READING GURU

A FREE GUIDE

Dyslexia

What Parents Need to Know

The signs to watch for, what really helps, and how to get your child the support they need

FROM THE READING GURU

Inside this guide

Whether you've just started to wonder about dyslexia or already have a formal diagnosis, this guide walks you through what you need to know and what to do next.

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Reading on a phone? Tap any chapter to jump straight to it. Links throughout the guide open our website.

CHAPTER 1

What dyslexia is (and isn't)

At its heart, dyslexia is a difficulty connecting the sounds of spoken language to the letters that represent them.

That one core struggle can look very different from child to child. One student labors to sound out every word; another reads quickly but skips and guesses; a third reads well enough but can't spell.

It's how the brain is wired

Research, including brain imaging studies, shows that dyslexic readers have differences in how areas of the brain connect. Children with dyslexia are born this way. Dyslexia also runs strongly in families, so if a parent or sibling struggled with reading, that's worth noting.

> **PLEASE HEAR THIS**
>
> Dyslexia is **not** caused by bad parenting, bad teaching, laziness or low intelligence. Your child's brain simply learns to read differently, which means it needs to be *taught* differently, by someone trained to do it.

It's more common than you think

5–20%
of people show evidence of reading struggles

80–90%
of children's learning disabilities are dyslexia

It exists on a spectrum

Some children are mildly dyslexic. They keep up in school, but they work far harder than their classmates to do it, and the difference may show up as a B instead of an A. These kids often "fool" their teachers into thinking all is well. Other children have more severe dyslexia and need more intensive help to learn the basics.

Does it go away?

No. Dyslexia is lifelong. But here is the hopeful part: **remediation works** when it's delivered by teachers with specific training in the Orton-Gillingham approach. With that specialized instruction, dyslexic students can become strong, confident readers and be just as successful as their peers.

Timing matters, though. The longer reading problems go unaddressed, the harder they are to fix, because older students are expected to have mastered basic phonics already. If you suspect your child is falling behind, it's worth acting now rather than waiting.

CHAPTER 2

Common myths, cleared up

Many parents dread the word "dyslexia" because of what they've heard about it. Here's what's actually true.

MYTH **Dyslexia means seeing letters backwards.**

FACT Mixing up b, d, p and q can be one sign, but dyslexia is much more than reversals. It's mainly about linking sounds to letters.

MYTH **My child just needs to try harder.**

FACT Dyslexic kids are often working much harder than their peers already. Effort isn't the problem; the kind of instruction is.

MYTH **It's because of how we taught them at home.**

FACT Dyslexia comes from differences in brain connectivity and has a strong genetic component. It isn't caused by parenting.

MYTH **They'll grow out of it.**

FACT Dyslexia doesn't go away on its own, and waiting makes catching up harder. Specialized Orton-Gillingham instruction is what closes the gap.

MYTH **We need an official diagnosis before we can get help.**

FACT A diagnosis can be useful, but you don't need one to start the right kind of reading help.

MYTH **The school says they're fine, so they're fine.**

FACT Children with milder dyslexia can look "proficient" while struggling quietly. Trust what you see at home.

CHAPTER 3

Signs to watch for, by age

No child shows every sign, and one sign alone doesn't mean dyslexia. But if several of these sound familiar, it's worth a closer look.

PRESCHOOL & KINDERGARTEN

- Was late to start talking
- Mispronounces words; trouble remembering new words
- Struggles to learn letter names and sounds, numbers or colors
- Can't recognize the letters in their own name
- Has a hard time with rhyming
- Trouble with sequences, like days of the week

EARLY ELEMENTARY

- Reads below grade level
- Has trouble sounding out new words; guesses, or relies on the pictures
- Forgets vowel sounds
- Confuses look-alike letters (b/d, p/q, s/z)
- Gets very tired after short bursts of reading, and says reading is "too hard"

OLDER STUDENTS

- Slow, choppy reading, or reading too fast and skipping words
- Trouble reading unfamiliar words
- Poor spelling
- Difficulty with math word problems
- Avoids reading aloud, or avoids reading and writing altogether

Why it matters

Reading underpins nearly every subject. Without help, struggling readers often face:

- Lower grades and trouble on tests
- Difficulty in science, history and math, not just English
- Falling self-esteem
- Challenges later in college and at work

TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS

You know your child best. If something feels off about how they read, that's reason enough to check.

CHAPTER 4

Screening and diagnosis

A screening and a formal diagnosis are two different things. A free screener is the easiest place to start.

STEP 1 · SCREENING

A quick check you can do at home

A screener shows whether your child may have dyslexia or seems behind in reading. Our free Dyslexia Screening Test takes about 5–10 minutes on a phone or laptop, and you give it at home. It works for kindergarten through 12th grade, and no account or payment is needed.

Go at your child's pace and let them take breaks if they need to.

Take the free screener →

OPTIONAL · FORMAL DIAGNOSIS

A formal evaluation

An official diagnosis comes from a formal evaluation by a psychologist. These can be helpful, but they're often expensive, long and hard to schedule. A diagnosis may be needed to qualify for a 504 Plan or an IEP at school (see Chapter 6). It is **not** needed to start getting help.

GOOD TO KNOW

A trained Orton-Gillingham tutor does their own assessment to pinpoint your child's gaps, so help can start right away, with or without a diagnosis.

CHAPTER 5

What actually helps

Dyslexic learners need reading taught explicitly, step by step. Extra practice of the same methods that haven't worked at school isn't enough.

The Science of Reading

"Science of Reading" refers to the large body of research on how the brain learns to read. Its conclusion is clear: children need direct, systematic teaching of the sounds in words, how letters represent them, and how to blend them into words.

The Orton-Gillingham approach

Orton-Gillingham (OG) puts that science into practice, and it's widely considered the gold standard for teaching struggling readers. A good OG lesson is:

- **Explicit:** nothing is left to guessing; every rule is taught directly.
- **Systematic:** skills build in a logical order, and a new skill isn't introduced until the last one is mastered.
- **Multisensory:** children see, hear, say and move, using things like letter tiles and tracing.
- **Individualized:** tailored to the child's skills, personality and interests.

Other well-known structured literacy programs, such as Wilson, Barton and Lindamood-Bell, are built on the

same research. Whoever you work with, look for an approach grounded in the Science of Reading.

A dyslexia specialist vs. a general tutor

A general tutor or homework helper can offer reading practice, but usually lacks specialized training. Online games, while fun, don't effectively teach the mechanics of reading. A dyslexia specialist, on the other hand, has spent hundreds of hours learning to teach with the OG method, and can effectively help children with dyslexia.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

The most experienced tutors typically have:

- A master's degree in education
- Orton-Gillingham certification from a program accredited by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA)
- Rigorous training that included being observed by seasoned tutors, or "fellows"
- Years of one-on-one experience with students of all skill levels and reading-related diagnoses, including dyslexia (also called word recognition deficit), reading comprehension deficit and dysorthography

Questions to ask any reading tutor

- [ ] Are you trained in Orton-Gillingham or another structured literacy approach? How much training? From where?
- [ ] How will you assess my child's specific gaps?
- [ ] How will you track and share progress?

- [ ] Will you work alongside my child's school?

How long does it take?

Remediation is a marathon, not a sprint. Most students do best with two or more sessions per week. Parents often notice a boost in confidence within the first month, with measurable gains in fluency and decoding within three to six months of consistent work.

> **ONLINE WORKS, TOO**
>
> Live, one-on-one online tutoring with a skilled specialist is highly effective. Interactive digital tools recreate the multisensory experience, and online lets you work with the best specialist regardless of where you live.

CHAPTER 6

Getting support at school

Public schools are required by federal and state law to identify and support students with dyslexia. But getting that help isn't always easy.

Evaluations take time, school resources are stretched, and the support offered doesn't always include the specialized reading instruction dyslexic kids need. That's why many parents turn to Orton-Gillingham tutoring to bridge the gap.

Two plans you'll hear about

Schools offer support through an **IEP** or a **504 Plan**. The difference matters: it can decide whether your child is simply allowed to use audiobooks, or is actually taught to read.

IEP · INSTRUCTION

Individualized Education Program

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), an IEP requires the school to *teach your child differently* to close a learning gap. For dyslexia, that should mean specialized instruction from a reading specialist using a structured, evidence-based method.

- Measurable goals (for example, decoding two-syllable words with 80% accuracy by June)

- Progress monitoring and reporting
- Accommodations, plus modifications like shorter spelling lists

504 PLAN · ACCESS

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

A civil rights protection that changes the *environment* so your child can access the same curriculum. It levels the playing field but usually doesn't change how your child is taught. Common accommodations:

- Extra time on tests; seating near the teacher
- Audiobooks or text-to-speech
- Not being made to read aloud in class
- A laptop for written work

> **A 504 builds a ramp into the building. An IEP is the physical therapy that helps a child climb the stairs.**

Which does your child need?

Probably an IEP if your child…

- can't read grade-level text fluently
- has real gaps in phonics, decoding or spelling
- can't decode the words, so extra time wouldn't help

Maybe just a 504 if your child…

- has already been remediated and reads fairly well, just slowly

- understands the material but needs time to process it
- is gifted and dyslexic, and needs tools like speech-to-text to show what they know

Some children need both.

Three hurdles to watch for

1. **"Wait to fail."** Schools sometimes offer a 504 with extra time first, to "see how it goes," because it takes fewer resources. But extra time won't teach a child to decode, any more than extra time in the pool teaches a child to swim. If the mechanics of reading are the problem, ask for an IEP evaluation.
2. **The process takes time.** Getting an IEP can take 6–12 months in many cases, and meanwhile, kids are failing to progress.
3. **An IEP may not be enough.** Even with a strong IEP, many schools lack the trained staff to deliver true OG instruction two to three times a week.

> **BRIDGING THE GAP**
>
> Many families start private Orton-Gillingham tutoring while the school process plays out, and continue it alongside the school's plan once an IEP is in place. A good tutor will work with your child's teachers and school specialists so everyone is pulling in the same direction.

CHAPTER 7

Building a reader at home

Nothing matters more for a dyslexic child than time spent actually reading. Students who read at least 20 minutes a day improve much faster.

The goal is to make reading feel like something good, not a chore. Children model what they see, so let them see you enjoying it too.

Ideas to try

- [ ] **Family reading time.** Everyone reads at once, parents included.
- [ ] **D.E.A.R. time.** "Drop Everything And Read" at a set time each day.
- [ ] **A friendly audience.** Kids can read to a pet, a younger sibling or a grandparent.
- [ ] **A special spot.** A blanket in the park, a flashlight in a pillow fort, a seat on the train.
- [ ] **Take turns.** You read a page, they read a page. Great for reluctant readers.
- [ ] **Ham it up.** Read aloud with voices and expression to show that books are fun.
- [ ] **Pair audio with print.** Following along with an audiobook builds vocabulary and love of stories.

Protect their confidence

Children with dyslexia often feel "dumb" long before anyone names the problem. Praise effort and progress, not just results. Remind them that their brain works differently, not worse, and that many successful people learned to read the very same way they will.

> **SAY IT OUT LOUD**
>
> "Reading is hard for your brain right now, and that's not your fault. We're going to get you the right kind of help, and it's going to get easier."

CHAPTER 8

Your next steps

You don't have to do everything at once. Here's a simple plan.

1. **Note what you see.** Keep track of the signs from Chapter 3 that fit your child, with examples.
2. **Take the free screener.** It takes 5–10 minutes at home: **readingguru.com/dyslexia-test**.
3. **Talk to the school.** Share your concerns in writing and ask about an evaluation. If decoding is the problem, request an IEP evaluation.
4. **Find a structured literacy tutor.** Look for a tutor trained in Orton-Gillingham or another Science of Reading–based approach. You don't need to wait for a diagnosis or an IEP.
5. **Make home a reading haven.** 20 minutes of reading a day and lots of encouragement.

The Reading Guru is here to help

Not sure whether your child needs remediation? Book a free phone consultation with our team. We'll talk through your child's challenges and the options that make sense.

Book a free consultation →

We help children crack the reading code.

Founded in 2010 by Joanna Brown, M.S. Ed, C-SLDS, The Reading Guru offers private, one-on-one Orton-Gillingham reading and dyslexia tutoring online worldwide, and in person in NYC, Los Angeles, Denver and Austin.

FREE SCREENER
readingguru.com/dyslexia-test

FREE CONSULTATION
readingguru.com/contact

EMAIL
info@readingguru.com

CALL OR TEXT
(303) 478-9000

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