

## **Education Matters:**

### **Dyslexia: The Hidden Learning Difference**

by Jayne Matthews

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When my son still could not read words like “cat” and “ball” the second time he was in the first grade, I knew there was something seriously wrong. I tried to get answers to this problem so he would not fall even further behind his classmates. His kindergarten and first grade teachers had given me many reasons for his inability to read: he was not paying attention in class, he chose to guess at words instead of taking the time to sound out the letter and he was “slow” learner with a poor memory.

These explanations were very puzzling to me. Outside of the classroom, he was very capable of focusing his attention on creative activities such as designing complex buildings with blocks and Legos. Before starting school, he was a quick learner with an amazing memory for people and places.

Furthermore, I totally disagreed with the idea that his guessing at words was a choice. In my observation, guessing seemed to be the only way he could read because he was not capable of making a connection between the letters in a word and how it was supposed to sound. Consequently, he spent so much time struggling with the mechanics of reading it got in the way of his comprehension which in turn made him to appear to be a slow learner.

It did not seem possible, but his second year of first grade was even less successful. He still could not read. Before he could he held back again, I managed to get him accepted at St. Mary's of the Assumption, a Catholic school in Govans. It was a great school, but he still struggled to read. However, as fate would have it, one of his teachers was being trained as a tutor with the Dyslexic Tutoring Program. She said my son had all the classic signs of dyslexia and with help of the program's tutors, he could be taught how to read.

Within three weeks of calling the Dyslexia Tutoring Program, he was tested and assigned a tutor. After six months of weekly tutoring, I began to hear him fluently reading aloud and sounding out the words that gave him difficulty. It is not an overstatement to say that the Dyslexia Tutoring Program changed my son's life. What is just as noteworthy is this organization offers its services FREE to families. You may call them at 410-889-5487 for more information.

In the years since my son was diagnosed I have learned that while dyslexia is one of the most common learning disabilities, it is perhaps the most misunderstood. This week Education Matters welcomes Thea Medvetz, Development and Outreach Coordinator for the Dyslexia Tutoring Program, who will give a definition of dyslexia and some of the signs parents should look for if their child is having difficulty learning how to read.

“National Institutes of Health research shows that dyslexia affects at least 1 out of 5 children in the United States”, say Mrs. Medvetz. According to the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) “Dyslexia is a learning disability characterized by problems in expressive or receptive, oral or written language. Problems may emerge in reading, spelling, listening or mathematics.”

Dyslexia is not a vision problem. It affects people from all different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds and males and females are affected nearly equally. In addition, many dyslexic individuals are quite bright and creative. Some people think that dyslexics “see letters or words backwards”. It is actually much more complicated than that.

The International Dyslexia Association defines dyslexia as: “a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate or fluent word recognition.” Some of the signs of dyslexia in children are:

1. Lack of awareness of sounds in words. For instance, a child with dyslexia may have trouble rhyming or may confuse sounds like “b” or “p”.
2. Difficulty decoding or sounding out words, or getting letters in the wrong order. For example, these children may read, “left” as “felt” or “form” as “from”.

3. Difficulty encoding or spelling words.
4. Difficulty expressing thoughts either orally or through writing.
5. Difficulties with math.
6. Problems with directions in space or time. For instance, a dyslexic child might confuse the concepts of up and down or yesterday and tomorrow.
7. Problems with reading comprehension.

The best way to determine if an individual is dyslexic is through professional testing. People who are dyslexic can learn to read and can be successful in school and as working adults!

**Next week: Dyslexia Awareness Week**

Education Matters is dedicated to improving educational outcomes for all Baltimore area children and their families. In particular, it will focus on the challenges and needs of students with language-based learning disabilities (which will be henceforth referred to as “learning differences”) such as dyslexia and attention-deficit/hyperactive disorder (ADHD). Upcoming columns will feature advice by a speech and language pathologist, an occupational therapist, a school psychologist, special education professionals and parents of students with learning differences, because if we are to take our children off the track to academic failure and guide them to a course of success—— education matters.

*Jayne Matthews is the parent of a very bright, intelligent child with learning differences and an educational advocate.*