

Socio-Emotional Support for Children with Learning Difficulties

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What is dyslexia?

Children with dyslexia are as smart as other children, yet display a gap between their potential and their academic performance. Their academic difficulties are not due to a problem with their intelligence (their IQ is usually average or higher). Only, their brains are wired differently, impacting how they receive and process information. These children could face difficulties in reading, spelling, writing or mathematics. In addition, they could also display difficulties in executing functions, like organisation, planning and prioritisation, and impulse and emotional control.

In a school environment, a child is required to display the acquired academic skills for the most part of the day. When a child struggles to read, spell, copy from the board, write an answer or do maths, most often, teachers and parents feel frustrated, and peers tend to mock and ridicule the child. The child is labelled as 'loser', 'lazy' or 'slow'. Well-meaning caregivers and teachers relentlessly urge the child to practice in order to improve their academic performance. The overwhelmed child struggles to break out of this image and to integrate with peers. Very often, these experiences scar the emotional wellness of the child and manifest as stumbling blocks in learning and other achievements.

A child's emotional wellness is directly influenced by peers, immediate family, school teachers and workers. A child who is happy in some environments is distressed in others. For instance, a child with reading difficulties could be good on the race track. Participation in track-and-field events would make him happy and stress-free, giving him a sense of wellbeing. On the other hand, the failure faced in reading sessions, and possible ridicule might leave a deep scar; as a result of which, this child may gradually retract into a shell inside the classroom. What a stressful life for a school-going child with baggage that could wear him down!

How to help this child

Assessment

Reiterating that children with dyslexia are as smart

as any others in the class, they, nevertheless need to be taught in the way they learn, that is, in the unique learning style that each one requires. The Individualised Education Plan (IEP) that uses the strengths of the child to develop the required skills forms the basis of this support system. These remedial sessions are systematic, structured, multi-modal and integrated with the approach of Multiple Intelligences.

This supportive action is possible only after a child is suspected or identified with dyslexia as the cause for the academic struggle. Systematic observation (using a checklist) of the child's performance by the child's teacher(s) would help to identify the nature of these difficulties. If required, an assessment (conducted by a special educator or trained psychologist) using standardised tools can be used to determine the areas of difficulties, the associated sub-skills and the extent of difficulties.

The assessment report can facilitate multi-pronged interventions. In addition to being the basis of remedial support, the report might recommend activities to build and sustain the essential skills needed. It also brings into focus classroom accommodations and concessions for board examinations.

Classroom and examination accommodations

Classroom accommodations help the child focus on learning rather than spending their effort on the sub-task, the skill for which has not been acquired by her. For example, a child with difficulties in the mechanical aspects of writing would be expending all her efforts in copying from the board/book or writing down the notes, with little or no bandwidth left for understanding the same. If she were given permission to use a voice recorder or photocopied notes, this child would be able to scale up her efforts to gain from the classroom session.

Similarly, every examination board offers a variety of concessions for children with dyslexia in high school. Some boards offer exemptions from mathematics (when the child has difficulties with numbers) or from a second language (when

the child has definite language difficulties). Other concessions include additional time, the use of a calculator, the support of a scribe or a reader etc. These supportive systems remove the stress of dealing with the difficulties posed by dyslexia, thereby giving the student a stimulating environment of performing well in other areas.

Classroom processes and peer group sensitisation

Life at school is not only about exams and academic performance; day-to-day activities could pose challenges too. Take, for instance, read-aloud sessions that play an important role in the teaching-learning process in schools. Some children with dyslexia could have a good understanding of the language but may face difficulties in reading and this individual read-aloud session could be an extreme challenge for these children. As a natural response, a child with dyslexia is likely to withdraw into a shell, lose interest in class and perhaps even drop out of school.

In such a situation, the teacher could adopt the 'phrasal reading' and the 'buddy system' after she carries out model reading. The teacher could encourage the struggling reader to group the words before the verb into a chunk and similarly the words after the verb into another. As a result, instead of reading word-by-word, the child would read by pausing briefly between short meaningful phrases. Model reading by the teacher followed by a group reading familiarises the children with text and new words. A 'reading buddy' provides the required scaffolding while phrasal reading provides support by chunking. This builds confidence in the child to participate in class activities without the fear of being shamed for his reading difficulty. The 'buddy system' not only helps the child with dyslexia but also helps all children exhibit a caring and responsible disposition towards them.

This is achievable only when peer sensitisation is done by parents and teachers. Helping students understand dyslexia and the difficulties it poses, giving equal opportunities, recognising the strengths of children with dyslexia, and tackling bullying of these children are some steps in this direction. This permits a better understanding of disabilities and establishes a social responsibility of providing appropriate support to help children with dyslexia reach their potential.

Recognition of talents

A school day is not just for academic work. Many opportunities arise for the display and

consequent recognition of a child's innate gifts and talents. These build self-worth. Very often, the unsatisfactory academic performance of children with dyslexia leads to a bias and they are also side-lined during the selection of children for activities that require non-academic skills, such as participation in the Annual Day. It is important for teachers to recognise that for a child with dyslexia, the opportunity to harness innate talents is very significant – the recognition of their talents builds their confidence and consequently, their interest in school. The strengths pave the way to better learning and overcoming the problems that arise due to their needs.

Play

Play is an important route for socio-emotional development. An environment that fosters inclusive play gives the child with dyslexia the required opportunities for building executive functions through peer learning. What better strategies could there be for equipping oneself with life skills like impulse control, flexible thinking, organisation, self-monitoring etc?

In addition, play is an accepted alternate route to many literacy skills. For instance, language development takes place very organically, as it provides many opportunities for hearing new words and their usage in different contexts and then applying these correctly. Similarly, concepts of more-less, big-small are an integral part of play. Many games include counting and scorekeeping, thereby giving opportunities for building numeracy skills. The non-academic ambience fostered by play can nurture a child with dyslexia.

Where does one start?

The above supportive measures are possible only when all those most involved with the child – parents and teachers – are aware of the child's neurological condition and accept it. Hence, it is essential to conduct awareness programmes that bring to the fore the various aspects of this neurological condition. Schools could collaborate with professionals in this domain to conduct such programmes. Enlightened parents and teachers would be able to interact with the children with dyslexia with an appreciation of their strengths and an understanding of their deficits. Not only would they be able to establish a nurturing environment but will also be able to proactively take the first steps towards appropriate intervention.

Together, these supportive actions by the team

(parents, teachers and the school), embrace, empower and elevate the children with dyslexia, providing them with the essential socio-emotional

scaffolding that enable them to be productive and happy individuals.



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Stress and anxiety are common reactions to changes and difficulties, which are a part of everyone's life, even during childhood. We frequently believe that stress and anxiety are terrible emotions brought on by negative circumstances. However, even the anticipation of happy occasions (such as school events, vacations, or social hobbies) can sometimes be stressful. When there is something that needs to be anticipated, modified, or protected, children experience stress and anxiety. When something important to them is in jeopardy, they become anxious.

Shalini Solanki, Some Simple Activities to Manage Emotions, p 46