

What Dyslexia Looks Like in Middle School and What You Can Do to Help Your Child

Definition

“Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent **word recognition** and by **poor spelling** and **decoding abilities**. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in **reading comprehension** and **reduced reading experience** that can impede growth of **vocabulary** and **background knowledge**.”

– International Dyslexia Association

Dyslexia in Middle School

Middle school students with dyslexia are challenged by increasingly complex text, greater word length, more advanced writing assignments, and unfamiliar content and vocabulary. Academic words in middle school texts are commonly three syllables or more, requiring more advanced decoding skills. As students encounter hundreds of new and unfamiliar words in science, social studies, English, and math, they are unable to “guess” at enough words to compensate for inadequate decoding skills. With the increased length and complexity of reading and writing tasks, students may struggle to fully understand and complete their assignments. Poor reading comprehension can lead to lack of motivation to read in school or for pleasure. This lack of reading experience and practice may in turn contribute to lower levels of knowledge and vocabulary, further hindering reading comprehension.

This recurring cycle is shown in the following graphic.

Students With Dyslexia Struggle With Word Recognition, Decoding, Spelling, and Writing

Word Recognition

- Poor recognition and reading of common words
- Slow or choppy reading

Decoding

Difficulty with:

- Sounding out new or unfamiliar words while reading
- Breaking apart and reading multisyllabic words

Spelling and Writing

Difficulty with:

- Spelling common words
- Sounding out words correctly while writing
- Organizing written language



Reading Comprehension

- Reading below expected level for age or grade
- Difficulty explaining what happened in a story, summarizing, or answering questions
- Poor understanding of math word problems and math operations



Reading Experience

- Lack of motivation to read
- Reduced reading experience at school and at home

Vocabulary

- Low vocabulary level for age
- Difficulty pronouncing and remembering unfamiliar words
- Difficulty learning foreign languages

Background Knowledge

- Reduced knowledge about topics specific to text understanding

Tyler: A Middle School Student With Dyslexia

Tyler is a well-liked, athletic, and socially gifted sixth-grade student. He loves learning and has good listening skills. Throughout elementary school, he struggled with reading and received extra support from his classroom teachers. He earned good grades by listening in class, asking questions, and “filling in the blanks” with his knowledge. While his friends started reading science fiction novels for pleasure, Tyler preferred to do more active and hands-on activities. He would love to be an engineer when he is an adult.

Tyler has just started middle school this year and quickly discovered that his previous methods of compensating for his poor reading skills do not work. The classes are larger than in elementary school, and his teachers do not seem to be aware of his struggles with reading. In social studies, he is placed into a small group to do a class presentation. He is required to read two chapters in his textbook and write part of the presentation. Tyler has difficulty understanding the text and he does not know how to formulate his contribution. He dreads reading aloud in class because he reads haltingly and often gets stuck on multisyllabic words. In English class, he is asked to write sentences using new vocabulary words. He does not completely understand the words and fears that even his simple sentences have multiple spelling errors. In his algebra class, he listens attentively but still does not understand how to do the operations. When he reviews his algebra notes at home, he struggles to read and understand them. He finds that he needs to spend twice as much time on his homework than his friends and often does not complete it. He finds it difficult to stay organized with multiple assignments and classes.

What You Can Do

1. If you suspect that your middle school child is having difficulty with reading and may have dyslexia, reach out to the school’s counselor or assistant principal. They are often the first point of contact in middle school and can coordinate with your child’s numerous teachers and gather data on your child’s academic and reading performance. Arrange a meeting to talk in person, review your child’s performance, and set up a plan of action.
2. Request strategic intervention with regular monitoring. Strategic intervention may include small-group supplemental reading instruction that focuses on comprehension and vocabulary strategies as well as instruction in multisyllabic reading and reading fluency. Ask the school counselor or assistant principal what interventions they already have in place and how often they are monitoring your child’s progress.
3. You may request a comprehensive evaluation to determine the cause of your child’s reading difficulty. Comprehensive evaluations are conducted by a licensed school psychologist from the school district.
4. Involve your child in this process if possible. With your guidance, your child can learn to advocate for what they need in a supportive environment.

