

Dyslexic Centre Australia

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Educating Square Pegs

Tips for Educating Your Dyslexic Child at Home

By Dawn Matthews

If you are home schooling your child because s/he was struggling at or hated school, then it's important that you don't fall into the trap of subjecting him/her to the same sort of teaching as school did.

Medieval clerk or creative inventor

If your child dislikes reading, is poor at spelling, or hates handwriting, then please do not fall into the trap of expecting him/her to become a medieval clerk. Schools want students to be good bookkeepers with fast mental maths abilities, and beautiful, neat, perfectly-spelt handwriting.

If your child is not good at these things, or rebels, then turn him/her instead into a twenty-first century creative inventor!

Learning should be great fun!

Don't let relatives and friends make you feel guilty because your child is having fun. The more fun your child is having, the more your child will learn.

Also, do not fall into the trap of thinking that you have to use materials similar to the ones schools use. There is so much out there now, and much of it is free.

If you are home educating your child because s/he struggles in mainstream education, please don't try to turn your child into a round peg. Accept that your child is a square peg, and that square pegs are way smarter in so many ways.

Is your child a square peg that thinks outside the box?

Schools generally cater for "round pegs". If your home child is a "square peg", then you need to teach in a way that works for "square pegs".

I spend a lot of my time helping home education parents and children. Many children in urban areas are home educated because they were struggling in mainstream education, but their parents do not know how to change the teaching approach to fit their child; often they continue to teach their child in the same way that school did.

If your child was struggling at school, s/he was most probably not struggling because of the school environment, but because of the way s/he was taught, and the materials that were used.

For example, today schools teach reading by means of the “whole word” system, and it is believed that students will just absorb the information and pick it up without really being taught it. But you have to **teach** children with dyslexia to read and write using multi-sensory phonics.

So, you have to change the teaching method and approach to fit your child. I develop personal learning programmes for children like this, by assessing in detail how they learn and what their strengths and weaknesses are. As a result, you end up with a programme that is tailored exactly to your child’s needs. Whilst I obviously cannot do this in an article, there are things that I find myself saying again and again, and suggestions that I give to practically everyone. Here are some of them:

Computers and calculators

There are two things that I am always telling children.

The first is that computers are really quite good at spelling and tend also to be neat.

The second is that calculators, the ordinary \$10 ones, are really very good at arithmetic!

And both will almost certainly still be around when you grow up.

So, parents, let your children use these things!

Suggestions

I consider the best maths programme in Australia to be Matheletics

(www.matheletics.com.au). It costs less than \$100 a year, keeps records of what your child has done, and gives rewards. Children love getting the rewards and so are inclined to work harder. I strongly suggest repeating the same concept until the child has mastered it and is ready to move on. Then it becomes like the Kumon maths, and children who struggle at school mostly do better if a thing is repeated until completely mastered. (Editor’s note:

Mathletics is available to HEN members for \$30 per student per year - email

Colita@hollyburton.com.au to enrol)

Weighing and measuring

You do not have to use maths books or worksheets at all if you don’t want to. I prefer using practical activities such as cooking (for weights and measurements), shopping (for money) and making things (for measurement). If you want to use books or worksheets, I recommend using the practical activities as well.

Coins and Money

Please don’t get books with pictures of money and ask your child to answer the questions.

Give your child real tasks. I advise keeping a box of coins. I have heaps of coins and use them to demonstrate many concepts in maths, including basic addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. If you have the old one and two cent coins, you can use them to teach hundreds, tens and units. Children love being able to handle real money, and the ability to handle money with confidence is an essential life skill, and a must for adult life.

Ideas

- * Come up with a menu for a dinner once a week within a budget and let your child actually buy the ingredients.
- * Give your child a certain amount of pocket money each week or, better still, pay your child for doing jobs. Make up the pay in different combinations of coins and/or notes. Encourage your child to save up for things, and repeatedly count the money.
- * Set up a pretend shop. Your child will need to work out change when selling things to you. There are many more ideas for hands-on maths teaching in my book *Dyslexia-How to Win*.

Times tables

If your child is having really big problems with times tables, please remember three things.

1 They need to understand the concept of multiplication and division.

2 From the time they get their first mobile phone they will always have a calculator on them, because now all mobile phones have calculators. So it is no longer a necessity to know tables off by heart.

3 But you do need to know your two times table, and be able to count by twos in odd numbers (1,3,5, etc.) in order to be able to find houses which are numbered odd one side of the road, and even the other.

You also need to know your five times table to be able to read an analogue clock, and you need your 10's as we have a binary counting system.

I teach the concepts by actually sharing out things between drawings of children, dolls, etc. (I actually have drawings of children in my book *Dyslexia- How to Win* just for this purpose.)

So, 3 multiplied by 4 becomes three dolls with 4 coins each.

12 divided by 3 becomes 12 coins shared between 3 dolls. Always ask your child to guess the answer before working it out because when they guess the answer fairly accurately, you know that they have mastered the concept.

Telling Time

If your child has dyslexia or dyspraxia, s/he may well be having big problems with analogue clocks (i.e. clocks with hands). If this is happening to your child, then buy your child a digital watch and encourage him/her to time things and keep time lines until s/he knows when everything happens, and can predict how long half an hour, for example, is. There are tons of good boys' digital watches but few places sell watches for girls. At present you can get one from K-Mart or Smiggle.

Make sure s/he always wears the digital watch and then you can delay teaching analogue clocks for a while. Most children with dyslexia are not ready to learn these until they are at least 10 years old. My eldest son did not learn to read an analogue clock until he was seventeen.

Learning by taking things apart

It's relatively easy to get old electronics or motor-driven things; there's always some area where people are throwing old stuff away on the footpath. People with dyslexia need to know how things work. We hate just being told that a thing is so and, quite frankly, we are

inclined to not believe it until it has been proven to us. So collect some free gadgets and let your child take them apart and see how they work.

Google Earth and Google Images

These two applications are wonderful teaching tools. I suggest to many families that they follow the news, picking out one item every week or so that their child is interested in, and then research it.

First, use Google Earth to find its location. Remember that Google Earth is a couple of years in the past so you will not see the event, but it helps to learn where places are. (I left school not understanding the difference between South Africa and South America! And once I taught an eight year old with dyslexia who thought the world was flat because there was a flat map of it on the classroom wall!) Google Earth is also great for looking up where relatives and friends live.

Then look at Google Images or photos of the place.
Children with dyslexia learn so much more from photos than from text.

Then find ten interesting facts about the place and type them up. Print out some images and put them all in a folder. Let your child decide what s/he wants to study; after all, this is what will happen in the “real world” once they are adults.

Work sheets

Please don't fall into the school trap of using sheets covered in text with blanks for your child to fill in. Believe me, most children hate them, and there are so many out there. If you find something boring, then your children probably will too. Teach them that learning is fun. That way, they will carry on learning all their lives.

I do strongly suggest that the only other things you buy are books your child is interested in, and fun games.

Auditory Processing

If your child was struggling to understand and comprehend what the teachers at school were saying, it is very likely that s/he has an auditory processing problem. Now you can have this tested by a hearing clinic or you can merely buy a CD course that will help sort it. The course is called “**Earobics**” and can be bought from **Multisense Technology at www.learn4u.com.au**. Your child needs to do about 15 minutes a day until it's finished. It's a bit boring, so some bribery may be needed. Basically, it's much the same as the “Fast Forward” programme, which costs a lot more.

Reading and writing

Contrary to what school will have told you, children with learning differences do not pick up reading quicker by being made to do it more often.

These children need multi-sensory, phonics-based learning of letter sounds, rules etc. I have written one this year as nobody else seemed to be coming up with a good, really simple and fun one! I sell it from my site. If you do buy my *Dead Easy Phonics* then this is all you need to teach literacy - it covers everything. But do not buy any of the other games from my site as they are all in this one course as well as much, much more.

There are twelve golden rules I stick to

1 Multi-sensory phonics – say, hear, see and feel the letter sounds, all at the same time.

I do this with printout sheets and audio files. The course needs to be structured and repetitive, and cover as many rules and sounds as possible.

2 Teach children how to punctuate their own work, rather than some other person's.

Learning to punctuate other people's writing is a great skill to have if your dream is to become an editor but, trust me, no child with dyslexia or dyspraxia is going to want to be an editor when s/he grows up.

Everyone has different writing styles and each person, unless they are going to become an editor, only needs to punctuate their own writing. It's easiest to do this while word processing because you then do not have to keep rewriting it.

3 Avoid eye-strain by using a voice-over for much of the research.

Free instructions on how to get these to work on your computer, or downloading a free one, can be found at www.dyslexicentreaustralia.org.au . Click on the top menu bar, labelled "voiceovers".

These also make great editing tools. I use them all the time.

Also, children with dyslexia find it easier to read if the text has a coloured background.

You can get another free piece of software called Screen Tinter Lite at www.bltt.org/software/screentinterlite/index.htm which allows you to select a colour tint for the background on the screen. Likewise, these children find it easier to type with this application as a background. If you have a Mac computer this will not work for you.

Instead, I always type in blue or pink text, as this is much easier to look at. Let your child choose the colour they prefer.

4 Teach the "stupid" irregular words in a different way from the "good" regular words.

"Good" words are words which can be sounded out when phonics and rules are known. I teach "stupid" ones with games, which I have published at almost no cost. The instructions for *My Fun Dictionary* is a freebie on my site.

5 Children hate writing journals! Please encourage them to be creative. I sell a \$5.00 game of interesting words, called *Writing is Fun*, that is so much more fun. They have to learn that writing can be powerful; when writing, you can kill things, and blow up schools! Let them do this.

6 Please prepare them for life beyond school where you need three writing skills.

*** To type or word process.**

Get them word processing as soon as possible. I use my \$5.00 word game to teach typing. People with dyslexia are unlikely to be 10 finger typists as we have to sound out every word, so touch typing skills are not needed. And anyway, the world is now full of two finger typists – including me! All they need to learn is where the keys are on this QWERTY keyboard

*** To sign a signature.**

Practice this.

*** To print in block capitals when filling in hard copy forms.**

Please get real forms to fill out. Your child can help you fill out forms but also practice on forms from banks, etc.

7 You do not actually need to handwrite at all once leaving school. Handwriting is virtually an extinct beast!

And writers nowadays do not need to hand write first drafts! When they short- list authors for the Booker prize, they do not write and ask for the first hand-written draft! I have no idea why so many schools insist on two handwritten drafts before typing up the finished copy. The only logical explanation for this is that 20 years ago we used actual typewriters, and you could not correct work typed up this way. Could schools be that old-fashioned?

8 If your child has a learning difference, and finds reading hard, then use voice-overs and get talking books from the library. This way, your child will learn about complex sentence structure. And if they are not interested in the first three you get, allow them to keep choosing until they find one they enjoy. Encourage them to be picky about what they read or listen to. Adults only read a book if they find it interesting. This rule should apply to children also. **They need to get a reward for reading, and that reward has to be pleasure. If it's boring as all hell, do not give it to your child.**

9 The single most important aspect in writing is the content. You will never get a book published by merely being a good speller! You will only get it published if people want to read it. I do advocate that people with dyslexia learn to word process well, but this skill only becomes useful if the content of the work is good. Jamie Oliver actually dictates his books.

10 These children learn from doing, working out, and watching, not from reading, or being given long verbal instructions. Let them work out how a thing is done. Let them explore it. They will only ever remember a thing if they completely understand it. So allow them as much time as possible to explore something. Only move on when they are happy to do so.

LOTE

The curriculum states that children have to learn a language and culture other than English. For children with learning differences, such as dyslexia or dyspraxia, I make two suggestions:

1 Aboriginal paintings. They do actually have a language in their art, which is pictorial. Patterns and shapes mean things, and every painting tells a story. These stories come from the core of their culture. This is interesting to learn and I think that every child living in Australia should understand this, and it in no way competes with learning English. To find them, go to Google Images and type in "Australian Aboriginal symbols and meanings". Here are some:

2 There is one language that is almost international. I am told it varies a bit from country to country, but if we were all to learn sign language as a second language it wouldn't half-help deaf people! And it's good for children to understand what it's like to not hear anything. Use this as a way of understanding what it's like for such people.

Golden rule number eleven – and you thought I'd forgotten the last two, hadn't you?

11 Concentrate on what your child is good at and enjoys doing, because this is what s/he may well be doing for the rest of his/her life. The single most important thing when teaching children with dyslexia or dyspraxia is to discover their strengths, and this is what does not happen at school.

Many of these children excel at design, photography, art, acting, sport, engineering, architecture, hair dressing and fashion, and most things practical.

12 Oh, and one more golden piece of advice!

Please, if you remember nothing else, remember that confidence is way more important than literacy. It is certainly far more important than being a good speller or a fast reader.