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Module 29: Assessment and evaluation

When trying to help someone diagnosed with dyslexia, there is nothing more important than assessment and evaluation. The only way to truly help someone who is suffering from dyslexia is to understand as much about the disorder as possible. That means you need to read about and study dyslexia, and educate yourself about the specific elements of an individual's dyslexia. Proper assessment, and evaluation of the subsequent results is an invaluable way to get an excellent understanding of your patient's strengths and weaknesses. Then, and only then, will you be able to put together an individualized treatment plan that will also help them cope with dyslexia. In this module, we will discuss the different skills that you will need to assess in a patient. You will learn how to assess these skills, and how to properly evaluate the results.

What you will learn in this module:

29.1 Language

29.2 Phonological Awareness

29.3 Rapid Naming and Word Fluency

29.4 Reading Fluency

29.5 Reading Comprehension

29.6 Spelling

29.7 Writing

29.1 Language

We often think of dyslexia as solely a reading problem, but it can affect an individual's oral and written language skills alike. For that reason, it is important to give both forms of language credence in our discussion of language assessment and evaluation. In this section, we will discuss how dyslexia can affect a child's language skills. We will detail more in later sections of this module.

29.1.1 Language - Oral Language (1 of 2)

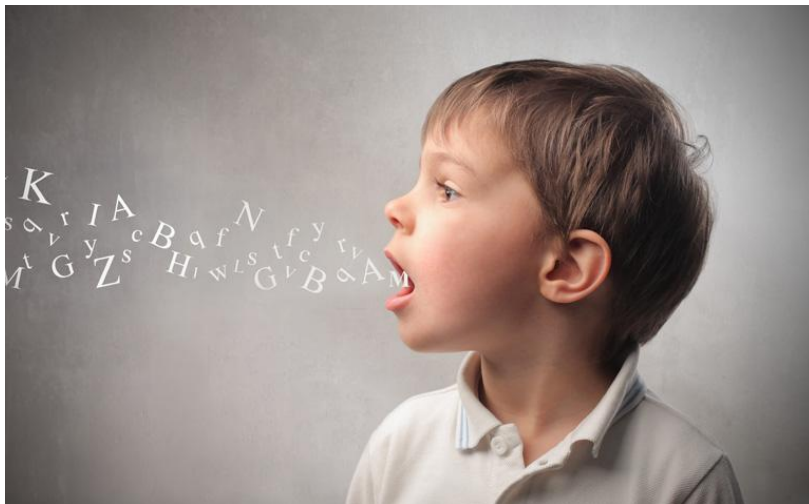


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While verbal skills are often a strength of individuals with dyslexia, many dyslexic individuals have difficulty with similar oral language tasks. The following oral language deficiencies can be symptomatic of dyslexia, especially in children:

- Speech is delayed: All children learn to speak at a different pace, however a child should typically be able to form very simple sentences by age two. They should show enormous language development gains between two and three years old. If a child is behind this pace, there is a possibility that it may be caused by dyslexia or other problems.
- Interpreting and understanding language: Because dyslexia affects the way that an individual processes words and letters, children with dyslexia may also display difficulty understanding language.
- Pronouncing words incorrectly: When the words become mixed up in an individual's mind, it can be difficult for him or her to pronounce them correctly.
- Organizing their ideas into complex sentences: Because the deficient language skills makes speech a little more difficult for individuals with dyslexia, it takes them longer to develop the ability to speak in complex sentences and organize their thoughts.



29.1.2 Language - Oral Language (2 of 2)

These symptoms are most noticeable in children, when language is being developed, so many of the assessment options we discuss will be geared specifically towards children. In order to identify whether the symptoms you are observing in a child are caused by dyslexia or something else, you should administer assessments based on the following skills:

- Rapid naming and word retrieval: Assessing an individual's rapid naming and word retrieval skills can give you a glimpse into their thought process, and whether it is



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hindered by dyslexia. Dyslexia will slow an individual's ability to process and express their thoughts, so you will notice a delay and difficulty in these skills.

- Word pronunciation and sentence formation: These skills can be difficult for individuals with dyslexia. When trying to pronounce a word, an individual will sound it out in his or her head. If the letters or sounds are mixed up, which sometimes happens with dyslexic patients, pronunciation is more difficult. This goes with sentence formation as well. If an individual is struggling to put words together, putting sentences together is going to be a problem as well.
- Oral comprehension: This is once again a processing skill. Individuals with dyslexia may have difficulty with oral comprehension because it takes them longer to make sense of the words they are hearing.

There are a number of different tests you can use to evaluate these skills, including:

- Test of Language Development
- Wechsler Individual Achievement Test
- Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals
- Slingerland Screening Test
- Test of Adolescent and Adult Language
- Lindamood Auditory Conceptualization Test



29.1.3 Language - Written Language (1 of 2)

More than anything, dyslexia affects an individual's written expression. It makes most every type of writing skill more difficult to acquire and master. It can sometimes be difficult to tell if a child is struggling because of dyslexia or some other problem, issue, or disability. Children who have dyslexia often display the following difficulties:

- Poor spelling
- Inability to organize ideas



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- Difficulty with spatial organization
- Poor handwriting

There are specific skills that you can assess to identify if a child has dyslexia, including:

- Reading fluency: Testing an individual's ability to read accurately and quickly can be a good way to gauge his or her likelihood of dyslexia. The disability will slow the individual's processing ability, and therefore make reading fluency more difficult.
- Reading comprehension: A dyslexic patient's difficulty with reading fluency will affect their reading comprehension. Either it will take them a longer time to comprehend what they read, or they will move too quickly to accurately comprehend anything. If someone has difficulty reading accurately, they will likely have trouble comprehending the text as well.
- Single word decoding: Decoding is an important part of learning new words. Children who decode well can look at a new word and figure out what it says using their knowledge of letter and sounds. When a dyslexic child tries to decode, they often struggle because of their difficulty identifying specific letters and sounds.



- Spelling: This skill is difficult for dyslexic children for the same reason as decoding; spelling requires an understanding of letters, sounds, and their placement within a word. This is a skill that dyslexic children usually struggle with.
- Grammar, punctuation, and word choice: Children dealing with dyslexia often have difficulty with the nuance of grammar and punctuation.
- Essay or paragraph writing: Because it is sometimes difficult for children with dyslexia to put together complex ideas on paper, it can be a struggle for them to form an argument or stay focused during a longer response.
- Handwriting: Children with dyslexia will often display poor handwriting because of the concentration required for them to accurately create letters. They will likely either write very slowly, or write quickly with a lot of errors and illegibility.

29.1.4 Language – Written Language (2 of 2)



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There are a number of different tests you can use to evaluate these skills, including:

- Wechsler Individual Achievement Test
- Test of Word Reading Efficiency
- Test of Reading Comprehension
- Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests
- Woodcock-Johnson Diagnostic Reading Battery

29.2 Phonological Awareness

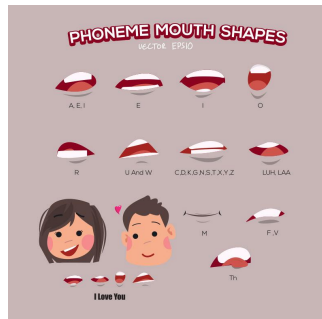
Phonological awareness is a term used by specialists to refer to an individual's understanding of how to sound out words. A child who has a strong understanding of the phonological structure, or sound structure, of words is much more likely to be a strong reader when he or she grows up. Phonological awareness is often used to assess children's potential reading ability very early on. Dyslexic children often have trouble with phonological awareness. It is important for experts to be able to differentiate between a child who is not a strong reader, and a child who has a disability such as dyslexia. The disability may be hindering him or her from being a strong reader. Before we get into how dyslexia affects an individual's phonological awareness, let us review some important vocabulary.

29.2.1 Phonological Awareness – Important Terms

- Phonological: The way in which sounds are combined to create words and sentences.
- Phoneme: The basic distinctive units of speech sounds within a language. In other words, phonemes are sounds that are commonly found in many different words. Breaking a word down into phonemes is helpful when trying to understand phonological awareness. For example, if we break the word "black" into phonemes, it will look like this: "b/l/a/ck." Usually, two vowels together or two consonants together will form one phoneme.
- Morpheme: A word or sentence comprised of phonemes.
- Phonics: Using phonemes and morphemes in order to teach an individual to read, write, or speak a language.
- Segmenting: Counting the number of sounds (phonemes) in a word or sentence.
- Elision: When an individual adds, deletes, or moves a sound or sounds when pronouncing a word or words. For example, an individual who pronounces "fifth" as "fith" is eliding the "f" sound from the word.
- Blending: Combining two sounds you have heard in isolation and forming one word.
- Phonemic awareness: An individual's understanding of phonemes and how to identify them.



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It is important to note that phonological awareness and phonics are not the same. Phonological awareness is about an individual's ability to understand phonemes and pronounce and create words using that knowledge. Phonics is the act of teaching an individual to read and write using phonemes. Phonological awareness is all about sound, and has nothing to do with written language (though it is a predictor for future reading and writing ability).

29.2.2 Phonological Awareness - Important Elements of Phonological Awareness

When broken down, phonological awareness is focused mainly on 4 different elements of speech: phonemes, syllables, words, and sentences. Here are a few examples of questions that someone with high phonological awareness would be able to answer:

Sentence: How many words can you identify in the following sentence: "Mike went to the stadium to play baseball."

Word: Of the words fish, line, and dish, which two rhyme?

Syllable: How many syllables are in the word "monkey"?

Phoneme: How many sounds are in the word "cow"? What are they?

Remember that phonological awareness is purely verbal, so individuals attempting to answer these questions do not have the questions written in front of them to review. Phonological awareness is considered an excellent indicator of future reading and writing ability. If you are able to break down words into sounds in this manner, you will have an easier time remembering new words and accurately predicting the meaning of new words.



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29.2.3 Phonological Awareness – The Effect of Dyslexia

Phonological awareness is not easy, and requires an understanding of the nuances of the English language (which is very complicated). For dyslexic individuals, it is even more difficult because it requires an individual to interpret words, letters, and sounds, which are adversely affected by dyslexia. When testing a child's phonological awareness, there are some clues that you can observe that will give you an indication of whether or not the child has dyslexia, including:



- Difficulty discriminating between sounds that are different and sounds that are the same (rhyming, alliteration, etc.).
- Difficulty remembering sounds and/or the pattern of sounds in a word, phrase, or sentence.
- Difficulty understanding and comprehending the sounds that he or she hears.
- Difficulty sequencing, or identifying the order in which words were just presented to him or her verbally.
- Difficulty isolating one sound from a word or sentence.



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Children who have difficulty with these skills could be suffering from a disability such as dyslexia. Remember, that having dyslexia means that an individual's ability to interpret words, letters, and sounds is disparate from the individual's overall intelligence. Some children may struggle with phonological awareness and not have any disability. However, difficulty with these skills can be a strong indicator of a potential disability. There are many different assessments that you can use to test these skills in an individual, including:

- The Phonological Awareness Test
- Test of Word Knowledge
- Texas Primary Reading Inventory
- Slingerland Screening Test
- Wechsler Individual Achievement Test
- Torgesen-Bryant Test of Phonological Awareness

29.3 Rapid Naming and Word Fluency

Rapid automatized naming (RAN) is a term that refers to the quickness with which an individual can identify objects, pictures, colors, or symbols out loud. The ability to quickly identify such symbols is often referred to as word fluency. Because of the quickness with which an individual must identify images, dyslexic individuals often have difficulty with rapid naming and word fluency. In other words, dyslexic individuals have a difficult time quickly putting together what it takes to rapidly name images, while non-dyslexic individuals can do it without much thought.

29.3.1 Rapid Naming and Word Fluency – Put Yourself in Their Shoes

In order to better understand why it is difficult for dyslexic individuals to perform on a rapid naming assessment, let us use an analogy.

Scenario 1:

Imagine that you are walking into your home when your friend calls you and tells you to turn on the television and go to a specific channel because a reporter is interviewing him. It would not take you very long because you know where the television is, you know how the remote controls work, and you know how to find the right channel.



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Scenario 2:

Now, imagine you are housesitting for someone and you have never been in his or her home. You are walking in the door when that same friend calls with the same request. Where is the television? Where are the remotes? Which remotes control what? What channel is the network for this particular cable provider?

Everything was a lot easier in the first scenario because you already had all of the pertinent information to perform the task. In the second scenario, you knew what you had to do, but the steps were a lot more confusing because the setting was foreign to you. This is a lot like what a dyslexic person goes through when they need to rapid name. They know what they are supposed to do, they see the image, but it takes them longer to put everything together because they have obstacles in the way.

29.3.2 Rapid Naming and Word Fluency – Evaluating an Individual Using RAN

Performing an informal rapid automatized naming test is not difficult. In fact, some board games like Scattergories, Password, and Taboo, specifically require this skill. All you need to do is display words, objects, or images to the person in question and see how quickly he or she can identify them. However, if you are really trying to assess where the individual's weaknesses lie within this test, you need to consider a few questions, including:

- Does the individual respond better to different types of stimuli (words, pictures, objects)?
- Does the individual perform differently depending on the way you stage the assessment?



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- Is there a difference in the way that the individual performs when asked to write answers rather than verbalize them?
- Is the individual able to sound out foreign words?

These types of questions do not just help you identify dyslexia, but they also help you understand what the individual needs to be successful. You may even want to include the individual in these questions, asking him or her to tell you what was easiest and what was most difficult. With a better understanding of an individual's strengths and weaknesses, you can be better prepared to help him or her.

29.4 Reading Fluency

When assessing an individual's reading fluency, you should focus on two measures: speed and accuracy. In other words, how quickly can the individual read a passage, and how accurate is his or her reading? Typically, reading fluency is measured as the number of words an individual can accurately read in a minute. An individual who has high reading fluency is able to read a text without having to focus a lot of attention on decoding, and is able to instead focus on comprehension and analysis. Just because a person has low reading fluency, does not necessarily indicate dyslexia. Dyslexic individuals can usually understand what they are reading, but it takes them longer to read it. Therefore, if you have an individual who reads accurately, but takes a long time, they are likely dyslexic. Someone who reads quickly and inaccurately may be having difficulty with something else.

29.4.1 Reading Fluency – Difficulties

When trying to decide if an individual's low reading fluency is a result of dyslexia, it is important that you pay attention to the assessment itself, and not just the results. The following difficulties may indicate dyslexia:

Trouble with automaticity, meaning that he or she takes longer with reading tasks (like decoding) that others perform unconsciously.

Trouble understanding new, but simple, vocabulary. Dyslexic individuals struggle with sounding out and understanding new vocabulary, even if they have the proper prior knowledge to be able to take an educated guess.



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Trouble breaking words down into syllables to make them more accessible and understandable.

Trouble comprehending the text the first time he or she reads it. Individuals with dyslexia may be too focused on trying to break down and figure out the words to take the time to put together meaning and comprehend them.

29.4.2 Reading Fluency – How to Help Build Reading Fluency

An individual with dyslexia can improve their reading fluency. It may be more challenging for him or her than it would be for an individual who does not have dyslexia. There are a few strategies that you can use to help individuals with dyslexia improve their reading fluency:

- Model good oral reading: Many dyslexic individuals can comprehend texts better when they hear them (although dyslexia can also affect oral language, as we discussed earlier), so modeling proper reading can help dyslexic individuals visualize the language and build up their automaticity.
- Practice: Like every other skill, practice will always help. Individuals who struggle with reading fluency will need more practice, not less.
- Keep encouraging: Dyslexia is already making reading difficult. Do not make it worse by discouraging or being insensitive to the individual's struggles. Give positive and constructive feedback to help guide the individual towards improved reading fluency.
- Vary your techniques: Try to help the individual display their reading fluency in different ways. Use more visual text, or books-on-tape, as a break from traditional reading. The more you add variety, the more the reader will adapt to adjustments. As an added bonus, the individual will not get bored as easily.

Dyslexia does not mean that an individual is unable to improve his or her reading. It just means that he or she will have to work a little harder. As a Dyslexia Therapist, you can help make that work a little easier and a little less lonely for them.





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29.5 Reading Comprehension

A lot of the problems we discussed earlier, when combined, may make reading comprehension difficult for dyslexic individuals. Dyslexia can also affect an individual's reading comprehension skills in different ways. We need to look at reading comprehension as a more complex task than simply reading a passage and answering multiple-choice questions. By doing this, we can give dyslexic individuals the chance to show where their reading comprehension strengths and weaknesses really lie. Some of the important elements of reading comprehension that we need to consider are:

- Reading for understanding
- Identifying the main idea
- Character analysis
- Author's purpose
- Classification of information
- Making inferences
- Compare and contrast
- Sequencing

Looking at all the different elements of reading comprehensions will give you a better profile of the individual you are working with. Once you have identified the individual's strengths and weaknesses, there are strategies that you can use to help him or her improve reading comprehension.



29.5.1 Reading Comprehension – Before Reading

Dyslexic individuals who are struggling with reading comprehension will often benefit by preparing for the text that they are about to read. Model the following behavior for them so that they get used to doing it themselves:

- Preview the text: This changes depending on the type of text. If it is a book, look at the cover, read the sleeve, preview the length, and look for any pre-reading



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information. If it is a passage on a test, read the title, look for where the piece was published, and the author's name. Previewing a text helps the reader get acclimated with it, and makes it easier to comprehend because it builds context.

- Access prior knowledge: Encourage the individual to refer to any previous knowledge that he or she has that may help understand what the book is going to be about.
- Make predictions: Making predictions about the text is a great strategy because it forces the reader to think critically about what he or she is going to read.
- Categorize what you are going to read (schema): Try to get the individual used to consciously categorizing texts. This will provide even more context and make it easier to read.



29.5.2 Reading Comprehension – During Reading

Many people see reading as a passive activity, which is why it is easy to sometimes read four or five pages, and then realize that you were not paying attention at all. This can be even more difficult for individuals with dyslexia. Encouraging active reading will help dyslexic individuals focus on comprehending and analyzing a text rather than just decoding it. Here are some strategies you can use to help dyslexic individuals develop while they read:

- Annotate: Use sticky notes, a notepad, or write directly on the text, but somehow annotate as you read. Ask questions, make predictions, and point out purpose, theme, or characterization. Not only will this help focus the reader's mind on understanding the text, but it will also help out when the reading is over and he or she wants to go back and refer to the text.
- Vocabulary: If there is a word that the reader cannot decode or does not understand, encourage him or her to look it up. Once he or she gets in the habit, it will not be a bother, and it will help the reader comprehend the text tremendously.
- Focus on the text as a whole: Encourage readers to constantly ask themselves "why is this important?" Great writers do not include information that is irrelevant, and this strategy can help a dyslexic reader stop focusing so much on decoding and focus more on comprehension.



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29.5.3 Reading Comprehension – After Reading

Once reading is done, it is important to continue working with the text. Stopping your comprehension strategies when the text is done is like working out without stretching afterwards. Encourage readers to reflect thoughtfully on the text after reading, and try to:

- Synthesize: Encourage readers to create something new that reflects something from the text. This can be anything from acting it out, coming up with a new ending, or forming a counterargument.
- Connect with it: Help the reader make a personal connection with the text. Has something like this ever happened to him or her? Does he or she empathize with the character(s)?
- Connect it to the world: Does the text remind you of something you have experienced? Does it remind you of another text you have read?



29.6 Spelling

Spelling is not all about memorization, which is why most schools have done away with typical spelling tests and quizzes. Spelling has much more to do with overall language acquisition. People who develop phonological awareness and reading fluency are better spellers because they have context that helps them make educated guesses. Dyslexic individuals struggle with spelling because they have difficulty with these skills, and also



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because they often mix up characters. To help improve their spelling, dyslexic individuals should practice focusing on the importance of phonemes. A strong understanding of phonemes will help a struggling speller develop and improve his or her ability to sound out words and determine proper spelling.



29.7 Writing

29.7.1 Writing – Writing Difficulties

Writing can be extremely frustrating for someone suffering with dyslexia. Oftentimes, they know exactly what they want to say, but cannot put it into written words. This frustration is a result of the various tasks that are required in writing that are difficult for people with dyslexia, like:

- A strong vocabulary that is varied and deep
- Knowing how to write in different genres
- Command of grammar and punctuation
- Putting together words and sentences

One of the most important things that you can do for someone who is having trouble writing, because of their dyslexia, is to encourage him or her. Remember how frustrating it is to do something you are not comfortable with, and try to help them get more comfortable with it.

29.7.2 Writing – Improving Writing

The first question you have to answer when trying to help a dyslexic person improve his or her writing is “what are his or her strengths/weaknesses?” Without an answer to that question, you cannot effectively help the individual. Once you have figured out where his or



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her struggles are, try to implement one or more of the following interventions (choose interventions that are relevant to his or her strengths/weaknesses):

- Identify and discuss areas of need: When the individual is ready to set goals, should he or she focus on content, organization, voice, or mechanics? Where does he or she need the most work?
- Set goals: Help the individual set goals, but make sure that they are his or her idea. This helps the individual take ownership of his or her writing and involves the individual in the intervention process.
- Set actions steps: You have your goals, now what are the practical steps you can take to achieve those goals? This makes the goals more manageable because you can focus on one step at a time.
- Revisit and reflect: Encourage the individual to consistently reflect on his or her progress in order to make sure that he or she is still taking the proper action to achieve his or her goals.

These strategies, paired with specific writing instruction, can help dyslexic individuals work to overcome their disability and remove the stigma of writing.



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