

Parents

- a resource for their children

**How you can help your child,
if they don't find reading easy**





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Introduction

This brochure is intended for parents of children who have just started school. The aim of the brochure is to improve parents' understanding of reading and writing difficulties and dyslexia, and to highlight the importance of early interventions to help children who struggle with reading and writing.

The people behind the brochure are Louise Belfrage and Suzanne Heimdal. We ourselves have children with dyslexia and know how hard it can be to find the help and information that is needed. There are so many questions to face: How do I tell? What shall I do? What is best for my child?

We hope that this material can be a practical tool for parents and carers. We aim to provide background knowledge, advice and tips to help when working with your child and their teachers at school.

The majority of children seem to learn to read regardless of which methods are used. But for many children, learning to read and write is more difficult. There can be many reasons for this and, of course, all children should get help according to their own individual circumstances. No one should be left behind!

Obviously, the main responsibility for teaching children to read and write lies with the school, and you should have high expectations for the quality of this teaching. But you, as a parent, are also an important resource for your child. You can support your child's reading and writing development in many ways. Children, parents and teachers will all benefit by working together from an early stage.

What are reading and writing difficulties?

There are many reasons why children experience problems with written language.

Some causes of reading and writing difficulties:

Dyslexia, a special type of reading and writing difficulty, usually with a biological background.

Concentration difficulties can sometimes bring about reading and writing problems.

Poor teaching can cause children major difficulties with learning to read.

Other reasons include: insufficient language stimulation in the pre-school years, a failure to establish the 'reading habit', or insufficient knowledge of the Swedish language due to having a different first language. There is often more than one underlying cause of reading and writing difficulties – for example, a child may have a different first language and dyslexia at the same time.



Increasing amounts of text

Today, the written word is more important than ever. The demands placed on our ability to read and write have increased dramatically in the last 20-30 years, both at school and in society in general – we are almost drowning in written information!

But, at the same time as the demands placed on our ability to read and write have increased, our biological ability to do so has not changed.

In the past, jobs were available where reading and writing ability was not so important. That time has passed and reading and writing skills are needed for almost all jobs. It is therefore essential that everyone is given the opportunity to learn to read and to develop the reading habit from an early age. It takes many hours of reading to become an able reader: starting early and practising often is vital.

In round figures, we can say that around 25% of Sweden's population is not really keeping up with the skills needed in this information society.

What is dyslexia?

Dyslexia is a special type of reading and writing difficulty – it is a language problem with a biological basis and is unrelated to intelligence. It is estimated that around 5-8 % of children in any age group will have dyslexia. It appears to be more common among boys than girls. This may be because dyslexia can be more difficult to detect amongst girls who might be quiet and well-behaved whereas boys are often heard and noticed more.

Children with dyslexia can have major problems with reading and writing, but other kinds of learning can be easy for them. Their talent and creativity often comes out better in other ways, rather than through writing.

Dyslexia is not an illness and there is no universal cure, such as medicine, special glasses or dietary supplements. It has nothing to do with laziness, nor with poor sight or hearing. We do know that there is a strong hereditary aspect to dyslexia – so it tends to run in families.

Small variations

All people are different – we are different heights, have different body shapes, different hands and toes, and so on. In the same way, our brains are all a little different from each other. These small variations in the language-responsive areas of the brain can cause differences in how we learn to read and write. Reading and writing are complicated activities, built up of many different components.



Considering this complexity, what is really remarkable is that most people *can* read and write.

Sounds as building blocks

When we talk, a stream of sounds comes out. We have to pay attention to the sounds, and encode them as letters when we write. When we read, the opposite process takes place. Research shows that the basic problem behind dyslexia is usually this particular difficulty with noticing the sounds in spoken language – how the words *sound*, rather than what they *mean*. Good sound awareness is essential for becoming a good reader and writer.

Children who are able to distinguish the speech sounds can hear the “a” in the word “cat”, and that the words “cat” and “hat” sound the same at the end. We call this good phonological awareness. However, children with dyslexia usually have weak *phonological awareness*. Although their hearing is normal they have difficulty noticing the sound building blocks in words. Understanding how sounds relate to letters, i.e. “cracking the code”, then becomes difficult. This means that children with dyslexia need a special type of training that helps to develop the connection between speech sounds and letters, in order to achieve fluent reading.

Typical signs of dyslexia

Children with dyslexia usually have difficulties with one or more of the following:

- **Sound awareness** – accurately grasping the sounds in spoken words, what the sounds are, and the order in which they occur.
- **Word recognition** – reading written words quickly and automatically. They often read letter-by-letter instead.
- **Access to vocabulary** – quickly finding the right word. “What’s the white bear that lives in Greenland called?”
- **Spelling** – this is usually a big problem.
- **Short-term memory and working memory** – being able to keep one thing in mind whilst doing something else. An example is remembering something a friend is saying, at the same time as looking for a book in the school bag.
- **Expressing themselves in writing** – getting their thoughts down on paper and recounting something in writing is problematic. In contrast, it might be very easy to express the same thoughts and ideas by talking, explaining or demonstrating.

Children don’t grow out of dyslexia but with the right training, the right help, and good technical aids, a child with dyslexia can usually get to a stage where they are able to learn and work effectively under the same conditions as other children.

Early identification

Children at risk of dyslexia can be identified long before they start school. Pre-school, children who seem to be uninterested in nursery rhymes, letters and word games should be given particular attention.

Many of the early signs to look out for in the primary years are, of course, about reading. But there are other aspects of the child's behaviour that we also need to pay attention to.

- no interest in letters, words and books
- learning to read and write comes more slowly, compared to classmates
- reading which is disjointed and hesitant
- often misreading words that are similar to one another, such as 'become' and 'because'
- difficulties with word-based problems in mathematics
- spelling mistakes, 'losing' the ends of words, jumbling up the order of words in a sentence
- appearing to under-achieve
- becoming frustrated, unhappy and having low self-esteem
- difficulties with concentration
- making excuses to avoid reading and writing

Some children who have reading and writing difficulties also have problems with other kinds of learning, such as:

- telling left from right
- learning how to tell the time
- remembering, and following, instructions

Early intervention in school

A good outcome for the child depends upon adults communicating, understanding and working together. Good cooperation between parents and teachers brings positive results, and gives the child security both at home and in school.

Researchers emphasize that early and powerful interventions for learning to read and write are crucial for a large group of today's children.

The quality of literacy teaching in school plays a large role and the teacher's experience and competence are of great importance. In order to achieve good results, all children must be given sufficient time and support by the teacher, to develop their ability to read and write. *Teachers with special training in reading instruction should be available in every school.*

The right help

All children who have difficulties with reading and writing are entitled to receive help in school – and don't need a special diagnosis for this. If you, as parent, are worried about how your child is doing with learning to read and write then talk to the teacher and ask for this to be investigated. This is not about putting a label on the child, but rather about getting the right help, as early as possible, whatever the underlying problem is.



An experienced teacher who has appropriate training can do an initial analysis. Sometimes a more extensive assessment is needed, involving a speech therapist and a psychologist. Team assessments are useful in getting the best picture of how the child learns, and identifying their strengths and weaknesses, which will enable a customised program to be developed.

Action plan

An action plan is a written document that describes what will be done to help the child. It is drawn up in school and should always be drafted in consultation with the child and the parents. It is the head teacher's responsibility to ensure that children who need particular support are given an action plan.

The action plan should build upon the findings of the assessment. It should be detailed and specific and contain clear short-term and long-term goals, so that everyone can understand what is to be done and be able to assess progress.

The action plan must be monitored and reviewed in order to see whether it is working. Decide when you will meet again, and who has responsibility for what.

The child's views need to be considered at all times and they should be treated in a friendly manner by all the adults involved. For the plan to work, the child needs continual encouragement and understanding.

What you can do, as a parent

You can help your child in many ways. Exactly what you will feel able to do depends on how your child is getting on at school, and the difficulties they are experiencing. Here are some suggestions.

Listen to your child

Children know themselves when they are having difficulty, and can often describe this – if they are given the time to explain. Try to listen and understand what your child wants help with. Quiet conversations between just the two of you can help. Don't forget that your child has lots of strengths and remind them that you also have strong and weak sides, and so does everyone.

Boost self-esteem

Self-confidence makes a huge difference to being able to try and succeed. Always give praise rather than criticism. By showing belief in your child's ability to learn difficult things you can boost their self-confidence. And difficult things include learning letters, writing words and sentences and reading books. Children compare themselves with their classmates and notice that they are not keeping up; you have to point out that they are progressing, even if it is more slowly.

In amongst all our efforts to help the child's reading and writing development, we must not forget that children need time for things other than schoolwork. There must be a time for playing, hobbies and interests and friends. Encourage your child to take up other activities outside school, where he or she can feel successful. This boosts self-esteem which then helps with the things which are not, naturally, so much fun.



Play with language

There is a connection between language development in the pre-school years and later reading and writing ability. A pre-school child needs plenty of opportunities to be “showered with language” both at home and at nursery. Talk to your child; try to answer all the questions they ask about words and why things are called what they are.

But, of course, language development doesn't stop when a child starts school – hopefully it continues throughout life. So it is still important to talk a lot to your child when they have started school, and take every opportunity to play with language for example by joking about silly words.

There are lots of fun games you can play together that will stimulate language.

Read to your child

Read to your child while he or she follows the text. Talk about the content of the book and new words that you come across in the text. Young children who listen to stories become familiar with the patterns of written language from an early age and then it is a small step to starting to read and expressing themselves in writing. Don't forget that even older children, and adults, enjoy listening to someone reading aloud – telling the story in a familiar way. This can be a very relaxing way for all to “wind down” at the end of the day.

... and read *with* your child

Make reading together fun and cosy, with no pressure and no stress. Take turns in reading, and be sensitive to when your child starts to feel it's becoming an effort.

Use your child's interests as a starting point, to make the reading motivating and fun. What does *your* child like? Dinosaurs? Animals? Football?

Cooperate with school

It is important to understand which methods the school is using. Arrange a visit to look around to see what they do. Ask the teacher about materials, exercises and strategies. Ask for ideas about how you can work at home in the same way.

You don't usually need sophisticated equipment. A pen and paper can be enough. You don't even need to sit at a table when you're working with language. Magnetic letters on the fridge can be a good way of playing with words and building new words, and maybe you can sneak in a bit of alphabet training at the same time.

"Learn in school – practice at home" is usually a good rule. Responsibility for teaching lies with school and it is there that your child is taught and learns new things. Then, it's good to practice them at home. Help your child, but try to understand when your help isn't needed.

Use many senses

We learn through using our senses – through what we say, hear, see and feel. Some children like to work from a book, while others prefer more physical activities, for example using their fingers or materials such as clay, magnetic letters, sticks,

collages and plaster. Using music and song can help children when they have to comit things to memory.

Use computer support

Computers have a very important role to play. Some children struggle so much with their handwriting that they don't think about spelling. Many are so busy thinking about the spelling that they forget what they wanted to write. Remember that all text can be made readable with the help of a word processing program.

There are many good training programs, where children can practice with sounds and pictures.

There are also computer systems that can read out the text on the screen, and many other computer programs that help with spelling, writing and organisation.

Read with the ears

For children whose reading is slow and hesitant, audiobooks can be an important pathway to knowledge and enjoyable reading experiences. For many children, reading with their ears can be the springboard to knowledge during their time at school.

Use memory aids

Make things easier for a child with memory difficulties by recording important information on a tape recorder or a digital memory stick. The child can use this to transfer messages between home and school and for reminders such as when to take a sports bag or a packed lunch.

Play with mathematics

Mathematics is an area where many children have difficulty. In many cases, this is because solving mathematical problems often requires the ability to read correctly. Just think of all the text involved in mathematical problems.

Learning multiplication tables by heart is also hard for many children. There are some good rhymes that can make it easier to remember multiplication tables. Working with a pocket calculator can also be fun and helpful. When we learn how to tell time, it is also about mathematics. Half an hour is two quarters, or six 5-minute periods.

Keep your child motivated

Be prepared to adapt all tasks and games so that they suit your child. And don't forget to praise even the smallest progress – it means a lot! Learn to recognise all the tricks your child may use, consciously or unconsciously, to avoid starting work. Pay attention to your child's behaviour and try to stay one step ahead, to help avoid unnecessary conflicts.

Organising and planning

Many children have problems with planning and organising their work, and they need your support to get started with certain tasks. Help your child to make a plan so that things can be done step-by-step. Making sure that everything needed for the school day is in the school bag can seem difficult for you – but impossible for your child.

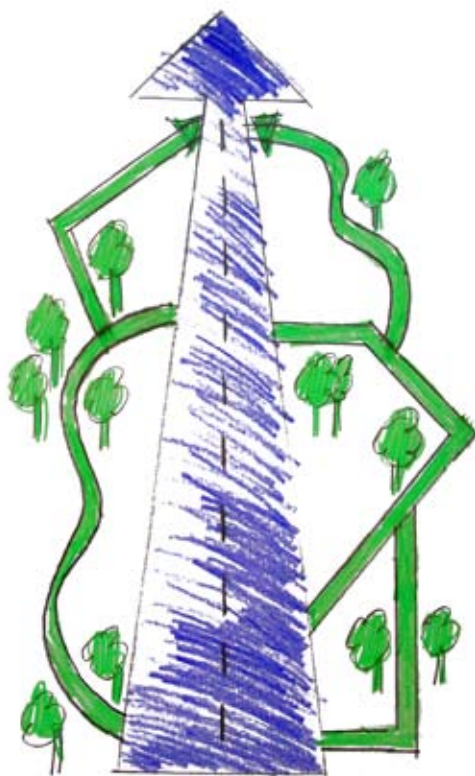


ILLUSTRATION: CHARLOTTE HEDBERG

*Everyone can reach their target.
Those who have reading and writing difficulties approach the
goal in their own way – and they need to be allowed to do this.
They take a different route, not the main highway.
Nevertheless, they do reach the goal and will have many
good experiences along the way.*

More information

This brochure has been produced by the non-profit association, Kod-Knäckarna (“the Code-crackers”). There is also a training CD for parents of children with reading and writing difficulties and dyslexia. You can read more about Kod-Knäckarna’s material and the project on the website. www.kodknackarna.se

Information and tips on children’s language development is available at www.blom.just.nu

FDB, an association for parents of children with reading and writing difficulties. www.fdb.nu
tel. +46 (0)8- 612 06 56.

Dyslexiförbundet FMLS, an association for people with reading and writing difficulties. www.dyslexiforbundet.se
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Swedish Dyslexia Association, an association for those working in the field of reading and writing, and for others interested in the subject. www.ki.se/dyslexi
tel. +46 (0)8-524 868 25.



BDA, British Dyslexia Association, www.bdadyslexia.org.uk

Dyslexia Action, www.dyslexiaaction.org.uk

IDA, the International Dyslexia Association, based in the USA. www.interdys.org

Reading tips

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