

# Dyslexia Dossier

*Around 10 to 15 per cent of the global population is dyslexic — people with reading and spelling disabilities. Arlene Sondag, former vice-president of International Dyslexic Association, and author of the 'Sondag Systems' — an acclaimed teaching system for dyslexic children — was recently in Delhi to hold India's first-ever workshop on 'multisensory' teaching. She spoke to Mahua S Mukherjee:*

**What exactly is dyslexia?**

Etymologically, the term, composed of two Greek words — dys meaning ill or difficult and lexis meaning word — literally means poor reading. It is normally used to refer to people, children and/or adults, who experience difficulties with reading, spelling or writing. Dyslexia may also affect short-term memory, mathematical ability, concentration, personal organisation or sequencing. **What causes dyslexia and how does it manifest itself?**

Dyslexia is both a congenital and developmental condition. It is a neurological disorder which creates anomalies in the brain. These anomalies bring about varying degrees of difficulty in the usage of words, and sometimes symbols. Nonetheless, dyslexia can also be acquired through changes in the brain resulting from illness or accident — before, during or after birth. The brain of the dyslexic child is affected by malformation, poor functioning or a delay in maturation. Problems such as viral infections, wrong use of drugs, malnutrition during pregnancy, etc may give rise to learning disabilities without

mental retardation, by affecting the brain.

**How does one identify a dyslexic child?**

Early symptoms are found in pre-school children as soon as they start to read and speak. But, more often than not, parents tend to overlook these symptoms, thinking that the kid will improve as he or she grows up. It is this lack of awareness that has made dyslexia a global problem. Early detection, followed by specialised training, can solve half the problems. If the kid is good at some things but has surprising difficulty with others, if he or she cannot remember two or more instructions in sequence, is clumsy in some respect but good at manipulating things, is uncertain about which hand to use for eating, or has difficulty in dressing at the pre-school stage, it is advisable to see a neurologist. Your alarm bells should start ringing if your kid uses spoonerisms such as 'par cark' for 'car park' and has difficulty in remembering nursery rhymes. It's time then for assessment by a qualified educational psychologist.

**What does an assessment mean?**

A full assessment with an educational psychologist tests for underlying ability — thinking skills, organising and planning,

using words and patterns, vocabulary, reading, writing, spelling, memory, and sound skills. Thereafter, a profile of strengths and weaknesses is made, which can tell an experienced psychologist whether the child is dyslexic, and what should be done to help.

Once dyslexia is confirmed, the child, depending on the severity of the condition, needs appropriate specialist teaching to overcome the problem. If dyslexia is identified during Key Stage 1, a great deal of support can be given even in the normal classroom. Teaching that is good for dyslexic children is also good practice for others. However, the problems are compounded for the dyslexic child from Stage 2. Such a child needs to be withdrawn from the classroom for targeted specialist teaching that will enable him or her to be included later in the full curriculum in the classroom.

**Is there a solution to dyslexia in older children, even adults?**

If you are looking for a medical solution, there isn't any since dyslexia is not a disease... Each dyslexic person's difficulties are different and vary from slight to very severe disruption of the learning process. There is no total cure but the effects of dyslexia can be alleviated by skilled specialist teaching and committed learning. On the

positive side, there is a hypothesis that the neurological anomalies also give some dyslexic people special visual, spatial and lateral thinking abilities, which enable them to be successful in a wide range of careers.

Remember, dyslexia has nothing to do with intelligence levels. What dyslexic

## Q&A

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people require, most of all, is a faith in their abilities, and the right learning environment. The list of those who have excelled despite dyslexia is extremely long: Tom Cruise, Steven Spielberg, Harrison Ford, Richard Branson, Henry Ford, Leonardo da Vinci, Pablo Picasso, Walt Disney, Beethoven, Mozart, Winston Churchill, Benjamin Franklin, George Bush, Alexander Graham Bell, Galileo, Benjamin Franklin and, of course, Steven Hawkins. Among writers and poets you have W B Yeats, Agatha Christie and John Irving; among athletes, Carl Lewis and Nolan Ryan... They have all created history.

**What is your special contribution in the field?**

After a lot of research, I concluded that there is a need for specialised teachers at the pre-primary and primary levels. The teacher should have a sound base in phonetics, with the ability to segment and clip onset sounds, and then blend them so as to form words. This will help children across the board. This is also the basis for the so-called Sondag system, which is a kind of teaching aid for teachers and parents. The basic idea is to give the affected students an understanding of the structure of language.