

# **An Early Assessment Programme for Identifying Children Displaying Dyslexic Characteristics**

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Purpose**

The development of a school based early assessment strategy to ascertain if children have dyslexia is important to Sumner School and New Zealand education. As a result of dyslexia being recognised by the Ministry of Education in 2007, schools have received information and resources on dyslexia. However the questions being asked by teachers and SENCOs – Special Education Coordinators, now relate to the assessment of children within schools. Parents may have their child assessed by outside agencies, but this can be very expensive and time consuming. As SENCO of Sumner School I am often asked by parents and fellow teachers whether I can assess a child who is displaying dyslexic characteristics. I want to investigate:

- The development of an effective assessment programme for use at Sumner School as a means of identifying potentially dyslexic children with a view to early intervention.
- How an assessment strategy will improve the teaching and learning of Sumner School students.
- Whether it is feasible to assess a student for dyslexia when starting school at five years old.

As a teacher, deputy principal, and SENCO I am committed to raising the standards and outcomes of all students at Sumner School. I am passionate about this issue and see this project as a way of informing and assisting teachers with their classroom literacy programme to support teachers and parents of the school.

This project will improve and enhance my role as special needs coordinator (SENCO) at Sumner School.

## Definition of Dyslexia

The International Dyslexic Association defines dyslexia as “a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterised 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” (Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2003).

The Ministry of Education defines dyslexia as “a spectrum of specific learning difficulties and is evident when accurate and/or fluent reading and writing skills, particularly phonological awareness, develop incompletely or with great difficulty” and that these difficulties are “persistent despite access to learning opportunities that are effective and appropriate for most other children”(Ministry of Education Handbook 2009).

The underlying symptom of dyslexia, for most children is difficulty processing phonological information. The processing of phonological information involves being explicitly aware of the speech sounds within words, understanding how these sounds relate to the printed form of the word, being able to store phonological or sound information in memory, and being able to efficiently retrieve this to use in decoding printed words.

Put simply, dyslexics have problems with converting letters into sounds, and with the acquisition of reading and spelling skills.

## Summary

Research suggests that approximately 1 child in 20 has dyslexia (Christo, Davis and Brock). This means that there is likely to be at least one child in every class who displays the characteristics of dyslexia.

The consensus of research points to phonological awareness and skills as being pivotal in the development of literacy. Recent studies pinpoint phonemic skills as being the most strongly predictive of literacy success. The processing problems experienced by children with dyslexia tend to result in persistent difficulties in the acquisition of literacy skills.

Family history is important and though it does not mean a child will be dyslexic simply because a parent is dyslexic, it does indicate that close monitoring is warranted (Christo, Davis and Brock).

No two children who have dyslexia, or display characteristics of dyslexia, present with the same set of difficulties. This determines that responses must be tailored to individual needs. Collaboration between class teachers, parents, learning



support workers and other professionals who may be involved is vital, at all stages of the identification process and planning of the child's individual programme. In addition to involving parents in the identification process it is equally important to involve the child. Even very young children can tell you what they find difficult and how they try to tackle tasks. By speaking to the child, more insight into their difficulties and needs will emerge.

Dyslexia is often not just a problem of literacy, but it can also be a problem of identity and self esteem. This means that children and young people have to be helped to develop a sense of identity which includes the acceptance of their dyslexia and the effect it is going to have on their life. This will also help to prepare them for the life long challenges they may face.

Although the underlying condition causing dyslexia cannot presently be cured, its severity can be ameliorated by early intervention targeted to address the specific difficulties which the child encounters.

**Is it feasible to assess a student for dyslexia at 5 years of age?**

The stages of development and speed of learning in early childhood, and year 1 and 2, differ significantly for each child. For this reason psychologists tend not to formally diagnose dyslexia until a child is 7 or 8 years of age. However some of the latest research into this area suggests it may be done. At the pre-school stage many dyslexic children are already showing early signs of their disorder. The key is usually an uneven development profile, particularly in cases where there is a family history of speech and literacy difficulties.

Characteristic difficulties include one or more of the following:

- Delays in the development of speech and language.
- Difficulties of fine or gross motor co-ordination.
- Difficulties in remembering the order of simple 2 step instructions.
- High distractibility and poor concentration compared to other children of the same age.

Early identification does not necessarily mean early labelling, but rather the early identification of needs. It is only by identifying the child's needs at an early stage that appropriate and effective intervention can be put in place.

### **Activities undertaken**

During my sabbatical I undertook the following professional learning:

- Chuck Marriot, Resource Teacher of Literacy.
- Shirley Craig, Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour.
- Professor John Everatt, School of Literacies and Art in Education, University of Canterbury.
- Dyslexic Foundation.
- Neil McKay 4D Edge Workshop.
- SENCO Meetings.
- Background reading and research (see references).

## **Benefits of the assessment programme to the students and to the school**

### *Students*

- Enhanced learning experiences and improved learning outcomes for the students identified.

### *School*

- More effective leadership in the assessment and delivery of special needs pedagogy.
- Improved professional development.
- An assessment methodology for application in the school and possibly other schools in our cluster.
- A clearer understanding of the difficulties that these children face.

It is hoped that this new resource will offer a way to make a real and positive difference to the education of dyslexic students in our school.

## **Framework for identifying a student with dyslexia**

I am proposing that Sumner School implements a 5 step early assessment programme for identifying children who display dyslexic characteristics. The programme draws information from both formal and informal sources.

### **Step 1**

The student is referred for assessment because of reading difficulty. The referral may come from classroom teachers, learning support workers, parents or others.

- Initial screening checklist investigating family history, health (hearing and vision) and early developmental characteristics. In trying to build a profile of the student it is essential to have an understanding of his/her early developmental history.

### **Step 2**

Formal assessment of reading skills using class/school assessments.

- Standardized assessment in areas of concern will provide information about a deficit in relation to a larger peer group.
- Information from several sources can be useful in making a decision about the presence of an academic deficit.
- Typically an academic deficit involves performing significantly below peers or chronological expectations.

### **Step 3**

More extensive dyslexia assessment/checklist carried out by the teacher and the school's special education coordinator (SENCO). The analysis of the assessment profile will determine if the pattern of strengths and weaknesses is consistent with dyslexia.

**Step 4**

Additional assessment is available if required.

- Bangor Dyslexic test (for 8 years and over)
- Ashton Portfolio.

**Step 5**

Construct an individual education programme (IEP) for the student. This will describe the child's particular needs and how the school is going to cater for these needs, including appropriate strategies and resources that will be implemented and by whom.

Consultation with the parents will include a description of the assessment and results, and indicate whether we think the student may or may not have dyslexia. A decision whether or not to consult a psychologist for a more comprehensive assessment may then be made by the parents.



**SUMNER SCHOOL ASSESSMENTS FOR  
AT RISK DYSLEXIC CHILDREN**

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age** \_\_\_\_\_

**Year** \_\_\_\_\_

**STEP 1**

**Initial background screening checklist**

	YES/NO
• Hearing and vision tested.	
• Has it been established that the difficulties identified are not due to another factor such as AD/HD, emotional disturbance, illnesses, and lengthy absences from school or other reasons?	
• Are there any other family members who experienced difficulty learning to read or spell when they were at school?	
• Was there a delay in speech and language?	
• Is there confusion about following instructions e.g. when playing a game?	
• Does he/she experience difficulty copying from the board?	
• Does he/she have difficulty counting backwards from <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 100? (year 3-8)</li> <li>○ 10 or 20? (year 1-2)</li> </ul>	
• Does he/she seem bright and capable but not making progress in <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Spelling?</li> <li>○ Reading?</li> <li>○ Writing?</li> </ul>	
• Is there persistent b/d confusion?	
• Is there number confusion e.g. 3/5?	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is his/her reading age 2 or more years behind chronological age (year 4-8)?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does he/she have difficulty <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Naming the first word in forget (for)?</li> <li>○ Telling you what is teacher without the 'er'? What is train without the 't'?</li> <li>○ Sounding out or clapping hands the number of syllables in the word 'remember'?</li> <li>○ Telling you 2-3 words that rhyme?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does he/she have poor concentration when working on literacy activities?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does he/she have much better verbal skills than written skills?</li> </ul>	

If the team can answer “yes” to all or most of the above, then move onto step 2.

## STEP 2

**Formal class/school assessment results attached where appropriate**

	YES/NO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 year net; literacy assessment at 6 years of age</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Latest running record; reading assessment</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PAT; Progressive Achievement Test</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AsTTle; Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• STAR</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spelling e.g. Peters</li> </ul>	

### STEP 3

#### Visual Difficulties

##### Reading

	YES/NO
• Variable performance (good days and bad days)	
• Left – right awareness and directionality problems	
• Word confusion when reading (was/saw)	
• Has trouble learning and remembering high frequency words	
• When reading aloud <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Frequent loss of the place</li><li>• Inserts or omits words</li><li>• Repeats a word or sentence 2 or 3 times</li><li>• Lacks fluency, slow reading speed</li></ul>	

##### Spelling and Writing

	YES/NO
• Strange (sometimes bizarre) spelling patterns	
• Jumbled spellings e.g., does/dose - said/siad	
• Persistent mirror writing	
• Consistently writing letters and numbers backwards	
• Awkward handwriting and fine motor control	
• Slow writing speed	
• Difficulty reading back own work	

##### Memory

Finds it hard to remember

	YES/NO
• Words in nursery rhymes, songs, poems	
• Names of children in class	
• Instructions	
• Sequencing the alphabet, days of the week and months of the year	



### Auditory and Phonological Awareness

Has trouble:

YES/NO

• learning and consistently remembering the sounds corresponding to the alphabet Year (1-3)	
• recognising and predicting rhyme	
• blending sounds	
• picking the odd one out e.g. sand/hand/cup	
• Confuses similar sounding words	

### **General**

YES/NO

• A good oral vocabulary but a poor reading age	
• Gets sounds in words muddled e.g. flutterby/butterfly	
• Left handed or ambidextrous	
• Poor organisational skills (self and work)	
• Poor concentration span	
• Poor self esteem	
• Poor spatial awareness	
• Motor skill problems, poor co-ordination and clumsiness	
• Motor skill problems, poor co-ordination and clumsiness	
• Difficulty copying simple letters or shapes (year 1-2)	
• Letter order confusion (year 3-8)	

## References

The Bangor Dyslexia Test; Professor T. R. Miles

### Books

A Practitioner's Handbook, Dyslexia Speech and Language, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, J Stacjhouse & J Snowling

About Dyslexia; Ministry of Education, 2007

D is for Dyslexia; Dyslexia Foundation

Early Screening for Dyslexia – A Collaborative Pilot Project; Ball. Becker. Boys and Davies; SLT Service, Trowbridge Health Clinic, Wiltshire, UK

Developmental Psychology at School. Identifying, Assessing, and Treating Dyslexia at School; Christo, Davis and Brock

Identification and Assessment of Dyslexia; A Reid & J Wearmouth

International Dyslexia Association; Lyon. Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2003

Removing Dyslexia as a Barrier to Achievement; Neil Mackay, 2008

The Gift of Dyslexia; Ron Davis

Understanding Dyslexia; Maria De Cort, Canterbury Magazine for Alumni of the University of Canterbury.

### Websites

[www.countmein.org.uk](http://www.countmein.org.uk)

[www.dyslexia-teacher.com](http://www.dyslexia-teacher.com)

[www.tki.org.nz](http://www.tki.org.nz)

[www.dyslexiafoundation.org.nz](http://www.dyslexiafoundation.org.nz)