our journey was building Aaron's self-advocacy skills. We all desire to mold our children into independent, thriving additions to society. I agree it is difficult to step aside as your child's advocate, but the benefits can last a lifetime. Does stepping aside mean you will never advocate for your child again? Likely, no, but reserving your interaction for the bigger battles instead of the small skirmishes builds credibility for both you and your child, and it yields more productive results for each of you. When should you start? Today! Let your child ask for something you are confident your teacher will approve or that you have previously discussed with your teacher. Self-advocacy not only builds self-confidence and independence and addresses issues in a timely fashion, but it also establishes respect for your child from those involved. Surprisingly, learning to self-advocate can also lead to successful school-related and career interviews. In a world filled with technology, our children have limited opportunities to communicate face-to-face with adults. Knowing that Aaron advocates for himself today both in the workplace and on his college campus makes all the tears I shed while "letting go, to let him" worthwhile. Go ahead, stock up on your tissues and promote self-advocacy now!

Researching best practices can be easily done online, but I encourage you to attend live presentations and workshops. You not only learn from the facilitator, but you also glean advice and encouragement from others in attendance. This is also a great way to remind yourself that you are NOT alone in your journey. Take time to research with your child success stories of famous people with dyslexia and keep their success in mind when you face a hard day. Aaron held up the autograph line the day he met Henry Winkler. Winkler stood to shake Aaron's hand and offered his own encouragement when Aaron announced that he, too, has dyslexia. Celebrate all of your achievements both major and minor. Doing so just might make the next difficult step in your journey a little easier. Beware: accomplishing one goal often leads to the start of accomplishing another. The dream I now envision for Aaron involves wearing a college graduation robe. The journey will not be easy, but he is better equipped this time around and I know from experience the results will be well worth the effort.

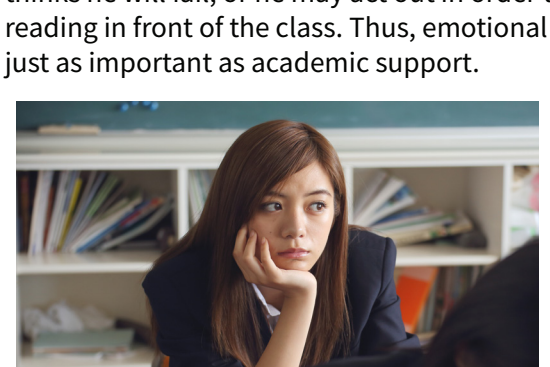


Dawn Lile is the parent of an MTSU student with dyslexia. Her son, Aaron Lile, was featured as a Dyslexia Success Story in this center's Fall 2019 newsletter.

In Focus

Emotional Support for Students with Dyslexia

For many students, dyslexia can lead to feelings of frustration, anger, anxiety, and embarrassment. Even though dyslexia is not a problem with intelligence, students may still feel that they are not as smart as their classmates. Some people may think these students are lazy when they are not. Often, they must work harder than their peers. Having difficulties in school also may lead to behavior problems in some children. For example, a child may refuse to complete work if he thinks he will fail, or he may act out in order to avoid reading in front of the class. Thus, emotional support is just as important as academic support.



What Some Children with Dyslexia May Experience

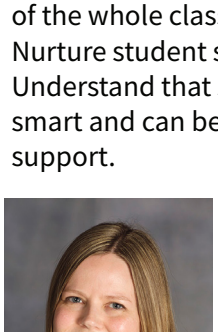
- Low self-esteem; feeling "dumb"
- Fear of failure or embarrassment
- Headaches or stomachaches due to anxiety about school
- Behavior problems

Some Things Parents Can Do to Help

- Learn as much as you can about dyslexia and discuss it with your child.
- Help your child understand that he is just as smart as other kids.
- Share dyslexia success stories so your child knows he can succeed and does not feel alone.
- Help your child recognize his strengths.
- Help your child develop skills and interests inside and outside of school.

Some Things Teachers Can Do to Help

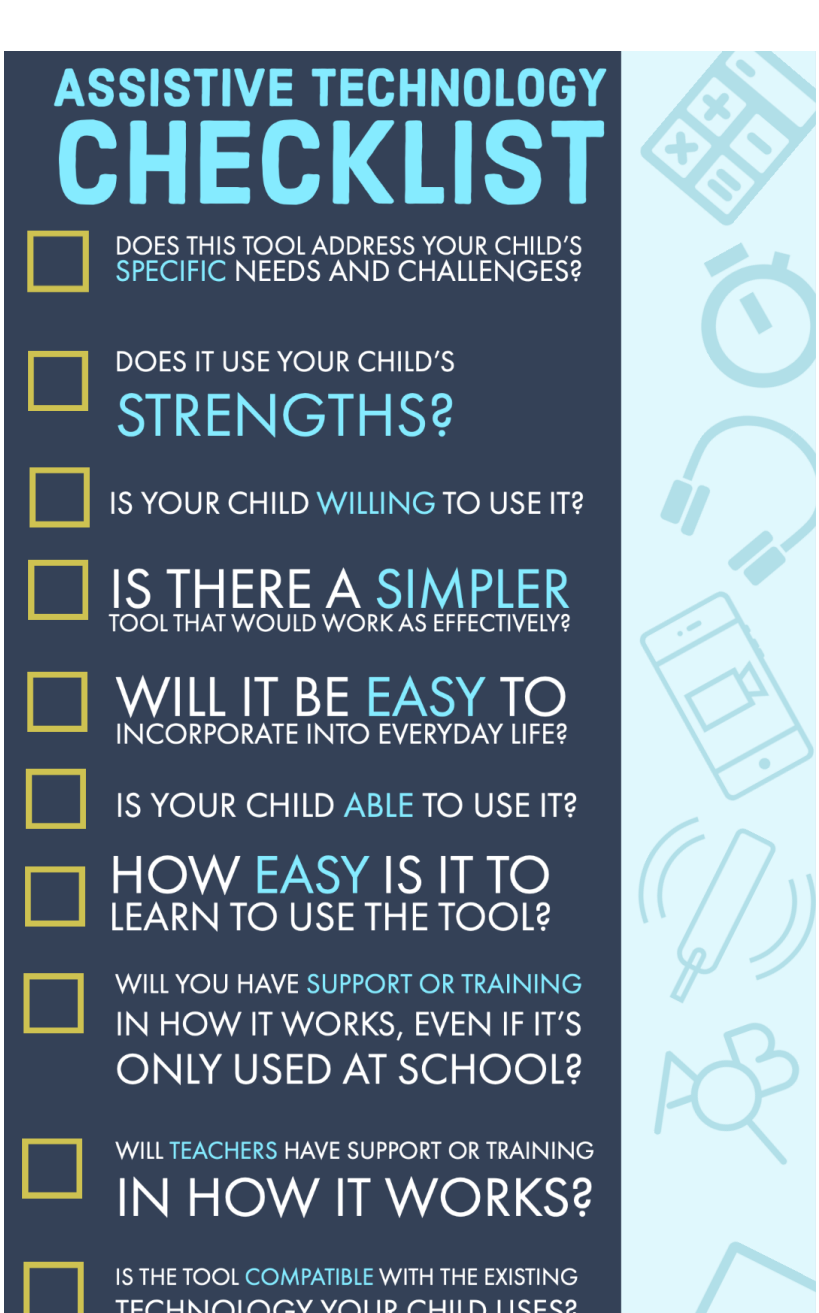
- Learn as much as you can about dyslexia.
- Screen all children for reading difficulties early so intervention can begin as soon as possible.
- Provide interventions shown to be effective in helping students improve reading and writing skills.
- Praise effort and hard work even when mistakes are made.
- Acknowledge what the student is doing right.
- Provide accommodations to students who need them.
- Provide various ways for students to access classroom material such as by listening to content.
- Find alternate ways for the student to demonstrate what he has learned.
- Do not require the student to read or spell in front of the whole class.
- Nurture student strengths and interests.
- Understand that students with dyslexia are smart and can be successful when given the right support.



Erin Alexander, Ed.S., NCSP, CALP, assistant director for clinical services

In Focus

Assistive Technology: Leveling the Playing Field for Students with Dyslexia



[1]Checklist adapated with permission of understood.org

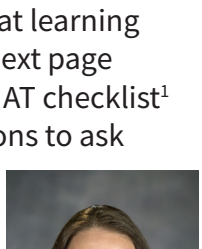
Students who struggle to read often need help to access the curriculum. Assistive technology (AT) can help level the playing field for students with dyslexia. AT helps students access the curriculum. While reading skills may be below grade-level expectations, comprehension skills are not. When a student uses AT to listen to textbooks, the student gains access to a text the student may not be able to read. The student also continues to grow background and vocabulary knowledge.

Using AT allows a student to show the knowledge they have gained in the classroom. Students who struggle to spell may limit the words used in a composition to the words they know how to spell. This may not reflect the knowledge a student has. Students use AT to compose an assignment which supports spelling, grammar, and vocabulary.

Many of our devices have AT built into them. Text-to-speech (TTS) is available in our phones, tablets, and PCs/laptops. TTS allows students to express their understanding of content. Speech-to-text (STT) allows students to check the accuracy of writing. STT allows students to confirm that the ideas they want to convey are being conveyed.

Students and their teachers benefit from AT. Students have the opportunity to show what they have learned. Teachers have the opportunity to help students learn and measure that learning accurately. The infographic on the next page describes types of AT available. The AT checklist[1] on this page lists some good questions to ask yourself, your student, and your school before selecting assistive technology.

Jennifer Flipse, Ph.D., CALP, director



ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD FOR STUDENTS WITH DYSLEXIA

TEXT-TO-SPEECH

Computer-generated voice reads selected text to learner

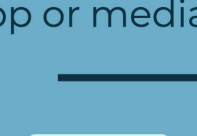
ALLOWS STRUGGLING READERS TO ACCESS CONTENT

AUDIOBOOKS

Pre-recorded reading of text played to learner through app or media

ALLOWS STUDENTS TO READ GRADE-LEVEL TEXT TO BUILD VOCABULARY AND BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE WHEN DECODING LEVEL IS BELOW GRADE LEVEL

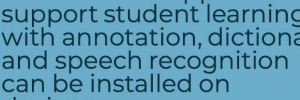
DEVICES



Software and apps to support student learning with annotation, dictionary, and speech recognition can be installed on devices.

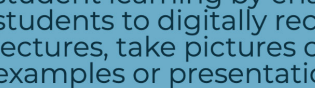
DEVICES WITH BUILT-IN ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY, LIKE SPEECH TO TEXT, HELP STUDENTS WITH READING AND WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS.

Mobile devices support student learning by enabling students to digitally record lectures, take pictures of examples or presentations, and use educational apps.



Assistive technology includes stand-alone devices like a scanning pen or voice recorder. AT also may be built into other devices, like spell-check.

Technology does not have to be high-tech. Low-tech options like graphic organizers, highlighters, and sticky notes also support student learning and comprehension.



Calculators can support students who struggle with recall of math facts. Organizational tools like timers and planners help students stay on track and manage their time.

Learners from around the globe attended the 2020 Fox Reading Conference

Supported by the Tom and Elizabeth Fox Endowment

Tennessee Center for the Study and Treatment of Dyslexia

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Workshops and Conferences

2020–21 Literacy Success Series

Direct, explicit, systematic literacy instruction in the tier 1/core setting benefits all developing readers. Students who are at risk for difficulty with reading development especially need core literacy instruction that is explicit and systematic. Our 2020 Literacy Success Series, “Addressing the Core Literacy Needs of All Students,” will offer 36 hours of professional development. The training will be developed over six days of learning offered across the school year. The series will focus on explicit instruction in both the language comprehension components and the word recognition skills needed for skilled reading, as exemplified in Hollis Scarborough’s Reading Rope model. Core instruction for the K–2 ELA block will be modeled using elementary core curriculum materials. The series will conclude with an examination of how to use student screening and curriculum-based data to intensify literacy instruction in the tier 1 and tier 2 settings.

Additional details coming soon! For updates: mtsu.edu/dyslexia

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