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ABSTRACT

This collection of essays contains a brief description of the symptoms of dyslexia and a definition of the terminology. The meaning of being the mother of a dyslexic child and how to live with this "hidden handicap" are also described. Suggestions regarding how to treat persons with reading and writing difficulties are put forward. After a foreword and an introduction, the essays are: "Reading and Writing Difficulties and Dyslexia (Britta Ericson); "Living with a Handicap" (Birgitta Johansson); "To Be Seen as a Person" (Kajsa Stening); "Walking with Your Child Side by Side" (Katarina Stening); "How To Deal with People Having Reading and Writing Difficulties" (Birgitta Johansson and Kajsa Stening; "A Few Thoughts on Dyslexia" (Serge Garcet); and "Reading and Writing Difficulties form a Belgian Point of View" (Arlette Paulissen). (Author/RS)

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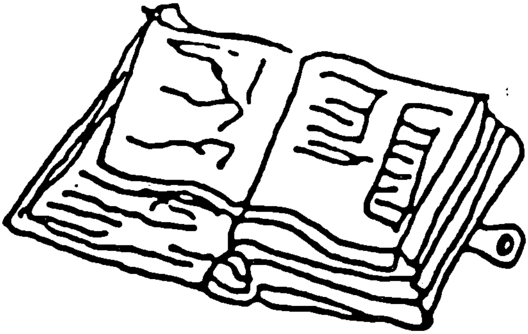
Britta Ericson, Ed.

EMIR Education and Research No. 2, August 1999



Reading and Writing Difficulties – A Problem?

Britta Ericson (Ed.)

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EMIR Läspedagogiskt Centrum, Sävsjö

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Abstract

This report contains a brief description of the symptoms of dyslexia and a definition of the terminology. The meaning of being the mother of a dyslexic child and how to live with this 'hidden handicap' are also described. Suggestions regarding how to treat persons with reading and writing difficulties are put forward.

Keywords: dyslexia, reading and writing difficulties, reading diagnosis, reading treatment.

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Foreword

Inger Claesson Wästberg

" We don't expect a child with a wooden leg to be good at the high jump, but we do expect people with reading and writing disabilities to cope with things which are impossible for them"
These words – and the experience – come from Arlette Paulissen, one of the authors of this book. A truer word was never spoken. Dyslexia – difficulty in learning to read and write – is a hidden impairment. The impediment and difficulty encountered by someone who is wheelchair-bound are easy enough to understand, but a person with the functional impairment called dyslexia cannot automatically count on the same degree of understanding.

This is due to sheer ignorance. Yours and mine. In this book we have an excellent opportunity of learning from those who know best. For who knows more about a functional impairment than the person who actually has it?

Writing about one's own limitation becomes, of course, an extra challenge when the limitation concerns writing ability!

Here we meet tree dyslexic writers with a different angle of vision from most others who have described this functional impairment.

About 500 000 people in Sweden are living with dyslexia. Reading and writing disabilities are one side of the problem. Another is the ignorance, on the part of people, which places dyslexics in difficult and virtually degrading situations.

This book is intended mainly for teachers and parents. One of its messages to them concerns the importance of a child with reading and writing disabilities quickly obtaining a diagnosis which can lead to the right kind of support.

The book is also intended for dyslexics. For them it has two messages:

You are not alone. And
You are good enough!

Stockholm August 1998

Inger Claesson Wästberg
Director General, the Office of the Disability Ombudsman

Introduction

Britta Ericson

Document background

Handicaps may be of many different kinds, those that are obvious and those that can be referred to as "hidden handicaps". For those who have the so-called hidden handicap it could be very difficult to be understood. Outwardly, nothing shows there is something inside the individual that very frequently interposes itself in the life of a person, turning things that seem to be very easy into things that are quite difficult to accomplish.

When in 1995 Sweden joined the European Union, the Swedish Government made a selection of various handicap organizations to take part in the HELIOS Program for the Handicapped. One of the chosen organizations was EMIR (Eve Malmquist Institute for Reading). A good number of working groups were active in the HELIOS Program. EMIR became part of a work group which as a whole was formed by 12 different organizations representing 8 countries, with Director Marc Garcet, A.I.G.S. (Association Interrégionale de Guidance et de Santé) from Belgium as President.

The aim of the HELIOS work groups was to enhance general awareness about the situation faced by the handicapped in Europe and to give them the opportunity to have a full participation in society.

The way to achieve this goal is contained in the standard rules set forth by the United Nations. Consequently, this meant that the work was carried out by the handicapped themselves, together with experts in this field working on an equal basis.

The HELIOS Program of the EU was concluded in December 1996. However, the 12 organizations of the working group wanted to continue their work. One of the reasons was that they felt there was a great need of information about hidden handicaps, namely, aphasia, reading and writing difficulties and dyslexia.

To make this work possible they requested EU funds in order to go ahead with the Progress Network Project *. Of the 12 organizations (see appendix) the members representing A.I.G.S., from Belgium, and EMIR, Sävsjö, from Sweden, were given the task of informing about reading and writing difficulties and dyslexia. This document shows the result of the work done by theese two groups.

Contents

In part one, Britta Ericson, Ph.D., gives a brief explanation about the difference between reading and writing difficulties and dyslexia. She describes the characteristic traits of dyslexia and gives a definition of the term. Need of a diagnosis is also stressed.

What is the real meaning of having reading and writing difficulties? Those who know best and who have a broad

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* Projet supporté par la Commission des Communauttés Européennes.
DG V Emploi, relations industrielles et affaires sociales
Dossier n° SOC 97 101273 05 E03.

knowledge of this problem are those who have the problem themselves. How the relationship between dyslexic persons and the world around them takes place, is described by dyslexic persons. Under the title “Living with a handicap”, part two, Birgitta Johansson talks about herself, her children and about how she succeeded in overcoming her handicap. In part three, Kajsa Stening gives her opinion about what it meant for her not being able to read properly during her years in school. Kajsa summarizes her message with the poem “Painting my portrait”. Further on in part four, Katarina Stening writes about her struggle and concern for her daughter, as a result of her reading and writing difficulties. In her contribution “Walking with your child side by side” she also emphasizes the need of support.

As an editor I feel highly rewarded for being able to work together with the three dyslexic writers. The three of them have all worked regarding their problem as dyslexics and were therefore able to describe their situation without feeling any kind of shame. The will to write was there. Not being able to spell right wasn’t an obstacle. They considered that the meaning and the message of their papers was worthwhile when compared with spelling right. In addition, they had learned how to compensate for their handicap by using different strategies. The computer became their means of aid. The corrections made by the editor were reduced to the use of commas, periods and capital letters.

Not placing commas or periods, or placing them where they don’t belong are very usual things with dyslexic persons. In reference to the contents of their papers no changes were made.

There is a reason, when we think about their ability to express themselves (meaning dyslexic persons), we think about the number of writers that is lost because of school demands regarding the right spelling of words and in many cases, it considers the different strategies used by the students in order to find ways to compensate for their difficulties, cheating.

Some recommendations are included as to how one should deal with dyslexic children and adults or persons who for many other reasons have reading and writing difficulties. The recommendations have been put forward by Birgitta Johansson and Kajsa Stening.

Serge Garcet, Liege University and Arlette Paulissen, A.I.G.S., Belgium, were in charge of the analysis of Johansson's and of Stening's papers in part six and in part seven.

This document is published in two languages, English and Swedish. The language of the authors is Swedish, except the document written by Serge Garcet and Arlette Paulissen who used French.

My heartfelt thanks to Lourdes Jane Jonsson, B.S.S., from Sweden and Mrs. Fabienne de Leval A.I.G.S., from Belgium. Mrs. Jonsson was in charge of the translation from Swedish into English, and the translation from French into English was made by Mrs. de Leval.

Reading and writing difficulties and dyslexia

Britta Ericson

The expression reading and writing difficulties tells what the phenomenon is about, namely, having problems with reading in an easy manner and also writing words with a correct spelling. These problems may depend on many different factors and can have various degrees of difficulty. In the old days, the most disturbing problems were called word-blindness. That expression began to be used in the late 1800 and at present, it is very seldom used. The most common terms today are dyslexia or specific reading and writing difficulties. Dyslexia is the most usual term. In English-speaking countries they often use the expression Specific Learning Difficulties.

What are the signs of dyslexia?

A child or an adult suffering from dyslexia may present the following signs or symptoms:

- having difficulties in transforming groups of letters with a meaning into words
- difficulties to distinguish between sounds that are similar
- having some pronunciation difficulties
- slow reading speed
- very frequently guesses the meaning of words while reading

- having spelling problems
- having a poor handwriting
- writing slowly
- having difficulties with syntax, the use of commas and punctuation

According to considerations made by the Swedish child psychiatrist Dr. C. Gillberg (1997), some or all of the aforesaid symptoms may be present in a child or a youngster with dyslexia, at some period of his or her development.

Determining dyslexia

The starting point to determine if a child or an adult has dyslexia depends on the concepts a person, for example a teacher, may have about this condition. There are some who consider all kinds of reading and writing difficulties, dyslexia. Others consider dyslexia just a pedagogical issue. Scientists have come to another conclusion as a result of the research work done in this area. Their conclusions are contained in the following definition.

Definition of dyslexia

- Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty that hinders the learning of literacy skills. The problem with managing verbal codes in memory is neurologically based and tends to run in families. Other symbolic systems, such as mathematics and musical notation, can also be affected.
- Dyslexia can occur at any level of intellectual ability. It can accompany, but is not a result of, lack of

motivation, emotional disturbance, sensory impairment or meager opportunities.

- The effect of dyslexia can be alleviated by skilled specialist teaching and committed learning. Moreover, many dyslexic people have visual and spatial abilities which enable them to be successful in a wide range of careers (The Dyslexia Institute, March 1996).

According to the preceding definition, dyslexia is neurologically-based and as mentioned before tends to run in families. Among dyslexic boys it is not strange to find that the father and the grandfather have similar difficulties. This condition can also be inherited from the mother's side, but it is not as common as from the father's side. There could be relatives from both sides (for example, uncles) with similar difficulties. If there are brothers and/or sisters in the family, some of them may also be affected.

Moreover, as far as neurological deviations are concerned, it is known that they can occur during the fetal period or during delivery. It has also been found that very frequently dyslexia presents itself together with some functional deficits, such as: attention, motor skills and perception, known as DAMP. About two thirds of children suffering from DAMP are affected by dyslexia. Dyslexia is more common among boys than among girls.

Reading and writing difficulties

As previously stated, many different factors can be behind reading and writing difficulties. They can be present as a result of either eyesight or hearing problems. For instance, if eye-coordination is not proper for binocular vision[1] at normal reading distance, reading can become quite a problem. The teaching or learning process could have been somewhat deficient either because the teacher's lack of skill or because the pupil missed classes. Emotional disorders can also hinder the learning process.

The examples just mentioned and the factors behind these problems are not neurologically-based, which according to the definition is a necessary condition to define dyslexia. Consequently, in these particular cases dyslexia cannot be determined. In other words, not all reading and writing difficulties can be classified as dyslexia.

Diagnostic procedure and treatment plan

It should be obvious to every teacher and anyone in charge of personnel who discovers someone with lack of literacy skills, either at school or in the workplace, that they make sure the problem is diagnosed. With a careful diagnostic procedure leading to a treatment plan, new ways will be open to give those affected by this problem the most proper help.

Not being able to read and write fairly well is very disabling, because in today's society to qualify for work you

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[1] From definition of orthoptics. Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary, 27th Edition., 1985, p.1193. 27th edition, 1985, p 1193

must constantly face educational demands. If you always have the feeling that other people seem to understand very easily the contents of a text when compared to yourself, it will often lead you to believe that you are not clever enough. You won't dare do some things because you are afraid of failing and show that you are very poor in reading and writing. You avoid every occasion in which you can be exposed.

People become ingenious in evading such situations, using excuses such as:

- I forgot my eyeglasses.
- I will read this tonight.
- I can't take this course because my mother-in-law is sick, etc.

The feeling of not being an intelligent person appears in the early years of school among pupils with reading and writing difficulties. In connection with this problem, some react, figuratively speaking, as if they were trying to disappear from the picture, just not to be noticed by others. Others react by projecting themselves towards the outside and start playing hooky or try to assert themselves by pilfering/shoplifting, etc. Studies made in Sweden with people in prison show that among them, the number of those who have reading and writing difficulties is higher when compared to the rest of the population.

In order to avoid poor development of individuals having difficulties with their literacy skills, a diagnose of the problem should be made at the earliest possible stage.

The reasons for this condition may be due to a number of factors. To analyze the problems you must have specialists at hand. Access must be given to representatives of various professional groups such as: special teachers, psychologists, orthoptists, speech therapists, child psychiatrists and neurologists.

Of utmost importance is that the weak and the strong points in every area of a given person, be pinpointed, so they can receive an effective treatment and the specialists will be able to suggest proper compensations in each particular case. If anyone has difficulty in focusing his or her eyesight at a normal reading distance, the practice of reading will not give any results until the vision is corrected with the proper reading glasses. If there is lack in the auditory sequence memory, probably the use of a phonic method is less appropriate when learning how to read. Instead, a logographic reading method can be used in order to achieve good reading results, if and when the visual sequence memory shows no deficiencies.

Usually, the diagnostic procedure begins with reading and writing tests under the supervision of a special teacher. If the teacher's approach stems from a holistic multi-disciplinary perspective, there is hope that during the diagnostic procedure the person will meet representatives from other professions. The carrying out of reading and writing tests, is not enough to either discover or determine the specific difficulties an individual presents in the learning process, for example, dyslexia. That can be achieved when the diagnostic procedure is the result of competence from all sides.

Those who have reading and writing problems are entitled to a diagnose. They have the right to know what are the problems affecting them. Uncertainty is always tough to endure. Being diagnosed is kind of a liberation. The person knows. He or she understands. They can dedicate themselves to work with the problem. They can meet their fellow beings face to face.

Living with a handicap

Birgitta Johansson

Introduction

To me being a dyslexic person means, never to be sure that whatever I spell or write will be properly understood by others. Perhaps it will mean much more to me than it would mean to others, since I have devoted quite a great deal of time trying to learn this art. But in spite of all the hours, weeks and perhaps years of training, my brain spells just the way it wishes. It has no order whatsoever, whether it is a matter of one letter or a matter of several letters. Whether the problem can be solved with a "u", or it can be better solved with a "y". I can write a word and forget some letters in or at the end of it. I can read words that are quite similar and begin with the same letter, but I do it the wrong way. Today and for my own sake, I have come to accept things as they are, although at times I can feel very sad, angry and ashamed, and the feeling that I am not as good as others makes itself evermore evident.

If I were to introduce myself today, I could do it in three different ways. First way: I am the mother of three children, two of whom have been diagnosed as having difficulties with reading and writing. Second: I myself have difficulties with the written language and since the end of the 60s, I have a certificate stating that I suffer from a condition called word-blindness, so that my teachers could take this into account at the time they would give me my final marks. This document was issued by a psychologist at the request of my teacher of Swedish, who during my time in High School[2] didn't know what to do with me regarding my situation as a student. Third: That way of introducing myself, which at times makes me stop and think, is because now, I am a teacher myself and work at a High School. The reasons why I became a teacher were the result of things that happened just by mere chance and also because of some possibilities that came up. It was not a choice made deliberately.

How I succeeded

I was brought into this world by very ambitious parents who met each other in the temperance movement. My grandmother meant a lot to me, partly because I was a little girl and partly because she became my full time daycare mother. This happened at a very important time in her life. She had two boys, so when the younger one moved away, I arrived and occupied most of her time. We were very close to each other and during my childhood, she used to read to me a great deal. I had a great fairy-tail reader in my granny. When I was sick, which happened to be quite often, she read to me from the books "Children of the Forest", "The Children of Noisy Village" and of course, from "Pippi Longstocking", which my mother had bought for me. Grandma was never grouchy or made fun of me, when I made an effort to write. On the contrary, she always encouraged me. She kept all my

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[2] In Sweden, High School includes three or four years depending on the program chosen by the student.

written production in a drawer with a red ribbon wrapped around it. When I was four and a half years old, I started kindergarten. This meant that I spent three hours every day in a little group, where I listened to songs and music and where I also took part in pedagogical plays.

Another event that I believe did have a positive influence on myself, was the visits I paid to the cottage where I spent almost every summer since the time I was born. There I practiced reading making use of weekly magazines. My grandmother subscribed to "The Home Weekly Magazine"[3] and "My World" another weekly. Her sister subscribed to "Around the Year" and "Events of the Week". My grandmother used to read "Housemother" and my mother, "Femina". So, I used to spend a week going through such a vast world of magazines, simply because we used to exchange them among ourselves.

During my time in school very few teachers had to be changed. I had very understanding schoolteachers who complimented me a lot for the work I did. The relationship with my schoolmates was good all the way. Many of them have been my best friends. But I remember times during my first three years in school when I overheard talk about myself regarding the special education I received, particularly when someone said that I was a good enough pupil to be in need of special classes. I also remember a team competition, where we had to go to the

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[3] The names of the weekly magazines are a free translation from the Swedish, except "Femina" which is the original well known name in Europe.

blackboard and write down words that we had as homework. I was supposed to go and spell and write the Swedish word 'katt' (cat). My team lost because of me. I had trained but ...

Homework

When homework was about the weekly vocabulary, we used to do it at home in the following manner. My mother and the teacher had decided that on the same day we had the weekly vocabulary test, we would be given the new words for the next week. That same day, mother and I practiced the vocabulary. We did the same every day of the week. This was always done before I was allowed to go out and play. We did it this way, up until the day prior to the weekly test. I knew beforehand that on that day, I couldn't go out and play or make any plans to be with my friends. I knew I had to practice the vocabulary intensively, from the time I got home until it was time to go to bed. The day of the weekly test we used to get up earlier, so that we could practice the vocabulary before going to school. But don't think that at the time of the test I always did everything right. My mother used to do the same with the rest of my school subjects.

During the time I went to the 7th, 8th and 9th grades, I studied Swedish and even mathematics by correspondence courses. This I did during several vacation periods, because I wanted to be prepared for the following school term.

Now that I have my own children, it is very difficult for me to understand how could mother or how could I endure all this. But neither mother nor I knew any better, to both, the important thing was that I achieved success.

Compensatory skills

Once, when I was going ice-skating in the Electrolux factory area, I had to write a note to my mother. She felt very impressed because I was able to write the word Electrolux in a correct way.

– But look – I said – it is printed on the refrigerator, I just had to copy it down.

This was how I used to work. If I couldn't spell the word chocolate, I wrote cocoa.

The problems began when I started High School. When I reached that level my homework was Greek to my mother. She only went to primary school (1st to 6th grade) after that she had to start working. My schoolmates were concerned about their marks and nothing else. They were not interested in studying together. There I was myself with texts that I of course could study in a mechanical way, but as I know now, I learned by listening not from reading. The situation became quite disturbing. My ability to compensate for my deficiencies (at the time I thought I was cheating) and my teenage meditations almost led me to a nervous breakdown. I am 'good for nothing', were some of the thoughts I had almost every day.

High School and advanced studies

The special education teacher I met back in 1968, taught me the basis on which the language is built, the repetition of spelling and the necessary instruments for language use. I have a lot to thank her for and I have done this many times. During my last year in high school we used to get in touch regularly. At lunchtime I used to take a bicycle ride over to her house, so I didn't skip any lessons. She began to teach me from scratch. So, as I began to grasp things we kept on going and went ahead with our work. I learned spelling, however strange it may seem, by memorizing all the rules and a good number of tongue-twisters and idioms, besides all the encouragement she gave me. In the end I felt I had improved quite a lot, but my teacher of Swedish was not of the same opinion. He gave me a 1 in Swedish, on a scale of 5. I never had such a low mark before. This made me feel very sad on graduation day. According to him, I had not improved.

After this and for a while thereafter, no one could convince me that I should continue studying. I took refuge in the children at the day-care center. A while after I took a course on Domestic Techniques[4], which taught us cooking and weaving. As a result of this I began to regain my self-confidence. Later on, I took a course on Children's Care[5] which was one way to get into nursery-school teacher's work. This course would also help me improve my average marks since the 1 I got in Swedish had been like a dagger to me. At the Children's Care course I met and started a friendship with others who already knew that studying was something very demanding, but that if we got to study together and asked questions among ourselves, the whole thing would be much easier. My

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[4, 5] Free translation from the Swedish.

marks were really high. They enabled me to enter the Training College in Umeå to study Domestic Science Education[6].

I went to college for three years. The first thing I did was to show them the certificate stating that I had been diagnosed as word-blind. I introduced the ‘new discovered technique’ of studying together. One thing that made things easier, was that the class was formed by a small group of ten girl students. My recollection of things orally expressed was one of my strong points. I also found it very easy to learn from illustrations. It so happened that on one occasion I was able to answer a question in an examination, because one of my friends showed me a card. The card represented a teacher, but on the blackboard behind her, there was the image of a figure. One of the questions in the exam was about this figure. I wasn’t in school the day the picture with the figure was drawn and explained, but thanks to the card my friend showed me and my visual memory, I was able to ‘play kind of a trick’ and score some points on that question. Those were the happy days, but I always found it bothersome when I had to use the typewriter, because independently of whatever I did, I always wrote some words with letters in the wrong places, or whenever I had to use double letters, I always missed some. The only way was to write down the whole thing over again, or instead, use Tip-Ex. What other solution could there be?

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[6] Free translation from the Swedish.

Professional life

After I finished school with many big A's[7] and some small a's, I got a job as a teacher to teach young girls taking the course on Children's Care. In spite of my handicap I was not considered a problem. I always introduced myself saying that I didn't know how to spell and asked my students for help. The office clerks that worked there used to write the exams I was going to give our students. My colleagues and my husband helped me with the correction of style.

Hard times and economic cuts reduced the possibilities for new investments, but in spite of all, an investment on a computer at home opened new possibilities. Tip-Ex lost its functions and disappeared. The utility of the computer to correct misspelled words has turned my husband's private occupation as a proof-reader, into something almost superfluous and unnecessary. Now he can do other things and enjoy his leisure time. Up to this moment, I have had three or four computers since I began to understand and to use this valuable piece of equipment.

Being the parents of children with dyslexia

When our children started school, our misfortunes began all over again. Well, ever since our eldest daughter Karin began pre-school, they told us she should not wear that

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[7] At the time school marks in High School were given in letters and not in numbers. A big ' A' was excellent, a small 'a' was very good, a big 'B' was good and so on.

patch over the eye, the one she wore for her strabismus, during the time she was in kindergarten. They also were of the opinion that she had a great imagination, that she was a daydreamer and that she didn't have enough interest in letters. But that problem could be sufficiently corrected, if she didn't wear the patch over the eye while she was attending school. The time to start school arrived and she kept 'dreaming', so she began her classes with a special teacher. When she read, she went slowly and she guessed some of the words, but when we read the texts together a couple of times, things improved. She memorizes, I thought. But school had never heard about such thing. They told us that if we paid some visits to the library and in between, we trained, she would become a better reader. She needed more time to develop her reading, more or less similar to the time it takes an apple to ripe, they said. My daughter was already visiting the library twice a week with my husband. She had a very good relationship with the librarian. She was fond of 'reading' books with illustrations, but she got tired very quickly. Every night and as part of the procedure established for bedtime, someone always read stories to her. But still, in our conversations with school, they kept saying that the visits to the library were of the utmost importance.

Since our eldest boy Martin needed more time than normal to learn how to read, the school convinced me that Karin's case was very similar to that of Martin. At the end of the third grade, I wanted Karin to take a test regarding her reading. So at school they asked me the following question: Do you really want to confront your daughter with a thing like that!? After such a question to a mother, we just went to an optician because we had heard that he was very good. The result of the examination was that her left eye was the dominant one. Although we had visited the eye clinic of the hospital on several occasions, they had never detected the problem. With the new eyeglasses she sure improved her reading.

Our younger daughter Maria started school. She is five years younger than her sister. When Maria finished first grade, she read as good or as bad as her older sister Karin. This was the first time I lost faith in what I thought was the school's responsibility. In my conversations with the teachers responsible of my daughter Karin, I told them I wanted her to repeat the grade because she needed it. Then the teachers changed their attitude and asked the school doctor to refer Karin to a specialist, so she could take a test for dyslexia. For a number of reasons the investigation took a long time. First, it took time for the doctor to state his views about the case. Then, there was a nine month waiting list and later on, summer vacations arrived. Just in midsummer, we received a letter saying that the residents of our municipality could not take tests for dyslexia due to economic reasons. The official responsible for this decision was taking his 'well-deserved' vacations and wouldn't be available until the month of August. However, in the letter reference was made about EMIR (Eve Malmquist Institute for Reading). There were responsible people with whom we got in touch and who were very kind to us. The Project Manager contacted me again at the beginning of the semester, which from a psychological point of view, was the right time for me. She encouraged and supported me and that gave me strength to keep on going. I remember the most things she said in that conversation:

– Since you are a mother with your own experiences in this field, you must face this situation and keep going. You can't change the fact that this condition is inherited and as a mother, you are the one who knows best.

Since EMIR was now going to be in charge of this case, we had to start the procedure all over again. Establish a new contact with the school – a new referral to EMIR – a new waiting period and so on. So finally, they went ahead with the investigation and my fears were all put together and then written down in a document. At last she was diagnosed! Karin went through her 7th grade with new teachers. This investigation served us to show the teachers that our well-adapted daughter was not lazy, that she didn't have any lack of interest, that she was not dumb. She needed help with reading and writing. She took advantage of all the help when it was given to her. On the one hand, she joined an evening study group, and on the other, she was going to have a special teacher during the time she had a break in school, so that she wouldn't have to miss any of the lessons given in the classroom.

Soon after, her youngest sister Maria took a test, since she as well has specific reading and writing problems. In spite of that, she is not getting the help she needs at school and according to the National School Curriculum, in my opinion she is entitled to it. We have solved the situation as follows: In many cases, it is much easier for me to help her directly, instead of first think about the kind of help she needs and then later ask the school for such help. Probably, they will not believe me, or perhaps, I would have to insist on things that the school staff may feel they don't have time to do. In addition, I have a lot of work giving the girls information about their handicap, so in the future they will be able to know exactly what help they need and what resources are required to get this.

Being the parents of children with dyslexia doesn't mean just problems. It is most important to identify the positive things found in every child. Karin, for instance, knows how to sing. She listens to tapes, records and the radio, so she learns the lyrics and the music of songs. She used to sing in a choir and we were proud of her because when she sang she was the only girl that looked straight at the audience. The rest read the lyrics and sang, so their voices got lost among the notes. Maria is good for remembering things. She never forgets her coat, her hat or her gloves in any place. She is sociable and she even helps her friends. In math everything is easy. She has no problems with the mental arithmetic of long and complicated figures. The girls are logic, creative and it is quite easy for them to establish a good contact with children and adults.

Why do we have to react? Why did I get myself involved with the problem of dyslexia?

- Well ... yes, my children's way through a school that can only distinguish two different kinds of intelligence, a linguistic one, regarding language, and a logical one, concerning mathematics. A school that doesn't take other aptitudes into account, for example: musical, visual, spatial, social and kinetic arts. In other words, a school unable to see the individual as a whole.

- Incomprehensible teachers who think they know better than parents and don't listen to them. Of all the teachers our three children had, (about 25-30 divided into a 15 year period) only two had called us and talked to us about our children's problems and happy stories, apart from the regular and obligatory so called The Quarter of an Hour Conversation, now called Development Conversation[8], teachers must have with parents every term. All three children have had a special teacher. At present, I never go by myself to these development talks. My husband and I take time off from work and go together. My self-confidence is not enough when we go to talk with the teachers about the ones who mean so much to us, our children.

The Swedish school of today is not in many ways better than the one I went to. Having in mind that it is also my workplace, I wonder how much good I can do by being there. My device has been the following: Inform and encourage our students and colleagues and tell them they should take advantage of the help technique offers to all of us in our search for knowledge. We must make sure that our young men and women realize they are not defective as people, but that they must be aware of their deficiencies and seek help. Our duty is to encourage them

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[8] Free translation from the Swedish. These conversations or talks are included in the Swedish School Curriculum.

and to disseminate knowledge among them in different ways, not just read from books and answer the questions that may arise.

Ever since I was diagnosed, I never tried to hide that I have problems. I have spoken about it whenever a relevant situation has arisen. I've never had difficulties because of that, although at times I have been asked some strange questions, but in order to avoid any misunderstandings, I have always tried to give as much information as possible.

Very often some people ask me how come I became a teacher. I then answer that it was because of my stubbornness, because of people who believed in me, a little bit of good luck, plenty of work, cleverness and many hours of persistent study.

I like to give parents a piece of advice. You are not alone. In the class or school your child goes to, there are many parents with sons and daughters that are equally concerned. Try to get in touch with them. Talk to other parents about the problem. Find out whether there is any organization, such as FMLS (The Swedish Association for Eliminating Reading and Writing Difficulties)[9] or a similar one. Try to find other children and young people having the same problem. That will prevent your child from feeling alone with his or her problem. In our family, that has been a great help in our struggle against the deep anxiety we so often feel.

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[9] Free translation from the Swedish.

To be seen as a person

Kajsa Stening

Before I began school I had the opportunity to take a test called School Maturity Test. One of my friends was going to take the test and I agreed to go with her for support. Since they had to have a couple of children to do it we went together and I was mature enough to start school.

When I began second grade, my mother realized I didn't learn to write as fast as my sister did. She is three years older than me. It always took me a long time to read things and, in addition, I got tired very rapidly. I spelled badly and read only the first letters of a word, the rest was just guesswork because I found it too difficult.

My mother thought that if it was something serious someone at school would inform her, but no one did. My mother got in touch with the school in order to find out why it was so difficult for me to read and write compared with others. The answer from school was that when I finished dreaming and began to concentrate a little bit more, everything was going to be fine. I was a little girl who concentrated much. I wanted to learn and paid good attention to everything my teacher said. She used to read out loud chapters of books to us and when I came home I could retell in detail the story she read, using almost the same words my teacher did.

After a good deal of insistence by my mother, I began to take a special training course. I was allowed to do that, because by doing so, they did not have to listen to my mother saying the same things over and over again. Those of us who attended these special classes used to sit in a little corner right in the hall outside the classroom. We were five children with five different kinds of difficulties and we all received help in the same manner.

I don't remember much about the first three years in school. Probably, I forgot all about them, because they were too hard for me. I haven't come to the point where I can remember such things, perhaps, I will never be able to do it and maybe it is better that way. The majority of my 'recollections' have to do with things my mother told me.

I also used to attend classes with the speech pedagogue[10], because I had a very thin voice as a result of my low self-esteem. I went to special education everyday and the time I spent in classes began to be less and less. What I do remember about special education, or better yet, the feeling I have about it, is that the place where we used to sit and have our special training lesson was really quite somber and depressing. I have no other recollection of the time I spent on such special education.

The fact that I was not like the rest, that I didn't learn as much and as fast as the others, that I was not as smart as the rest of my classmates, made me feel miserable. All

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[10] In Sweden a speech pedagogue is a teacher that has specialized in phoniatric disorders in order to help children in school and their work is based on pedagogical principals. It is mainly a Swedish teaching specialization. The speech pedagogue is not to be taken by a speech therapist.

that was extremely hard for me and when I was nine, I wanted to finish off with school. It affected me so much, that I began to feel anxious and experience performance anxiety whenever I had to do anything. I used to get heart-beat and felt very bad.

The thought that I might get sick made me nervous. The only way for me to learn was by listening to what the teacher said. That's why I used to get sick during my vacation periods. On many occasions during Christmas I had a temperature of 40°C. Every time I was going to start school after the holidays, I got panicky. Two or three weeks prior to the beginning of the school year after my summer vacation, I always began to feel sick. I never felt at ease. I couldn't eat, sleep or play. I spent entire restless days at home. When school began, it took me a couple of weeks to get used to and to accept that there was no other way out for me, but to attend school.

Sitting here
alone
in a room without walls
without doors
but yet locked
No one hears me
No one sees me

I scream
no a sound is heard
just silence
No one wants to hear
no one wants to see
Miss something
Have nothing

I was always very responsible with regards to school work. I complied with everything and I worked hard. My mother and I sat everyday for three hours doing my homework. I studied while my friends played. When I finished homework, my friends had already gone home.

I wouldn't have cheated when taking a test. I did once, in a spelling test we took in second grade. I cheated when I wrote the word 'Christmas star'. I just wanted to have at least one word spelled right. Anyway, I'm sorry I did it because I began to feel guilty. I never did it again.

During the time from the first to the sixth grade I felt really bad. I felt very inadequate, I felt scared and I thought I was stupid. When I read out loud, I heard my classmates sigh deeply. I always tried to read the paragraph ahead of the one we were reading, so I would have read it at least once, just in case I had to go ahead and read.

The teacher I had during the first three years enjoyed giving gold stars to those who were the best in class. One could also get a silver star if he or she was (almost) as good as the best. I never got one. I was never able to be among the best.

After vacations, we always had to make a composition about things we did. Our teacher used to read them out loud. She read the way we spelled, not according to what we really meant to say. She pronounced all the written mistakes we made and we sat and laughed at each other.

In secondary school[11] everything was a little bit different. In 8th grade one of our lady teachers in special education 'discovered' me in the last row of seats near the wall. Later on she described me symbolically as 'a wallpaper flower', in other words, a student who tries to disappear and doesn't want to be noticed by anyone. I preferred not to be seen by my teachers. Quite often I wished I had the ability to disappear from sight and become invisible. I often felt very nervous during lessons, in case the teacher would ask me to read or answer some question. Most of the times I knew the right answer, but I didn't dare open my mouth because I was afraid to say the wrong thing and make a fool of myself, and in addition, they could make fun of me.

After this special teacher 'discovered' me, she got in touch with the teacher in charge of my class, who in turn got in touch with my mother. The four of us met in order to talk about a special education plan for me. It was the first time since I had been a student that anyone wanted to know my opinion about anything. They asked me what I wanted and how and when I wanted to take this special training. We all agreed that the hours of special education should be on those days when we began late, when we had extended lunch breaks, free time in my schedule and when I had to attend my Swedish class. The fact that I was able to participate actively in the planning of my special training, was a source of rejoicing and motivation to participate in it. It wasn't as inconvenient as it used to be. Besides, most of the time I could be in class with my

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[11] Secondary School includes 7th, 8th and 9th grades.

classmates, so I didn't feel apart from the group or different, as I felt before.

My special education teacher and I could be by ourselves most of the time. We began from scratch by applying spelling rules. We used to practice reading and we talked. She began to tape my homework so I didn't have to wait till my mother could help me and work with me. I had the possibility of mastering my own work thus becoming somewhat independent.

I did fine in secondary school. I improved my average marks[12] from 2.8 in the 8th grade, to 3.6 in the 9th. I began to write in capital letters, so it was easier for me to see what I had written. Spelling errors were less and less and it was easier for me to catch them. Before that, I couldn't even read my own handwriting, because the imprint on the paper was so light that it was quite difficult to make out what I had written.

After secondary school I went on to high school to proceed with my education. I chose the Consumer's Economy program[13] because I thought it was more practical and less theoretical. I really didn't know if I was going to be able to stand for so much studying as I had done in previous years. At the beginning, everything was fine.

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[12] At the time Swedish Schools used a 1 to 5 scale. Five was Excellent, three was Average and one was Not Good.

[13] Free translation from the Swedish. In Swedish High School there are a given number of so called Programs every student can follow depending on his or her interests and the marks achieved in compulsory school.

My new teacher of Swedish wanted to help me, so she got in touch with my special teacher at secondary school. They talked about what we had done and about the aspects I found difficult. We didn't complete all the necessary school work I needed in secondary school. That meant that I still had much more work to do. However, I had regained my self-confidence and it was really much better. This I think, was my special teacher's most important task.

My Swedish teacher was very patient with my difficulties and didn't take them into account when she was going to evaluate my work. Unfortunately, she moved away. Therefore, they assigned me another teacher who took her place. The new one, reduced my marks immediately from 3 to 2, because according to her, I wasn't making a real good effort. When I got home and told mother what had happened, she got very angry.

We took a test on Swedish composition writing. The teacher in charge of the classroom during the test, said before we started: 'When you hand over your papers make sure you didn't make any mistakes in spelling'. At that very moment one of my classmates turned towards me and said: 'In that case it doesn't make any sense for you to take the test.' She said it, not because she wanted to hurt me, but because she knew I couldn't write a composition without making mistakes in spelling. My mother got even angrier when I got home and told her about it. I myself can't remember whether I was angry or whether I felt sad. At first, I didn't interpret this as an unpleasant way for my teacher to express herself, I probably thought that it was the way it should be. One thing is for sure, I'll never forget it.

There was an article in the newspaper about a pedagogical institute for reading, EMIR (Eve Malmquist Institute for Reading) that was going to open in my home town. My mother got in touch with EMIR's project manager.

I felt that I wanted to pay them a visit and I was received by them after we arranged a meeting. There I received all the right help I needed because from the very beginning my teacher saw me as a person. She wanted to find out how I felt, what was my opinion and also what I really had in mind. No matter how much help we get from our parents and the support they give us, one always needs somebody outside the home, who will see us as persons with our own given qualities. That in fact can save lives!

Having reading and writing difficulties means that you have a hidden handicap. No one can say straightaway that I am a person with such difficulties. I think this is all due to the fact that people cannot understand that we just cannot do it, that we do indeed find reading and writing very difficult.

Dyslexia is not a problem that goes away as soon as we finish school, because when one finishes school, many new things closely linked to reading and writing begin to appear. For example: when we fill out forms, pay bills, read recipes, and so on.

At EMIR, I was not only a weak student that my teacher had to help, but one that she indeed wanted to help. She wanted to help me! Together we worked on spelling. No other student came and opened the door and screamed in the halls. No other teacher came to interrupt us. We were not only studying, we also talked quite a lot. She listened to me. We could work and talk for three hours uninterruptedly. When summertime came, my teacher said she wanted me to read three books. I thought it was too much to see myself obliged to read. This was the worst thing that could ever happen to me. It really didn't make any sense. In the end I read the three books, simply because I had to read them. The following summer I had to read books just like the previous summer, but on that occasion I understood what the real meaning of reading books was. For the first time, reading became a joy and it turned out to be very exciting. That summer I read six books, simply because it was a lot of fun. Since then I keep reading books and I have discovered new worlds.

Most of my knowledge of English has been acquired through TV. When I was younger, whenever I watched a TV program in English, my mother had to read the subtitles to me. I learned English so that my mother didn't have to be with me when I watched TV. That was difficult and embarrassing, specially when we had company, for example, my sister's friends.

After I finished the Consumer's Economy program in High School, I took another course called Children and Recreation[14]. This is a course where you learn about children and their development. I did all right in that course. They allowed me to take oral tests and they also

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[14] Free translation from the Swedish.

made copies of the overheads they used both with pictures and texts and gave them to me. That way I didn't have to write them down all over again. I had to do a lot of reading in the course, but anyway, I was able to carry out the whole thing through.

Later and on two different occasions, I took part in a teacher training placement, first at an elementary school and later, in a secondary school. It is surprising for someone like me, who thought I would never go back to basic school, to be appointed in something of this kind. Nonetheless, I did and besides, it was a lot of fun. I had the chance to help a boy who was in the same situation I once found myself. As a result of that I learned a lot.

In the middle of those two periods of practice, I attended a writing course of a one year duration. There I learned to write poetry and literary texts. I've always loved writing and using words. When I was six years old, I listened to theater programs for adults over the radio. This was sacred to me, it was something I didn't want to miss. I always wrote fairy-tales and stories, although I didn't know how to write properly. I love words and I think they are beautiful, but sometimes they somehow seem to act like an enemy. I learned a great deal in the writing course, both in the use of words and about myself.

It was most important that I attended this course. It proved to me that I knew how to write, that my spelling did not mean anything if you looked at it from a wide perspective, that my words with the wrong spelling meant as much as those with the right spelling, that the most important thing is the meaning of words. All that made me feel stronger. The fact that I was shown respect for the things I wrote and for my poems, has given me strength. I know I can and I know that people understand what I say, despite the fact that I make mistakes when I write. However, I don't like to write to people that I don't know too well, if I suspect that there may be words I didn't spell right.

The writing course is both the best and the worst thing I have ever done. I thought I had made great progress before I began, but then I realized I couldn't do certain things that other people could do. For instance, read somebody else's texts and analyze them! The reading of the texts took me most of the time. I could express what I felt when I read the texts while the rest made reference to the language, to superfluous words, feeling, rhythm, messages and many other things. I then felt I had been left out and that really hurt me. If I had to work with just one text at a time, it would have worked, but I had to do it with eight at the same time. Now I know that I can write despite my handicap. I dare challenge my own handicap!

Many things have been and still are difficult for me, for example, to read long and difficult texts and at the same time comprehend what I have read; the spelling; to preserve the difference between the right and the left side; to recite the alphabet from memory and learn the multiplication table; to look up words in a dictionary. I've never been fond of party games, playing games or dancing around the Christmas tree[15] and things like that. It's

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[15] To dance around the Christmas tree is a usual Swedish tradition during the holidays.

tiring and difficult for me. I always have a need, I must feel that I am in 'control'. I really like to know what is going to happen next, so that I can plan and be prepared beforehand. I do feel very sad when things don't come out the way I think they should. Somehow, I call that my own personal protection network. When I was younger I felt like Bambi on slippery ice. It isn't that I have to make plans for everything, but it makes things easier for me.

I hate to fail, but still I demand more of myself than what I'm able to accomplish. I really don't know why.

Sometimes, I have the feeling that I am dumb and a slowpoke, particularly when I see how easy it is for other people to achieve things I simply can't. Sometime ago my boyfriend and I visited some friends and we had dinner with them. After we finished, our friends proposed playing a game. Right there and then I felt panicky. One of them read out loud the rules of the game and I felt I didn't understand a word of it, so I told them so. The others began to explain them to me and said they weren't so difficult and that I sure was going to get the whole idea once I began to play. The game was about the catching of a killer, finding the weapon of the crime and also discovering the place where the crime was committed. We had some sort of a checkout list to help us solve the mystery. We all had some cards showing such things as: a person, a crime weapon and a place. That meant that each one of us had to keep in mind the cards one had, and also the cards other players had, so one could be able to solve the mystery and discover who the killer was, where the crime was committed and what weapon was used. All that had to be done at the same time. I began to feel tears well in my eyes and the only thing I wanted to do was take off. It's so difficult for me to do several things at a time! When you take part in a game, you do it because you want to have a real good time. To some people this may seem to be easy, but for me, it's very difficult and since it is so hard for people to understand that I can't do what others can, it makes me feel very dumb. I know that it has nothing to do with intelligence, but it hurts so much.

When this happens I hate my brain and I only wish there could be some kind of an operation or something, whereby I could transform the whole thing and make it similar to that of everybody else's. At the same time, I wouldn't want to change it, because it is me and in spite of it all, I like myself.

My mother and my family have always given me help and support and they have always been there whenever I had to face any problem. If one works with people who have the same problems I have, never underestimate the great treasure the family represents and don't forget that they also need support. The family doesn't need to hear insinuations about it being their fault: that they read in excess to their children, or that they are not doing enough. Pay attention to what the family has to say and let them read to their children. One misses so much as a child if one doesn't have someone who can read to you, so you have the great chance to listen and be rewarded with all those beautiful stories and such wonderful world of fantasy.

Paint my portrait

If you don't understand
I'll help you
If you don't see
I'll show you
Take a brush
without seeing me
paint my portrait

Words to me
are incomprehensible hieroglyphs
A page to me
is like a novel
I want to be like you
know like you
but I can't

I'm not stupid
nor lazy either
and I know
what agony is
I've hated myself
Wished that I was someone else

If you don't understand
I'll help you
If you don't see
I'll show you
Take a brush
without seeing me
paint my portrait

Do you know what it is
not to understand

not to be able to read
to always spell wrong
Have you ever been scorned
for being who you are
constantly being afraid of
what other people think

I have a handicap
There are no soothing pills
only my own struggle
the sweat and the tears
Is it then surprising
that I'm insecure and quiet
even though I have a lot to say

If you don't understand
I'll help you
If you don't see
I'll show you
Take a brush
without seeing me
paint my portrait

I will always have a hard time
That can't stop me
I love words
strange but true
It shouldn't be like that
doesn't make sense

The impossible always tastes better
Setbacks have formed me
made me into who I am

Kajsa Stening

Walking with your child side by side

Katarina Stening

Every child has to go through life his or her own way. Parents may be by their side but they cannot take their place. Not even when the going is rough as it has been in Kajsa's case.

Kajsa was born in December 1975, after I went through some bad times when I was expecting my baby. She was born small because during pregnancy she didn't get the proper nourishment. She weighed 2 kilos and measured 45 cm. She was born one week ahead of time, but had developed some reflexes as if she had been born 4 to 6 weeks before delivery date. A week before delivery, they found out that I was suffering from preeclampsia. Even before this occurred, my pregnancy was not an easy one. Sometimes days went by and I didn't feel the baby moving.

After 2 weeks in the children's hospital they let Kajsa go home. The pediatrician told us that during the first year she would grow up and catch up with the rest of the children her same age. Insofar as weight and size were concerned, she didn't catch up with the kids the same age, but as far as everything else was concerned, she was no different from other children. Nor was she any different in the future. She has been and still is special just like they all are. Of course, I always had certain preoccupations, specially during her first year when she was a little girl. Our ever present concern was that we were afraid she may have had an injury due to lack of nourishment, or that she may have suffered some kind of damage during delivery. This was somewhat worrisome. However, when we saw that she was developing more or less at the same rhythm as her sister, we stopped worrying.

Kajsa was full of hope and expectations up to the day she was to start school. I had doubts regarding whether or not it was going to be difficult for her, because she had been born at the end of the year. The kindergarten teacher in charge of the six year old group, was of the opinion that our girl was as mature as any of the children born at the beginning of the year. When she began school it was quite a change in her life and she had to have time to adapt herself, but she liked it because it was fun and exciting.

As soon as I noticed that reading and writing were very difficult for Kajsa, I began to worry. Her father, her sister and myself had a hard time learning how to spell, but not how to read. However, Kajsa read slowly, got lost in the text, did a lot of guesswork and found it very difficult to repeat back what she had read. When I talked with her teacher, I felt confident with the reassuring answers she gave to all of my questions and worries. According to her, when Kajsa grew up enough, everything was going to be all right. I sure wanted to believe the teacher was right: The teacher was supposed to be the one who really knew how children learn reading and writing. Yet, I certainly didn't get rid of my worries and Kajsa's problems didn't 'go' away.

Kajsa was no longer happy about going to school. It took her a long time to do her homework and she always needed help. Sometimes, she didn't even have time to play. There were days when instead of doing her homework I let her go to play with her friends. If one doesn't get together with his or her friends and take part in different activities, we may run the risk of loosing touch with our peer group and very easily become either isolated or an outsider. Her homework was important and so were her friends. I found it hard to determine how much time would be reasonably required by Kajsa to do her homework so I could find a proper balance between her homework and playing time.

During the first three years in school, she had attacks of tachycardia that according to the pediatrician were symptoms shown by someone suffering from a great distress. She wanted to learn as much as others, but couldn't, despite her efforts and work. It didn't matter what she did. She trained and worked hard but she was never among the best, so she could win a gold star just by herself. If as a mother, I had given her all the gold stars she deserved, it wouldn't have helped. It was from her teachers at school from whom she needed recognition and encouragement and who should be warm in praising her efforts.

It was quite evident both to Kajsa and to us at home that school was very difficult for her. This, likewise, must have been obvious to the teachers, because they decided to give her special training. Yet, contact with school was a little bit confusing. It was as if Kajsa had a problem they all knew about, but at the same time, it was one that didn't seem to exist. When we asked the teachers for an investigation of Kajsa's case, they told us that such studies were no longer made, because they were unnecessary. They also told us that Kajsa couldn't concentrate and that she was a dreamer. That was the problem, they said. In their opinion, if she really had reading and writing difficulties (things that in their opinion didn't exist), she wouldn't have such a vast vocabulary and she wouldn't be able to express herself orally as well as she did. In addition, her father and I had divorced, perhaps that was the reason for Kajsa's problem.

It was hard to see how our happy little daughter had changed and become a sad and quiet girl. I felt very unhappy and helpless when she pleaded with me not to send her to school. All I could say was that all children must go to school. She knew she had to go, despite the fact that it didn't do her any good.

Of course, I did all I could trying to find out what was causing Kajsa's problems. I believed that if we were able to find the cause of her difficulties, we would find the solution that would in turn facilitate giving her all the help she needed. I asked myself, could this in any way be linked to my pregnancy or could this may have happened during labor? The pediatrician couldn't give me an answer. Could it be because of the divorce? It was quite a change, although her father lived very close by. Perhaps, I read too much to her, or maybe I was doing things the wrong way. I had a lot of questions in my head, but I didn't know whom should I ask.

The more Kajsa had to read, the more difficult her schoolwork turned out to be. She had problems in all subjects. The 'help' she was getting meant that she had to miss other classes. She missed lessons most important to her, because she actually learned quite a great deal by listening. The whole thing became a vicious circle because it took her longer to do her homework. Kajsa had to be helped everyday by somebody older than her. Although I was aware of both her problems and her great need of help, I didn't always have the time or the strength to help her as I wished. Of course, we used to get mad at each other, but in spite of all, we gathered strength and were able to go on with our task. The work had to be done, there was no other choice. But schoolwork should not depend on the effort made by parents, in order to give our children the help they need so that they can fulfill their tasks. People at school used to tell me that Kajsa was getting help. Who knows, maybe they didn't even want to see how much harm this situation was doing her. As a mother, I didn't have enough knowledge and perseverance to ask the right questions and therefore request that she be given all the necessary help.

It was hard for me not knowing if I was giving her the kind of help she really needed at home. We tried to find various ways to do the homework, so it could be more pleasant and varied. At times, I was able to prepare the work in such a way, that she could feel more independent, and that of course was good for her. But I always asked myself whether or not it was good that I read to her. Perhaps it was better if she herself did the reading. On many occasions she read one part and I read the other. It was difficult for her to read and at the same time grasp the meaning of the contents. When she listened she learned in a very easy and quick manner.

Time and hard work gave us experience, so we learned how to differentiate between what was easier from what was more difficult. When I talked to the teachers about 'our discoveries', they didn't seem to be interested. I do believe it would have helped Kajsa much more if the teachers had paid more attention to what we said about our discoveries and had put them to use. Not to mention what an important contribution this could have been in order to make me feel better as a parent, if as a result of my observations they had accepted all the information I was offering them. I was very much concerned for Kajsa and felt that I was not better equipped to help her, specially when I thought I wasn't being a good mother. We parents must have enough strength to face the sadness and disappointments our children have to go through, specially when they think they have failed. We parents are the ones who can help them with these feelings. When the teaching staff have no confidence in us, when the things we say are not taken seriously, when they put the blame on us and make us feel guilty, how can they expect us to gather up strength in order to help our children?

During the summer vacations, Kajsa seemed to come to life again, but as soon as the beginning of the school year drew near, she got pale and even appeared to have shrunk. That's how hard it was for her. It was just like putting her in a cage. It was hard for me to see her suffering and at the same time see that I was not being able to help. We gave her all the support we could, but what good was it to her, when life in school showed her the opposite of everything we said and even worse. She couldn't do just like the rest did, and where the special classes were supposed to help, they didn't help at all. Kajsa began to appear quiet and wrote in very small letters, so that nobody could see her mistakes.

Sometime in the 8th grade she was discovered by a special teacher who had gone to her class in order to help another student. Right there and then, Kajsa began to receive help, real help. For the first time and after all these years, I was recognized and considered a collaborator in Kajsa's schoolwork. Kajsa was given the opportunity to participate and decide in connection with her studies and the special classes, and I was given the possibility to learn in which ways I could be of help to her. In addition, this new special teacher told us that what we had done previously, was quite right! I also had the chance to read a book about people who had difficulties with reading and writing. That was quite an experience!

Finally, I was able to stop looking for the causes of Kajsa's problems. The most important thing after all was that she was going to get the help she needed. We again began to see and feel the real Kajsa coming back. The one we only saw in summertime.

When Kajsa went to High School, she got no more of the good help she used to get during her last years in secondary school. It made us feel that although we worked hard to get to the top of the mountain, when we finally got there, we were suddenly brought back down again. I felt very upset. In High School, teachers began to say all over again that Kajsa was careless, that she lacked concentration and that she was a daydreamer. The drop that filled the cup to overflowing was the warning they gave at the time of the national Swedish test: 'Remember, when you hand over your papers, make sure you didn't make any mistakes in spelling'. How can a teacher express herself like that, when she knows that among her students some have reading and writing problems?

Before this happened, I had read about EMIR (Eve Malmquist Institute for Reading), that was going to be opened, and also about the person who was going to be in charge of same. With Kajsa's permission I wrote a letter to the Project Leader and told her about Kajsa. As a result of this, Kajsa and her new teacher met and began to work together. This marked the beginning of a new life for Kajsa. There they saw her as the person she really is and not as a problem. She was seen the way every single human being needs to be seen.

It is hard for me to describe how I felt when after receiving help from EMIR, I saw Kajsa speaking in front of 200 High School teachers about her experiences at school, and how step by step she made a list of suggestions about several things they could do in order to help children with reading and writing difficulties. I was proud of her and at the same time I felt sad because I knew how hard it had been for her. I also felt grateful because now I know that she has received the help she needed.

I have been by her side all through her schooldays and I have seen her suffer. Yet, I was not prepared to hear her say that she probably wouldn't be among us today if she hadn't been given the possibility to go to EMIR. It saved her life! But the true fact is that it isn't enough with the support we parents can give our children. Someone else must see all these things and understand! Someone who is willing and able to give whatever help may be necessary.

Kajsa is an adult now, but it's still my duty to be by her side, although I may not be as close as I used to be when she was a child. It is difficult for people who meet Kajsa to become aware of her hidden handicap. Sometimes she needs to talk to us, because we have always been close to her and because we are the ones who really know. If somebody has a paralyzed arm, it's obvious to everybody around this person that he or she may have difficulties doing certain things. Those who have a so-called hidden disability very often find it very difficult to make others understand that there are things they just can't do, things that seem to be or that are quite simple and clear to others.

It is a great gift that our child wants us and let us walk by his or her side. At times it may seem to be tedious and painful, but this effort will also give us new strength and will bring us new knowledge and comprehension. It should never be considered a burden. Being by their side we'll also find happiness and love.

How to deal with people having reading and writing difficulties

Birgitta Johansson, Kajsa Stening

We are all people

All human beings need people who first of all see the person and his/her possibilities and not focus on the person's problem and the difficulties. We need to be seen and recognized as such. We must feel that we have things in which we are good. We don't always want to keep listening to old allegations, such as, that we are lazy, daydreamers and that we don't concentrate enough or that we don't pay attention, simply, because it is not true.

We want people to accept that all persons are different, without having to find out why or without having to give reasons. Just accept the fact that there are people who may be different from the ones you ordinarily know.

We never ask anyone with a visible handicap to do something they obviously can't do. But those of us who have a hidden handicap, such as reading and writing difficulties, have to face situations almost every day, where people around us demand or expect that we either read some papers or jot something down.

We need time and understanding

There are things about this handicap we would like to talk about. It is difficult for us to be punctual because we may not know how to tell time or maybe because we are unable to write the time down. It may be difficult for us to take care of several things at the same time, as for instance in school, where one has to pay attention in class, do some writing and at the same time participate in discussions. Things as simple as party games can become a problem. It makes us feel just as stupid as we feel in the classroom. When you take part in a party game you are supposed to be in a pleasant environment, you chat, you must organize your game, you must have some knowledge about it, you are pressed for time and on top of it all you must be a good looser. You must show that you have all these skills and that you use them all at the same time. Can you imagine? The main idea of party games is to have a good time, but for us, it may become a nightmare.

One of the most important things we aim at is that our fellow beings give us time and understanding. Reading and writing are abilities that we all don't have. When you are going to write a composition at school the subject of spelling right seems to take over, it seems to be the most important thing, not the contents. It should be the other way around. As a teacher you have to accept that not all students can spell properly. The most important thing in a text is the contents not the mistakes. Look at the positive sides, not at the negative sides.

In society we all have responsibilities but we also have rights

We should be entitled to the same rights handicapped people have regarding personal means of aid. We shouldn't have to depend on the request of funds. This in itself means that we need somebody's help in order to write such requests! It would be, for example, as if we asked a paralytic person without any possibilities to go anywhere, to sit in a chair at home and tell him or her, to wait until they had a chance to buy a wheelchair and that in the meantime they could ask for help whenever they find themselves in need of anything. With this example we want to draw a parallel just to show how difficult things can be for us. Individual means of aid for anyone with reading and writing difficulties should begin at elementary school and they should of course be considered a right.

Knowledge is always the best way to succeed

Investment of resources should be made in order to further the education of the school staff, so that they can learn new techniques, gain knowledge about the results of research and become familiar with the latest methods of aid. In that way they can acquire practical knowledge and at the same time find themselves in a position that will allow them to make use of such knowledge and share it.

The school staff and all personnel working with children must join together with the parents. Parents have an intuitive knowledge of their children. Working together enhances good opportunities toward a positive environment, well needed by all parties concerned. School is a brief, but very important part in a child's life. Still, the perspective of parents regarding the life of their children is much broader and should be taken into account in a serious and useful way, because the struggle of children having reading and writing difficulties and the support of parents do not come to an end when the children finish school.

Society should never blame the parents for their children's lack of literacy skills. They are accused of doing things the wrong way, that they either read too much or too little to their children, that the situation at home is a mess, that the whole thing just happened because the parents got divorced or because they don't train their children the way they should. In conclusion, there could be many other reasons society can give to justify the causes of the children's difficulties. That is not fair and it should never take place!

It happens that teachers see assessment and/or diagnose as "labeling" a child. But in fact, the sooner the problem is diagnosed, means that this will highlight the strengths and the weakness of the child, and thus the better he/she can be helped. Looking at the situation from that point of view, assessing or analyzing the problem, leading to a diagnose and the proper treatment must always be the right thing to do.

In all service work, such as: post offices, banks, health care, social security, etc., the personnel should be informed about this handicap so they can ask clients/customers whether or not they need any help in reading or filling out any of the forms and/or applications. The hurry we are in, and the stress we feel when we are in a queue (for example at the bank or the post office) do not make things easier for us. On the contrary, things become more difficult and we may feel blocked. We need time and help to solve our daily problems. It's not easy and the result is that we try to avoid the solving of other pending problems.

If together we can make the persons with reading and writing difficulties, become aware of their problems and accept their condition, instead of trying to hide their handicap, they will give those around them a good chance to help them.

A few thoughts on dyslexia

Serge Garcet

After having heard these different life experiences, certain comments arise. The first, and probably the most important, concerns the profound humanity of these accounts.

We can only raise one's hat to the incredible lesson of life that they give us. The courage shown by these people and their families to overcome the handicap can only reassure us for the future. Furthermore, these accounts have permitted us to see, beyond the borders, how similar the suffering is when one is not recognized in one's integrity.

How many times have we not been faced, in counseling, families who are tired, with similar hopes and disappointments? In the present situation, this feeling of distress, of incomprehension lived by many dyslexic families, finds its origin on the one hand in the hidden nature of the deficit, and on the other hand because dyslexia is a still ill-defined disorder. The hidden nature of the disorder is definitely the most difficult to apprehend in as much as we tend to take into account the handicap generated as a citizen.

Usually, and this throughout all European countries, our authorities accept that a handicap exists only if the physical, mental or psychological deficit is visible. The only function of this recognition is to give the stigmatized person the irresponsible social status of "handicapped".

Thus, in the presence of a dyslexic person, we proceed by exclusion; if we cannot observe a physical handicap and the person cannot read, then he/she must be mentally handicapped ("she's dumb, she's retarded, ...") or that he/she has psychological problems ("she's lazy, she's rebellious ...").

The difficulty with dyslexia is that the deficiency is apparent in a field which is not usually considered as an independent cause for a handicap. This is maybe one of the reasons why a social and political consideration for the consequences of dyslexia has only appeared recently, with important differences from one country to another.

For the person who has to live daily with the lack of recognition of their reality, the social and psychological consequences are numerous. It therefore seems difficult to dissociate, when dealing with dyslexics, the instrumental difficulties and the durable human consequences of this social incomprehension.

To measure this impact, it is necessary to define dyslexia. Beforehand, we spoke of the fuzzy outline of the disorder to stress the various forms and possible causes leading to dyslexia. This is essential for the understanding of the disorder and the reality of the dyslexic person.

Indeed, although the generic name "dyslexia" is the same, this can cover very different realities and the handicap can be of a different nature according to whether the affected mechanism is structural or more functional. Great public confusion as to what dyslexia is, is reinforced by focusing on dyslexia as such without taking into account the mechanisms leading to it.

Another reason for looking into the underlying deficits, concerns an early diagnosis. Dyslexia can only be diagnosed around the age of eight whereas certain disorders, at the origin of dyslexia, can be diagnosed by four years old. We can only imagine the importance these years can represent in terms of remediation.

In the majority of cases, dyslexia appears as the consequence of specific instrumental disorders linked to language, spatial structuring, motor functions or sensory-visual or auditory decoding.

Beyond certain hereditary components, certain organic factors significantly increase the risk of the apparition of specific learning disabilities. Pre-natal factors (hemorrhages, medication, ...) perinatal (prematurity, anoxia, birth weight < 2.5 kg, ...) post-natal (feverish convulsions, brain damage, meningitis ...). Let us note here that the difference in the number of dyslexics observed from one country to another are surely due to the confusion existing in the definition and the nature of this disorder, rather than on the true number of people suffering from reading difficulties.

This leads us to ask the question of remediation. Of course, it is tributary to social and political will to take into account this disorder. Therefore the means made available for families, reflects the representation of this disorder within each state. Furthermore, faced with such diverse forms of dyslexia, one must admit that it is difficult to define clearly the means of remediation. Certain difficulties can easily be treated, whereas, faced with another etiology we will have to admit to the relative efficiency or inefficiency of the therapeutic proceedings. This is why, we would rather stress certain factors which should be taken into account in all care: early diagnosis, a good quality diagnosis and multi-disciplinary care.

An early diagnosis limits, as far as possible, the psycho-social impact of the deficit. In the case of light instrumental difficulties, early care could even avoid he apparition of dyslexia at the age of eight. A clear diagnosis, is, as we have seen, necessary to correctly evaluate the deficit and the handicap. The quality of the diagnosis will allow to give the adequate means of remediation.

To conclude, the need for a multidisciplinary approach allows to go beyond the symptom so as to discover the person as a whole. However, the full impact of this approach is only felt if it integrates the dyslexic person and his/her family as partners in the therapeutic relationship, as actors of their own adaptation. This is no doubt the meaning of responsible citizenship.

Reading and writing difficulties from a Belgian point of view

Arlette Paulissen

Despite the invention of new media techniques, reading and writing are still considered to be the most privileged means of communication. Furthermore, stress and modern day life exacerbate certain aspects of reading and writing difficulties. This is why, it seems of interest to look into the various practical problems encountered by individuals with severe deficits in this field.

The aim of this chapter is, above all, to allow parents and teachers to improve their understanding of daily life difficulties faced by a child with reading and writing difficulties, and then to increase their ability to provide the right support.

In the rest of the document, so as to facilitate writing, I will refer to reading and writing difficulties using the masculine, even though this problem affects girls as well as boys.

The outward symptoms of reading and writing difficulties can vary quite a bit, however, people suffering from them do have points in common. Numerous similarities exist between French speaking people, but also between those who speak Swedish, and most probably, those speaking other languages.

A dyslexic person is a person who suffers from a hidden deficiency which influences family life, and for whom an early diagnosis is essential and who needs special help.

They are individuals

Every person suffering from reading and writing difficulties is unique. Why are we never able to accept them as such, without always being concerned about their deficiency? This seems so obvious that it is the title chosen by Kajsa Stening and motivated Birgitta Johansson to get involved in the field of reading and writing difficulties.

A person suffering from reading and writing difficulties is someone who has many strengths and various abilities. He can, for example, be very intuitive and very perceptive, he usually has a very vivid imagination and many adult dyslexics use positive aspects linked to their disability in their professions.

Unfortunately, often, when the parents and the teachers talk about a child, they often mainly discuss the problems: learning difficulties, maladjusted behaviour ... and they often forget to say that he can be quite brilliant in other fields. A child can be very good one day and that the next day it seems as if everything learnt has disappeared, explains why often people believe it is a question of a lack of effort. However, he is not lazy, but he may be tired.

Getting from one place to another is, for others, a problem. The numbers written on the buses all look alike. And even when he finds landmarks to get there, a dyslexic child can feel lost on the way back until he has seen a poster or a detail which proves that he is on the right track.

After school, the house is meant to be a welcome shelter, however, not only does he have to do his homework which, due to the reading difficulties, often takes twice as long, but how many other obstacles and failures is he going to have to face? He misses his favourite T.V. programme because he misread the time on the clock or was unable to read the T.V. programmes. How many of these types of frustrations is he faced with every day? He is interested in so many things to which he has often restricted access. Birgitta and Kajsa give us a good example of the time spent on homework, which considerably limit leisure activities, and play-time and thus the time spent with friends.

The deficiencies are hidden

The problems incurred by reading and writing difficulties exist but they are not always tangible; the weaknesses are not immediately perceptible nor classifiable.

It is obvious that we don't expects a child with a wooden leg to be good at the high jump, but we do expect people with reading and writing disabilities to cope with things which are impossible for them. An invisible handicap also means that, whereas we spontaneously help someone in a wheelchair, each time the person suffering from reading and writing difficulties needs help, he must ask: at school, but also later on at the bank, at the dentists and everywhere where papers have to be filled in.

More specifically, concerning dyslexia, every person who deals with children is concerned because if, usually, everyone wants to help a child, involuntary errors are very easily made by people who are not familiar with reading and writing difficulties. The football trainer gives, for example, a long list of instructions to be followed.

Reading and writing difficulties affect the whole family

Dyslexia, among others, generally costs money, time and a lot of effort. Thus, the whole family is involved. Its schedule often has to be changed, the objects placed in specific places ... In fact, accommodating professional and family life and other activities is already not an easy task but, with the handicap is all the much greater. One must manage so many interactive handicaps that sometimes the whole family is judged “disadvantaged”.

Helping a dyslexic child can become a full-time job! And sometimes, when the parents are dyslexic themselves, the help they can give is limited. The brothers and sisters sometimes suffer from the attention the parents give to the dyslexic brother or sister. It is however important that the members of the family can provide a helping network, even very low key, and thus that certain common objectives be set. Kajsa’s and Birgitta’s accounts show how important family support is.

An early diagnosis of the difficulties is required

With regards to dyslexia, the learning difficulties don't suddenly appear at 7, 8, 9 or 10 years old, but are the outcome of the evolution of specific problems from infancy. They are however, most of the time, discovered when the child has to learn more complex tasks or learn new ones. Often, the parents realise it a long time before their child begins school. They notice small problems which they can't really describe. They are, sometimes, confused and embarrassed when they try and explain their intuition to teachers or any other professional. It is particularly difficult for them to mention the problem if they themselves were dyslexic and have bad memories of school. In this case they can feel inferior, and react unconsciously as they did when they were themselves pupils. But we should believe in their instinct when they say that there is something strange with their child: they have an intuitive understanding of him.

Furthermore, it is sometimes difficult to understand that, if the majority of teachers are able to describe with great talent, the difficulties of a pupil, at the beginning of their career, they know little about reading and writing difficulties. Gardeners study the diseases a plant or flowers may have, but teachers, in Belgium at least, do not learn about dyslexia during their studies! Therefore, the diagnosis is often established after months or years of frustration.

Sometimes, pinpointing the problem comes as a relief. The difficulties have a name, the child is not alone dealing with this problem but is one among many others and some of them are very talented. The child can feel better when he knows that he is not guilty for having bad marks in tasks which others fulfil quite easily. It sometimes happens that they imagine that their parents and family could not love them because they are no good at school, they mix up affection and pride.

Being different from their peers and they very soon discover that they are, they can develop behavioural problems. They often feel quite isolated, useless, … They believe "I am stupid, I can't do anything, nobody loves me, …" Birgitta's story is a good illustration.

Mockery and teasing about their language difficulties are frequent. As Kajsa has explained, even a simple game can be a social problem because the dyslexic cannot think both at once about the aim of the game, its rules and a winning strategy especially when there is a time limit. They can also be called bad losers if they refuse to play. Sometimes, as he "sees" things differently from other players, that he takes on certain tasks in a different way, he is called a "cheat". Birgitta thought that she was cheating simply because she used different learning skills than the others. It's really very difficult to have friends in these circumstances.

They are sometimes so desperate to be appreciated that they would do anything to achieve it: some become class joker or the tough one. In this way they can show their peers how great they are. In any case, making others laugh about oneself or scare them seems better then crying over one's fate. Their low self-esteem can lead them to avoid social situations.

At the extreme of this emotional pole, some students are dragged into committing delinquent acts: a significant number of dyslexics have been observed in criminal institution populations. Thus, certain dyslexic families can be considered as "risk" families.

Parents must be conscious that their child's reading and writing difficulties is no-ones fault. The parents must not feel guilty, even though society sometimes tries to make them feel that way: "you read too much to your child, you don't read enough, you help him too much with his homework, you don't help him enough ..."

Parents must not feel guilty either, if they are divorced or have had personal problems: emotional stress, even though it can worsen learning difficulties, cannot create reading and writing difficulties.

Parents often anxiously wait to know whether their child will pass into the next class. Some panic, others shut their eyes and hope that things will get better by themselves. Sometimes, they are still angry because they feel that the problems should have been noticed earlier and appropriate help given to their child.

The diagnosis can explain, not only the reading and spelling problems, but also some behavioural problems. It can also help family and school relations.

Of course, nobody likes the idea of a permanent handicap, even though the skills affected by learning difficulties can be improved as well as some behavioural disorders, usually via adequate training and treatment.

The dyslexic person must accept to live with reading and writing difficulties and anticipate problems in such a way as to rearrange his life with them. On this subject, Birgitta reminds us that: “I am not a dyslexic person but a person suffering from dyslexia”.

When reading and writing difficulties is suspected, parents should do everything possible to ensure that the child be seen by a specialist so as to have a diagnosis and treat him in an adequate way, as soon as possible. The more the parents wait, the more reading and writing difficulties will leave scars on the child and the more difficult it will be to improve the situation …

What help can they get?

What could the state do?

The State could say: that dyslexic people should be allowed a certain amount of tolerance for their school examinations (with, of course, a medical certificate). Thus, for example, they could benefit from extra time or be given certain concessions for grammar mistakes. Certain severely dyslexic persons should get help from another person to write down the answers and even, if necessary, read out the questions. This is already done in certain countries.

What could the community do?

Certain knowledge about dyslexia and its symptoms, knowledge about the acquisition of written and oral language, assessment tools for children at risk, understanding of the rapport between professionals, learning methods adapted to different styles of learning, multisensory learning programmes, the use of technical aides such as the computer ... should be given to the teachers.

The most effective would be to benefit from a prevention policy in such a way that the child be treated before the conditions deteriorate and cause other problems such as low self-esteem, guilt, anxiety ...

Couldn't we have experienced teachers teach the first year students rather than having newly graduated teachers, which is usually the case in Belgium?

What could the parents and the teachers do?

Overcoming the consequences of dyslexia requires a lot of patience and hard work on everyone's behalf. Whatever the situation, it is very important that the parents be sure that the teacher knows about the child's dyslexia. In this way, those children suffering from the "hidden handicap" will no longer feel isolated and penalised, and will thus be sure of receiving the help and encouragement needed. Birgitta explains well how important it is, even as an adult, to inform others about written language problems. Sometimes, asking for a written report from an expert, who describes the difficulties, can be necessary.

The constant support and understanding from the teachers and the parents are essential for the child's self confidence, to compensate for weaknesses and develop strengths. Together, they can suggest ways to overcome certain obstacles.

Together, they must keep the child motivated, build up his strengths, lessen his weaknesses and build his self-confidence and self-esteem. They must encourage his interests, his leisure activities and give him information, put forward his ability's and show how much they appreciate them. They must not only be positive, but also must never compare them to others, and not allow for mockery about their difficulties.

This is why collaboration between parents and teachers is essential. They must work in the same direction, especially if the parents help with the homework at home. The parents implication in class activities is not always welcome, but the class journal can be used as an efficient communication tool. Meetings between parents and the educational team are possible. When they have fixed a meeting, they must prepare the meeting, for example, by reviewing the essential questions they want to discuss.. After the meeting, they can write a summary of the main points of agreement and the other aspects which should be followed, in 3 copies, one for the parents, one for the teachers and one for the child.

Even if it is difficult to go and talk to a teacher to ask for the authorisation to work differently with the child than with the others, it is very important to discuss and see what changes can be made.

- Can the child sit at the front of the class? In this way, the teacher can keep an eye on him, make sure that he has understood the question, check that he has copied what was on the blackboard correctly and give positive feedback without giving too much attention.

- Can the child be moved away from the window so as to reduce distractions?
- Can the teacher read out loud in the class room?
- Can the dyslexic person be given more time to produce written work especially during the exams? Can we ask him to write less or give written texts when the child is unable to copy from the blackboard?
- Is it necessary to ask the dyslexic person to write several times the same word when he could be copying a word with mistakes in it and thus memorise it incorrectly?
- Can he write a word in the space or spell it out loud or use mnemotechnical means? Certain funny associations or strange ideas help memorisation and experience shows that many dyslexic students happily invent or illustrate their ways of remembering.
- Can they use a tape-recorder during the lesson?
- Can the visual material be left a little longer on the blackboard?
- Can he ask a friend to take note?
- If he receives written papers, can they be in big characters and in one style?
- Is it possible to take into account the aim of the exercise rather than the grammar?

  It is indeed not easy to understand, for a child, that he can lose grammar points because his writing is not very good, or lose composition points because of his spelling even though the ideas are good.
- If their handwriting is bad, can they use a typing machine?

- Can he have less homework?
- Is it possible, when the task is too difficult and the child feels particularly anxious, to change the important part of the work and adapt it to the child?

It is important for the child to have his parents at his side. They can truly encourage him and build the child's capacities. Sometimes, making a list "I am good in ..." can be useful.

It is important to find an activity (sport, art, stamp collecting ...) in which the child feels able and far from any academic pressures, where success depends mostly on literary and numeric tools. So this means that we must be careful with the tasks we give our children.

The dyslexic child has to make more efforts than other children and is often tired at the end of the school day; being pressured after school is over should thus be avoided as much as possible. Considering that certain dyslexics need more time than others to carry out certain tasks such as tying shoelaces, reading the time ... the parents can make some of these tasks much easier. They can buy shoes without laces, buy clothes with a different front and back, buy a digital watch with a date and an alarm, use colours for the calendar, use a colour scheme for the different school subjects and days.

One can buy pencil cases with the multiplication tables printed on the back, give them a card with their name, their address, telephone number, date of birth ...

As for homework and the help parents can give with school and work, there are two risks: on the one hand that the child does not make the difference between the relationship he has with a "private teacher" and the feelings of a mother or a father, and on the other hand, that the parents take things too much to heart.

Not getting involved and saying "it's not my problem" and calling the child lazy or blaming the teacher for being too demanding does not help. Taking on too much responsibility does not help either, like spending every evening doing his homework.

But even if they are not always capable of teaching their child, parents can help in different ways: giving the child a quiet room in the house far from the telephone, from the T.V. ... making sure that he has all the necessary tools such as: paper, crayons, eraser, ruler, dictionary. Maybe, they can establish a daily or weekly schedule including meals, leisure, sport ... agree upon a time for homework and use an alarm. When work is given a long time in advance, they can, maybe, help the child to divide the work into smaller steps and establish a work schedule. Present the steps one at a time so that they don't feel submerged but do not leave everything to the last day either.

Parents can ask the teacher to tape his lessons, tape educational programmes on T.V. and discuss them with him later. Some can also read to their child as often as possible – whatever his age – and everyone can avoid asking him to do it if he does not wish to, also show him that reading is not only a difficult task at school, but can also be a source of pleasure.

The parents' role is to guide the child and not do everything in his place: it does not help him to do his homework even if it is sometimes necessary to give examples or show what path to follow.
In any case, dyslexia can not be an excuse not to do one's homework.

What technical support should be used?

The type-writer, the tape-recorder, the T.V., the computer are all very useful tools.

If his handwriting is not very good, his work can be typed on the type-writer and thus have a more professional look to it. It is rare that the dyslexic person finds it difficult to type. So as to avoid mistakes, he can help himself by saying out loud each letter that he is typing and keep a constant rhythm rather than accelerating and decelerating.

The tape-recorder is another technique for reminding and reinforcing. Everyone at home can acquire the habit of leaving messages on the tape-recorder so that the dyslexic can listen to it as many times as he wants. The television is another good accessory because it has sound and an image all at once.

The visuo-spatial dimension of the keyboard and the screen of a computer also helps the dyslexic. Furthermore, computers are very much appreciated and interesting. They create a dynamic and original work environment. The child in front of the computer is no longer scared of being punished or making mistakes. The computer can also store a lot of information which is easily accessible, in comparison to books. The computer is also useful because it allows for revision and reinforcement of topics already seen in class. The child can also use the miraculous help of the spelling corrector. Even computer games used in moderation are useful because they stimulate attention and give success.

Parent's associations?

Finally by joining a local association or parent support group, the family saves time and energy. They can get information on dyslexia, useful addresses to get a diagnosis and organise a treatment and some lessons. By meeting other parents, they have the possibility not only to have useful advice on teaching, homework and education, but can also be reassured by meeting other people who deal with similar difficulties. They are encouraged because they benefit from other people's experience and are happy when they themselves can be of use not as a professional counsellor, but as a friend with whom one can share experiences.

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