

Dyslexia And Teacher Effectiveness

Shouldn't my child's teacher be able to tell me that my child is struggling to learn and may require testing for dyslexia?

by Liz Dunoon



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There are three factors to consider when answering this question and we need to address them all.

1. Shouldn't my child's teacher be able to tell me that my child is struggling to learn?

Yes! I believe that teachers should be able to inform parents in a timely fashion when their children are struggling to learn at school.

2. Shouldn't my child's teacher be able to tell me that they may require testing for dyslexia?

No! Based on current teacher training and the number of factors that can be impacting on children today, general classroom teachers in most states and territories are currently not trained or qualified to determine why a child is struggling to learn.

3. Should all school children have access to specialists or teachers that are trained to diagnosis learning disabilities in the future?

Yes! Every school should have access to a trained teacher or a specialist with the appropriate training to screen children for learning disabilities in their first year of formal schooling. A number of effective and proven screening tests already exist and are in use in certain schools, states and territories around the world. These tests have been proven to accurately indicate a child's readiness for reading and determine specific areas of strengths and weaknesses.

“It is extremely detrimental for children with dyslexia to experience failure with learning for longer than is necessary. By today's' standards it is possible to reliably identify boys and girls at risk of dyslexia before they fall behind.”

When I was conducting research to write this book, many parents from around the world told me stories about their sad and frustrated children who were either struggling to learn or

had given up trying to learn altogether. Some of these children were six years old, but some were fourteen and had given up on school altogether. I do not believe that this is an acceptable state of affairs based on what current research tells us about dyslexia, how to effectively screen for it and what can be done to support children with it.

Now we need to consider why this is happening and what can be done about it.

Are Our Teachers Effective?

In every English speaking country around the world and at every tertiary institution that provides teaching degree courses, students who are studying to teach 'English', must pass the Language Arts components of their courses in order to receive their teaching degree. To my knowledge this has not changed throughout the history of obtaining a certificate to teach.

Not only must tertiary students who plan to teach English learn how to teach the language, they must also master the skills that go with it, such as reading writing spelling, grammar and punctuation. You would also expect that during their teacher training they would be trained to recognise a struggling learner and how to assess the ongoing progress of all of their future students. But can your child's teacher do this? Only you can be the judge based on your personal experience.

Teacher Training In Language Arts

If a teacher cannot accurately assess the learning progress of their students, and write accurate school reports, are they 100% effective? Are they fully accountable to the children they teach, the school they work in, the education system within their state or country and the parents who pay their taxes and therefore the salaries of the teachers? Perhaps not!

In my opinion I believe all of our children's teachers should be held accountable. They should be able to tell us when our children are struggling to learn within an appropriate time frame so we can take action to assist our children before they are exposed to frustration and failure for prolonged periods of time.

Unfortunately there seems to be many children in this situation. Perhaps your child is one of them and maybe you were too. So why does this continue to happen?

We all know teachers are, on the whole, dedicated and conscientious. So are the teachers at fault or does the problem lie in the teacher training courses, ongoing teacher training and our education system as we know it?

“Recent figures from the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy show that half the 34 Bachelor of Education teacher training courses in Australia devoted less than 5% of their four-year curriculum to teaching reading.”

Max Coltheart, Director of Cognitive Science at Macquarie University and President of Learning Difficulties Australia

For many Australians this is a worrying statistic which may lead us to question the quality of many of the teaching courses within our tertiary institutions, historically and currently. I wonder if the statistics are similar in other English speaking countries?

It is a wonderful skill to have the ability to teach English, but just as important to know how to identify and refer children who are not learning at the appropriate rate to specialists who can offer ongoing support. This is one of the main areas in which I believe many tertiary teaching institutions and the education system in general are letting our children down. All teachers must be provided with an ongoing comprehensive education in Language Arts and the associated learning disabilities in order to ensure children who struggle to learn are not left to do so for longer than is necessary.

Competent reading, writing and spelling skills continue to be an integral part of our daily life. These are necessary basic skills, which enable us to operate effectively within modern society. Our governments, education systems and tertiary teaching institutions must be able to train all of our

teachers to teach these skills effectively and efficiently to all children.

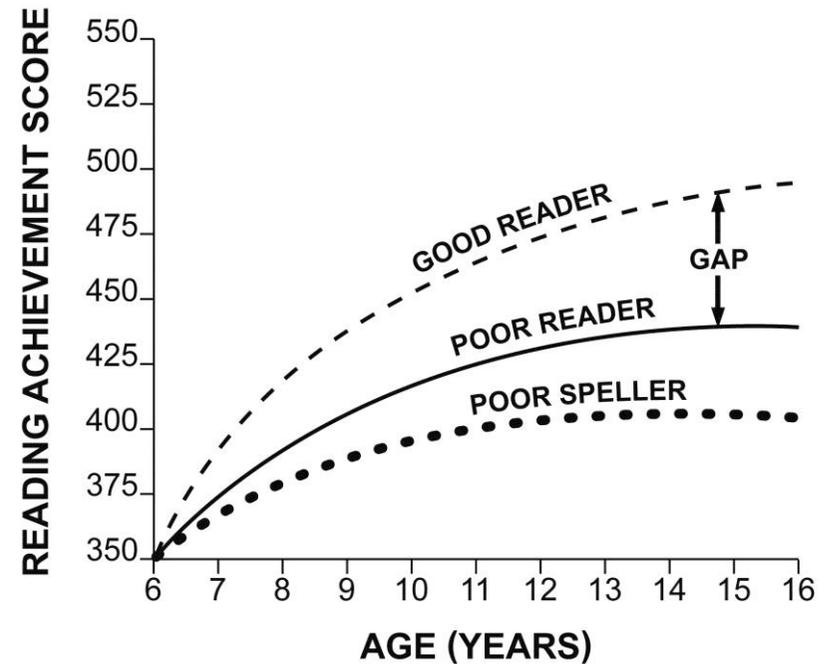
I believe therefore that a process must be put in place to enable classroom teachers in every school to recognise a child who may be struggling to learn for legitimate reasons. A subsequent specialist teacher should then be available to carry out further diagnostic testing within the school system to determine the exact cause of their difficulty.

How To Identify Children At Risk

It makes sense to me to screen all schools starters for learning disabilities. Dr Sally Shaywitz, Professor of Paediatrics at the Yale University School of Medicine, Connecticut, USA proposes that this should be done when children are entering their second semester of formal schooling at approximately five and a half or even six years of age. At this time they have generally had some exposure to basic sound and letter symbol relationships.

Children's ability to decode words to learn to read using phonological skills follows a natural, logical sequence. This makes it relatively easy to recognise when a child is experiencing difficulty and in which area this difficulty is occurring. There are a number of proven tests which enable specialists to do this. With early diagnosis and intervention, young children can be offered the appropriate support before they begin to fall behind.

WITHOUT SUPPORT THE GAP REMAINS



Why We Need To Lobby For Educational Change

The education systems that most of us rely upon are not catering to children at risk of learning disabilities. Many children with legitimate learning disabilities are continuing to fall through the cracks and are being left to struggle through the school years on their own. This leaves parents full of fear and worry for the future with no solutions forthcoming. This is a situation that I believe is not difficult to rectify. Those in power should take note of the readily accessible current dyslexia research and put an action plan in place to screen children as they begin formal schooling. I believe the funding required for this would be considerably less than dealing with the long term effects of raising future generations of children with reading disabilities, who experience many difficulties and challenges as they move through school and reach adulthood.

Screening Tests To Identify A Learning Disability

There are two types of tests to identify children at risk of a learning disability; standardised tests that all children can take and tests that an individual child can take if specific areas of concern are identified.

In some states and territories, pre-school teachers carry out testing of all the children (4-5 years old) in their care to assess readiness for formal schooling. These tests are generally broad in nature and fairly quick to administer. One of the purposes of these tests is to highlight children who may have a specific learning disability and then offer their parents the opportunity to have more specific testing carried out.

These tests do tend to over-identify children at risk because children at pre-school have such a broad range of skills and life experiences.

Some have never picked up a book before, while others can already read. Irrespective of this if parents and teachers have access to these results an appropriate support system could be offered to children in need from early on.

There is no doubt that if all children were screened for learning disabilities as they commenced formal schooling, much of the angst associated with learning at school could be resolved and the learning outcomes and future for so many struggling students could be positive rather than negative. This is not a new concept, there are already schools in countries around the world doing this successfully and a proven track record of success already exists.

Parents who are seeking the introduction of such screening tests into their education system need to find a way to communicate

their desires to those in power that make the decisions about educational funding.

Many of us have watched children with a learning disability struggle through formal schooling and know it is not a pleasant experience for the child concerned, or their parents. This should not be occurring. In many countries where such early childhood screening is already in place, it has often been due to active parents coming together as one more powerful voice and lobbying for change.

If all this knowledge exists, why can't teachers tell us our child has a learning disability? Why are so many children being left to struggle without diagnosis or support?

By current standards, most classroom teachers are not trained or qualified to inform us 'why' our children are struggling to learn. In fact many of them would never attempt to

do so because they realise they are not qualified and are concerned about any subsequent backlash. There are many reasons why children struggle to learn. It might be a learning difficulty or a learning disability or something completely unrelated.

“Imagine if your child’s teacher told you that they thought your child was mentally retarded or had a behavioural problem like attention deficit disorder (ADD) or was most likely autistic. If inaccurate, you would feel upset, annoyed and angry. This information coming from your child’s teacher could also create unnecessary fear and anxiety in parents and their children. More importantly it may or may not be accurate.”

Teacher Opinion Versus Fact

A teacher may believe they know the reason for your child’s struggle and may give you their opinion, but that is all it is, an opinion. When speaking with your child’s teacher, you should request to see actual examples of your child’s schoolwork and class test results demonstrating concrete evidence of your child’s actual difficulties. Don’t accept anything less. Teacher hearsay and opinion is not helpful when your child is struggling.

“Once you have been alerted to an ongoing learning difficulty at school, I recommend you take immediate action to determine the reasons this is occurring.”

Parents Need To Be On The Ball And Follow Their Intuition

Every school is different and all teachers are individuals, as are their students. Because of this it is easy to understand that there are many factors at play every day when our children are at school. It seems that the only way to ensure that our children's educational needs are being met is by paying close attention to what is occurring in our children's schools.

There are some incredibly knowledgeable teachers and specialists working in our schools with years of experience. Listen carefully to what they say, but remember to keep an open mind. General classroom teachers are only qualified to a point, based on their teacher training and experience. Learning support teachers also vary in their range of understanding. It pays to check on the qualifications of your child's learning support teachers. Many learning support teachers

have no more qualifications than general classroom teachers.

You can check on relevant qualifications by contacting the dyslexia association within your state or territory, or by asking the teachers directly what specific training they have had for their role. Find out what their qualifications allow them to assess for. They are given the job of providing support to our struggling learners, but not all are appropriately qualified to give you diagnostic information, yet may attempt to do so. Don't allow them to delay your response to your struggling child. You need facts not opinions. This has happened to me before when I was made to feel that seeking a diagnosis was not required, when it most obviously was. I was made to feel as though I was over-reacting, but the diagnostic tests showed otherwise. I am forever grateful that I stuck to my guns and followed my intuition.

Reasons Why A Child May Be Failing To Learn

It is important when considering the following list how long you believe that your child has been struggling to learn. Obviously children will go through different stages throughout their life, so having an intimate understanding of them as individuals and how they function will help you as parents to understand in which direction you should seek help.

One or more of these learning, behavioural or emotional problem areas can affect your child:

- A learning disability - including dyslexia
- Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorders and other disruptive behaviours
- Autistic spectrum patterns
- Anxiety and traumatic reactions

- Mood and emotional problems - including depression
- Environmental and family limitations

Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, ADHD, SLI & Autistic Spectrum - share many features and run in the same families

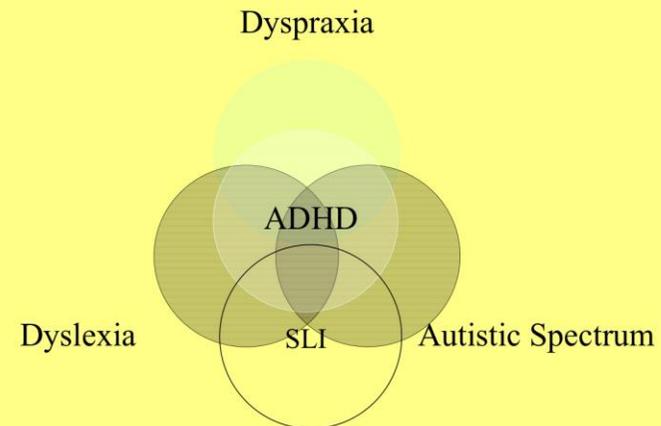


Image Courtesy of Prof. John Stein, Dyslexia Research Trust

Often, caring and supportive parents know or have a suspicion about why their child is struggling to learn at school. Always follow your intuition, but keep in mind there are many of reasons why a child can fail to learn

at any age. Becoming educated is your best option to ensure your child receives the appropriate levels of support.

The Many Factors That Affect Teacher Effectiveness

These days teaching children is an extremely demanding and challenging job. There are many factors which can influence the effectiveness of your child's teacher. These are not excuses for poor or ineffective teaching or for not keeping you informed when your child is beginning to struggle, but it is important for parents to be aware of them.

Once a new teacher leaves their place of tertiary study and starts work as a qualified teacher, they invariably enter a very historic institution, that of the education system. As a new teacher, they will be employed by their first school and will walk into their very own classroom for the first time. It is a momentous and exciting occasion for any teacher. In my experience, I don't think years of studying to

become a teacher can ever prepare you for the day you walk into your very own classroom for the very first time and face 20-30 expectant faces.

Whether teachers can operate at their full potential is determined by many factors, regardless of how experienced or conscientious they are. Here are some factors to consider, regarding your child's past current and future teachers. These factors can directly influence how effective your teacher is and how successful your child may be at school:

- The personality and skills of the teacher
- How many years of classroom teaching experience they have had
- Any past life and professional experiences or qualifications they bring to their teaching role
- Whether they are parents or not

- The quality of the teaching course that the teacher has completed
- The educational guidelines and standards set by the Educational Department that the teacher operates within
- The leadership, management and communication skills of the Headmaster
- The support systems available to the teacher within the school
- The curriculum - This is a document that states what subject areas and content will be taught, covered and assessed for each year level. Teachers must have a copy of the curriculum and must use it as a basis for all classroom teaching they do. Parents can ask to see a copy of the curriculum at their child's school. The curriculum can also be a valuable resource research tool if parents or carers are seeking to create a tutoring program to support their child or considering a change of school
- The level of experience and expertise of the school's curriculum co-ordinator
- How actively the school's curriculum coordinator monitors classroom teachers to ensure they are following the curriculum, teaching effectively and ensuring students are achieving year level standards
- What levels of ongoing education the teachers are expected to undertake, by way of professional development and educational courses as specified by the school
- The government funding available to the school for the purchase of resources, equipment or to pay the salaries of specialist teachers
- The quality of the teachers that the class has had in previous years
- The students themselves and if there are any pre-existing social, emotional, behavioural and educational factors

- The parents of the students and how supportive they are of school teachers and the educational process
- How the daily timetable is structured and how much time is spent on the direct teaching of each subject
- How many interruptions a classroom teacher and students have on a daily basis, breaking the flow of teaching and therefore interrupting the student's learning
- Noise levels and light in and around a classroom when a teacher is teaching
- The way grade levels are set. Does the school promote straight grade level classes or do they prefer composite classes, which mix the age and grade levels in the same classroom?
Composite classes can put teachers under considerably greater pressure as they must teach a broader age group and often juggle two or even three grade level curricula. Composite classes can disadvantage the struggling learner and advantage the highly able student. They can be socially beneficial to many students
- How many times per week individual children leave the classroom for specialist lessons such as music, sport, art etc.
- The school's discipline policy
- Whether the school has a learning support program and whether that program is ongoing as students move through the school
- The quality of the school's learning support program and the educational background of the learning support teacher/s
- How a school identifies and assists children who need learning support
- How many children are accepted into the learning support program, based on the schools criteria and resources

- The policy of the school in relation to using and training parent and grandparent volunteers to assist students who require learning support
- Whether a school has a policy in place to inform parents that their child has fallen behind based on age appropriate testing and recommend a professional assessment for a possible learning disability
- The quality of the school's testing, assessment and report writing process
- Whether a program of ongoing yearly student assessment is in place, providing a history of a child's learning strengths and weaknesses. This can then provide vital clues to your child's incoming teacher documenting any ongoing struggle or gaps in learning and how the new teacher can assist them effectively
- If the school has a professional referral system in place for children whose needs cannot be met or fulfilled

by the school

- Whether an effective school committee exists and is a positive influence on the overall running of the school
- Whether an effective parent committee is in place supporting the teachers and children within the school.

Children's Strategies To Hide A Learning Disability

Your child's teacher generally spends only one school year with your child. They often see the symptoms of your child's learning disability, not the cause. Remember that children can be incredibly good at disguising a learning disability.

They do this in order to fit in, be accepted and in an attempt to keep up with their classmates, while keeping their parents happy. It is generally not their intention to mislead their teachers or parents, however children develop ways to survive in the

classroom and this may lead them to develop strategies to cover up their learning problems. A conscientious teacher may pick up on this, but many may not.

A time will come when finally a child's schoolwork becomes too difficult or an assessment or test result indicates a problem. Teachers may then choose to bring this to the attention of the child's parents, but often months can pass before parents learn the full extent of a child's struggle in class. For a full list of strategies that children may employ to hide learning disabilities, refer to the eBook 'The Psychology of Struggling At School'.

Why Do Children Behave Badly?

You only have to read the newspapers and listen to the television news to realise that in today's modern society, children of all ages are dealing with many challenges. We often read and hear about children behaving badly. Why does this happen? Who is to

blame? Is it bad parenting, economic pressure, the breakdown of the family unit, poor educational standards, undiagnosed learning disabilities, the media, social networking or technology? Sometimes we forget to consider the origins of these angry, antisocial, violent and manipulative displays of behaviour. It is important for parents to realise that teachers are often on the receiving end of this behaviour and this can make the job of teaching effectively, extremely challenging. It is not hard to understand why teachers often voice their dissatisfaction with their chosen profession or vote with their feet and leave teaching to pursue a new career.

A Note From The Author

I have taught a classroom of eight and nine year olds where at least a quarter of the children in my class came to school each day without breakfast, clean clothes or enough sleep. I had major discipline problems in that

class from day one and they put me through my paces, leaving me exhausted. On the other hand, in this class I also had great kids from caring families, who were keen to please, did what was asked of them, worked hard and made good academic progress. It was a real mix, but on certain days the process of actual teaching seemed irrelevant as we organised food, a caring word and a soft place for some of the children to catch up on sleep.

Quite a few of the children in my classroom had social and emotional problems caused by a history of poor or ineffective parenting. Many of the children in my class had minimal support at home from their parents and I don't think schoolwork or hearing their children read at night time, was a major priority for many of the parents. Not all were uncaring, but some were single parents, working two or three jobs sometimes at night to survive and put food on the table. I

became one of the only stable and predictable things in many of those childrens' lives.

You know, that was my first job out of teachers college and I still think about those children regularly. Regardless of the adversity many of them faced, they were great kids. I grew to care deeply about them, even Billy, an eight year old boy who caused a classroom riot in my first week of teaching, because I had asked him what his dad did for a job as part of a social studies task. Unbeknown to me, his dad was in jail for attempted murder and aggravated assault. Chairs were thrown, tables were upended and 26 children were all screaming, some in fear and some in anger. It took three male teachers to regain control of my class and I went into severe shock. That was my initiation into teaching. There was no preparation for that at teachers college. That day as I drove home sobbing, I seriously questioned my

career choice of teaching. I felt like a failure. I had let those children down and I had failed to protect them.

I was 23 years old and with the unwavering support of my family, I returned the following Monday morning and began a process which taught me to become a much better teacher. I learnt how to discipline the children, how to show them I cared and how to teach them. In fact, think those children taught me as much as taught them.

Back then I didn't really understand learning disabilities or whether they were possibly impacting on my students or not, it was more about surviving the day.

The moral of the story is this. As teachers and bystanders it is very easy to observe other people's children and make assumptions about why a particular child may be struggling at school. Every family is different and children in some families are often

dealing with extremely difficult situations at home. Some problems are obvious, others, as we can imagine, are kept well hidden.

Teachers are required to support and protect these children, often filling in as a psychologist, pseudo parent, life skills coach, and a watchdog to report at risk children to authorities. While all of this is going on, teachers are also expected to effectively teach children and speaking from experience I know this can be a challenge in itself.

Parents need to be aware of the sort of challenges teachers can face. Many teachers are doing their best to teach and support their students. They should be able to tell us when our children are struggling to learn, but not why, because the reasons can be far reaching and complicated.

Let us assume if you are reading this book you are already in the category of being a supportive, caring and proactive parent. If so, you have a very fortunate child.

Why Your Child Needs You To Arrange A Professional Diagnosis

“It is important to remember that our children do not start school with the intention to fail. Failing to learn is invariably a symptom of something far deeper than just a lack of motivation or laziness. Don't guess, jump to conclusions or take on the opinions of unqualified, well-meaning people. This is not helpful to your child.”

Until standard diagnostic screening for learning disabilities is in place within schools in your state or territory, it will remain necessary for parents to take action and seek a formal diagnosis for their struggling learner. This is critical to your child's future success, so I recommend you do it as quickly as you can.

Teachers are invariably dedicated people who teach for the love of the job. Many will tell you it's certainly not for the money. Their heart is usually in the right place. We can all remember the 'standout' teachers when we went to school. These exceptional people are often instrumental in shaping our future and by believing in us they help many of us realise our dreams. Most though are currently unable to provide you with a diagnosis of your child's learning disability based on their training and experience. This situation is not likely to change in the near future unless we lobby those in power to change our education system to put an action plan in place to do so. Until then, parents will need to become educated to take action on behalf of their struggling child.

About The Author

Liz Dunoon is a teacher and a mother to three children all with dyslexia. It was through her own research to find ways to help her children that she discovered a huge divide between what is known by scientists about dyslexia and what is happening in our children's schools today.



Liz's determination to rectify this has culminated in her working with some of the world's leading dyslexia researchers to write this empowering, but simple and easy to read eBook.

Liz has also created a website full of free information, worksheets, resources, teaching aids, reports, interviews and personal stories. From one parent to another you will soon realise that you are not alone in your quest to support your child.

Liz Dunoon is also the author of:

Helping Children with Dyslexia

21 Super Strategies to Ensure Your Child's Success at School.

N.B. This eBook is an excerpt from this book

EBooks

Guide for Teaching Your Dyslexic Child to Read from Home

Guide for Teaching Your Dyslexic Child to Write and Spell from Home

Guide for teaching Your Dyslexic Child to Do Math from Home

Available from the website

www.dyslexiadaily.com

Reading, Spelling and Confidence Program

The Ten Minute Tutor

www.thetenminutetutor.com