

# How Can I Help My Students with Dyslexia?

By Holly B. Lane | Categories: Expert Voices, Science of Reading, Reading, Reading Intervention and Acceleration (Grades K–5), Dyslexia

In Part 1 of this series, we explored what dyslexia is (and what it is not), along with why it's getting so much attention these days. In Part 2, we'll focus on what you need to know about providing effective support for your students with dyslexia.

The most widely used intervention methods for students with dyslexia utilize a multisensory, structured language approach. Many of these methods fall under the umbrella of the Orton-Gillingham or OG model. This model was named for Samuel Orton, a physician who was a pioneer in the recognition of dyslexia as a condition, and Anna Gillingham, an educator and psychologist who developed instruction to help those with dyslexia.

However, the core principles of best practice in dyslexia instruction are embodied in a variety of powerful instructional models. In this blog, we'll dig into some of the principles and practices that support students with learning differences.



## Addressing the Phonological Core Deficit

The most unmistakable characteristic of dyslexia is a core deficit in phonological processing. This problem can cause the individual with dyslexia to experience difficulties in many aspects of literacy development, but most noticeably in decoding (reading) and encoding (spelling) words. Most students who struggle with decoding, whether they have dyslexia or not, benefit from instruction in the manipulation of phonemes, including blending and segmentation.

As a result of this critical need in the area of phonological processing, powerful, evidence-based instruction in phonological awareness, the alphabetic principle, and decoding is the most critical element in an intervention program for students with dyslexia. You are probably familiar with these terms, but just in case, let's review.

- **Phonological awareness.** Phonological awareness is the conscious sensitivity to the sound structure of language. It includes the ability to detect, match, blend, segment, and otherwise manipulate the parts of spoken language, including words, syllables, onsets and rimes, and phonemes. Instruction that focuses on phonemes addresses phonemic awareness. Ultimately, the most important of these skills are blending and segmenting phonemes.
- **The alphabetic principle.** The alphabetic principle is the fundamental insight that letters and sounds work together in systematic ways to form words. Understanding the alphabetic principle is essential to skilled decoding. Teaching this to students involves helping them uncover the relationships between letters and sounds and notice common patterns.
- **Decoding.** Decoding is the process of translating the written code into spoken words. When a reader decodes, she sees a word in print, connects the letters or letter combinations in the word with the associated sounds, and blends those sounds together to read the word. Decoding is the most fundamental element of proficient reading. Learning to decode, for most children, requires explicit, systematic phonics instruction.
- **Encoding.** A closely related skill is *encoding*, or spelling. Encoding uses the same processes as decoding, only in reverse. That is, to spell a word, one must take the whole word, segment it into its component phonemes, associate those sounds with letters or letter combinations, and write those letters to spell the word. For all students, but especially those with dyslexia, purposeful encoding practice can be a tremendous support for the development of decoding skills.

## Explicit, Systematic, and Intensive Intervention

Experts agree that intervention for students with dyslexia should be explicit, systematic, and intensive.

Explicit instruction includes clear, unambiguous explanations and demonstrations, carefully designed guided practice, sufficient independent practice to ensure mastery, and periodic review to promote retention.

Systematic instruction is carefully sequenced to ensure that the student has the prerequisite knowledge and skills to understand the new concept or acquire the new skill. This includes moving carefully and deliberately from easier to more complex skills.

Intensive instruction is usually provided in small groups or one-on-one, is of sufficient duration to ensure learning occurs, and is provided by knowledgeable, skilled professionals.

## Multisensory Methods

Some experts also advocate for interventions for students with dyslexia to be multisensory. Multisensory instruction typically refers to teaching methods that simultaneously activate multiple sensory pathways, usually visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile.

Although the act of reading is inherently multisensory, in that it includes visual and auditory processes, most advocates of multisensory instruction define it as including kinesthetic and/or tactile modes, as well. This can include strategies such as tracing

letters in sand (visual, kinesthetic, and tactile) while pronouncing the associated sounds (auditory), or encoding and decoding words using manipulative letters. Check out these examples of multisensory instruction.

Despite its popularity, there's actually little empirical evidence that multisensory instruction makes a difference. Several curricula that employ multisensory methods have been shown to be effective, but these curricula are also explicit, systematic, and intensive—characteristics that have been shown to make a difference—so, there's no easy way to tease out the effect of being multisensory. Anecdotal reports from teachers and students do tend to indicate that multisensory methods are helpful, but ultimately, the jury is still out on this one.

I like to think about multisensory methods in two categories: macro-level methods and micro-level methods. For the tactile/kinesthetic component, macro-level methods use the body's large muscles, such as those in the arms, hands, and fingers, to make large movements. Forming letters in sand or in the air would be examples of macro-level activities.

In contrast, micro-level methods use the small muscles in the vocal tract, such as the lips, tongue, and vocal folds. Micro-level activities focus your attention on the small movements of these muscles when producing a letter-sound (e.g., noticing your lips 'popping' when you say the /p/ sound, or your tongue vibrating when you say the /z/ sound). The evidence to support micro-level multisensory activities is somewhat more robust than the evidence supporting macro-level methods.

### **Structured Literacy Instruction**

The content of reading intervention is even more important than the multisensory aspect. Most experts agree that students with dyslexia benefit from instruction that reveals the underlying structure of the language. This type of teaching is called **structured literacy instruction**, and it includes content on phonology, sound-symbol associations, syllables, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Implementation of structured literacy instruction requires teachers to have a deep understanding of these elements of language.

The International Dyslexia Association has developed a set of **Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading** to identify what teachers need to know and be able to do to provide effective intervention for students with dyslexia. These standards provide guidelines for teacher preparation programs, but they also provide practicing teachers with a blueprint for seeking out professional learning activities.

All of this points to the importance of teachers understanding the "science" of reading. We know so much about how reading acquisition happens and what can go wrong—for students with or without dyslexia.

Let me end with my own rough paraphrase of distinguished educator Ron Edmonds: We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children to read, including those with dyslexia. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far.

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Read part 3 of this blog series, "Connecting the Dyslexia Conversation to the SIPPS Program."