

Getting in touch with words

New understanding of dyslexia leads to better methods of helping children read and write

BY NANCY SILCOX, KW RECORD, OCTOBER 2000

Dyslexia plays no favourites in life. Actor Tom Cruise, in a recent interview, pointed to his dyslexia as the reason he was teased in school. "I don't remember school fondly. Because I couldn't read, my childhood was extremely lonely and friendless," the star of Mission Impossible said.

The popular actor's struggles to be accepted may be in the past, but his difficulties with reading remain. Unable to read his scripts, Cruise works around the disability by using a tape recorder to memorize his lines.

Cruise is among the ranks of an estimated 10 per cent of North American men, women and children who are dyslexic. If statistics for Waterloo Region schools accurately reflect national ones, up to 8,000 local children in the combined public and separate school systems have some form of dyslexia.

Dyslexia is one of the most common of learning disabilities, but perhaps the most misunderstood. Thought by many to be a condition where letters are seen backwards or inverted, dyslexia, or word blindness, shows itself in more forms than just "mirror images."

There is no standard pattern of dyslexia. Some dyslexics may indeed see b for f, p for q, or 6 for 9, but for others, letters may blur or change shape. Print in books or newspapers may run uphill or downhill when seen through a dyslexic's eyes, while other dyslexics may be able to recognize letters, but cannot sound them out.

Whatever form the disability takes, the reading process becomes laborious. Frequently, dyslexics have to track printed words, letter by letter, with a pencil or a finger.

Difficulties with reading are only the tip of the dyslexia iceberg. If reading is difficult, writing will be

as well. The notebooks of school children with dyslexia are often a nightmare of misspelled words, words crossed out and erased.

Nor are the challenges of dyslexics limited to reading and writing. Many dyslexics, including adults, struggle with concepts of direction and confuse left and right. Physical skills such as hopping, skipping or tying shoes may be tough to master. Severe dyslexics may be unable to learn to ride a bike or safely drive a car.

It is hardly surprising that given the learning challenges for the dyslexic child, many become distractible, even disruptive in class. While some act out in an attempt to take the focus off their academic problems, others become withdrawn and depressed.

Until the mid-1960's, dyslexia was believed to be linked to emotional maladjustment. Only in the last 30 years has the condition been described as brain dysfunction, indicating a physiological rather than a psychological base. Its cause is unknown, but is thought by many specialists to be a result of brain injury, inner ear disturbance or serious childhood illness.

But as dyslexia, like other learning disabilities, tends to run in families and occurs in more males than females, chemical irregularities in the brain are now thought to be a primary contributor to the condition.

Despite the progress made in understanding dyslexia, a question has long intrigued specialists. Why is there a strong correlation between dyslexia and creativity? Why is there such a high proportion of dyslexics in the arts, sciences and politics?

Joining actors Cruise, Cher and Whoopi Goldberg

in the Dyslexia hall of fame are politicians Nelson Rockefeller, George Bush (senior and junior) and Winston Churchill. Time magazine's Man of the Century, Albert Einstein, as well as fellow geniuses Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell were also dyslexic.

The curious link between dyslexia and creativity has given rise to the view by some that dyslexia is a gift, rather than a disability; that the "short circuit" in the brain that causes reading problems is also the fuse that allows dyslexics to write and perform brilliantly.

Californian Ronald Davis, a dyslexic himself, notes in his bestselling *The Gift of Dyslexia* that the true dyslexic not only has above-average intelligence and problem-solving abilities, but possesses exceptional sensory abilities. This allows them to be highly in tune with their environment – hence creative.

Davis says the dyslexic is a visual thinker, interpreting the word in pictures rather than words. This ability is what Davis calls the "gift" of dyslexia.

However, in a school system that teaches children to read using abstract symbols (letters), the concrete learner, the picture-thinking dyslexic, becomes disoriented and confused. Soon identified as a slow reader and then placed in a remedial class where repetition and drill is the daily diet, the dyslexic adds boredom and frustration to his feelings about school. No wonder, says Davis, that dyslexic kids learn to hate school.

Although there is no cure, Davis says there is a way to improve the dyslexic's reading abilities. Using a multi-sensory approach to tap into their need for hands-on learning,



Neil Surnoskie, 12, of Heidelberg, shows a letter made out of modelling clay, one of the hands-on learning techniques with counsellor Gerry Grant, himself a dyslexic, uses to help people with dyslexia. The theory is that children will have less trouble recognizing symbols they have touched, send and smelled.

RECORD STAFF

students use modelling clay to shape letters first, then words. In theory, the child will be better able to recognize and understand symbols that he or she has touched, seen, smelled, even tasted.

Gerry Grant of Princeton, Ontario, who has an office in Waterloo and is one of four certified Davis-method instructors in Canada, has worked with more than 30 dyslexics. He says most have improved their reading level by at least one or two grades.

Grant 46, who is dyslexic, says the Davis method deals with the root cause of dyslexia rather than the symptoms.

He notes from personal experience that Davis's tactile approach allows

dyslexics to orient themselves to the learning environment, a necessary step before reading can improve.

"When you can sharpen the dyslexic's senses and perceptions, they will learn more effectively," Grant says. "And once that happens, it improves their relationship with people, and most importantly, how they feel about themselves."

For more information on the Davis method, check out their Website at www.dyslexia.ca

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