Breaking Through the Dyslexia "Iceberg"

Key Points

* Dyslexia is an inherited neurological condition causing reading difficulties
* The Orton-Gillingham Approach uses a 5-part multi-sensory technique
* Other Dyslexia therapies are based, in part, upon Orton-Gillingham research

By Mrs. Leah David

Your child is now 6 years old and entering first grade. She is bright and a real chatterbox. It is 3 months into the school year and you get a call from her teacher who is concerned, because your daughter is not keeping up with the class. Your daughter is having problems putting letters and sounds together. She is not learning to read. As a concerned parent you speak with your child's pediatrician. You recall that your oldest son had the same problems with reading and even after you tried everything, he still didn't do well in school. Your husband had some trouble in school as well. Your doctor suggests that you seek an evaluation by a professional, and the evaluation shows that your child has the most common learning difficulty, known as Dyslexia.

What is Dyslexia?

Dyslexia is an inherited neurological condition that makes it extremely difficult to read, write, and spell —despite average or even above average intelligence. According to the International Dyslexia Association, it is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition, poor spelling and decoding difficulties. It can result in reading comprehension problems, and impede the growth of vocabulary and basic knowledge. Children with dyslexia usually do not respond well to traditional reading programs.

I often explain to parents that a child with Dyslexia has an "iceberg" blocking their progress. Once you break through that "iceberg," learning becomes smooth sailing.

Reading requires the eyes and brain to work together in complex ways. The eyes must focus on the printed word while the brain controls the movements of the eye across the page. In addition, the brain must understand how the words are put together and how the letters sound. In processing words, the brain builds images and ideas, compares the new ideas to what is already known, and then stores these ideas in the memory.

A malfunction in any part of the brain's centers of vision, language or memory, or in the nerve cells that connect these centers, can result in dyslexia. People with dyslexia have brains that are wired differently. Imaging tests show that when people with dyslexia read, different parts of the brain are activated than in people without dyslexia.

I like to explain this complex learning difficulty with a simple analogy. Imagine the brain is like the surface of the moon, filled with craters. When a typical child learns letters, sounds and words, the brain is able to find the correct "crater" so that the information is remembered and can be recalled when needed. But in the brain of a child with dyslexia, the craters are not as deep, or the information isn't stored in the right "crater," so it cannot be easily retrieved when the child needs it to read, no matter how much help they may be getting from their parents or tutors.

When their baffled parents ask me, "How can it be that the information their child learned on Monday is often forgotten by Wednesday?" I answer, "That's Dyslexia!"

How Do We Teach The Child With Dyslexia?

Reading instruction for the child with Dyslexia must be specific, sequential and multi-sensory, spelling out every detail for reading, decoding and encoding (spelling). The professional dyslexia educator utilizes different sensory/motor systems to teach the building blocks of reading and develop new pathways to the various areas of the brain, which process language. The teacher starts from the basics, letter-by-letter and sound-by-sound. The rules of the language are taught and practiced repeatedly until the student can use them automatically, building a foundation to enable the child to develop effective reading skills.

Many reading remediation programs, among them LiPS, Wilson, Slingerland, and PAF (Preventing Academic Failure) are based on the research behind the Orton-Gillingham Approach. Dr. Samuel Orton, a neurologist, developed this approach in the 1930's after an extensive study of children with the language learning difficulties now associated with Dyslexia. Together with Anna Gillingham, a noted educator, they formulated a set of teaching principles and multi-sensory practices that is now known as the Orton-Gillingham Approach. Orton-Gillingham uses the senses of touch, sight, hearing, and movement, to teach children how to read in a specifically ordered way.

The Orton-Gillingham lesson, as defined by the Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners and Educators, is a 1-hour, 1:1 session, child and teacher. The lesson is broken down into at least 5 parts designed to help the brain of the child with dyslexia absorb information in a different way.

The material is covered methodically, making sure that the child has learned it thoroughly before moving on. For example, a child will learn the letter "A" by reading the sound, writing the sound, spelling the sound and saying the sound. Every time the child learns a new letter or a sound, it chips away at the "iceberg" that is blocking their path to reading, until enough of it is broken down so that reading becomes less strenuous.

As a mother of a child with Dyslexia, and an Orton-Gillingham teacher, I have come to understand what these bright children need to succeed. Early intervention is the key! Left untreated these children will slip further behind their peers. If you notice that your child is struggling with reading, please have your child evaluated by a reading specialist. If testing reveals that your child is struggling with dyslexia, it is important to find a properly trained and experienced reading teacher who utilizes a multisensory, sequential and specific approach.

Every child has the right and ability to learn to read. Make sure that your child gets the help they need.

Mrs. Leah David, MS, is the Founder & Executive Director of Ohr HaLimud-The Multi-Sensory Learning Center, which utilizes the Orton- Gillingham Approach. Programs include a Bais Yaakov School for girl's ages 7-14; an after school and Sunday tutoring program for boys and girls, and Orton-Gillingham Teacher Training Courses. She can be contacted at (718) 972-0170 or by e-mail at info@ohrhalimud.org.