

Chapter 1

Understanding the Basics of Dyslexia

In This Chapter

- ▶ Pinpointing dyslexia's true definition
 - ▶ Targeting the symptoms of dyslexia
 - ▶ Having your child assessed
 - ▶ Sorting through schools and programs
 - ▶ Participating in activities at home
 - ▶ Seeing your dyslexic child grow up
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Today in a bookstore, I got held up in the magazines section. The problem was that I just couldn't decide what topic appealed to me the most: "Sixteen foods to make me stronger, happier, sexier, and smarter," "Ten minutes to a flatter belly," or "Eat around the clock." Wouldn't it be nice if this book offered you a similar approach to dyslexia, with topics such as "Sixteen sure-fire ways to outsmart dyslexia," "Ten minutes to perfect reading and spelling," and "Raising a reader without lifting a finger"?

But in real life, people like to hear the truth. So in this book I give you the plain and simple truth about dyslexia — not the shortcut answers like you might find in those magazines I saw. And it all starts in this chapter with an easy-as-pie outline of what dyslexia really is, a simple sketch of how it shapes your child's life, and a lightning tour of the programs and treatments you can find in and out of the classroom.

Defining Dyslexia in Plain Terms

Plenty of children struggle with reading. Their parents get extra help for them, and after a few months, they catch up. Sometimes the problem disappears suddenly without any intervention at all.



Dyslexia isn't like that. If you're wondering whether your child has reading problems or dyslexia, and what the difference is, here's the simple answer: A child with dyslexia has *enduring* and *unexpected* difficulty with reading and writing. She's bright, you give her loads of extra help, but she just doesn't get it. A blast of extra help won't make everything right for her because she needs a different kind of help over a longer time than just a few months. She'll probably learn to read and write at about age 10, but all through her life she'll need to read and reread written text several times before she fully comprehends what she's read. In addition, when she writes important stuff, she'll need to complete several drafts.



Watch out: Misconceptions about dyslexia abound. Here's what dyslexia isn't:

- ✓ Stupidity
- ✓ Laziness
- ✓ Retardation
- ✓ Brain damage
- ✓ Willfulness
- ✓ Distractibility

Research about dyslexia provides insight into the possible causes of dyslexia. For instance, dyslexics use a different part of the brain when they read than nondyslexics do, and they use more of it. Dyslexia also tends to run in families. And some psychologists break dyslexia down into several types, including phonological dyslexia and visual dyslexia.

In Chapter 2, I give you the full scoop about the definition, causes, and types of dyslexia. I also tell you about different conditions related to (and often mistaken for) dyslexia.



Dyslexia shouldn't prevent your child from achieving her goals or dreams. Plenty of professors are dyslexic. They have strategies and routines that help them achieve high standards. Oh, and your child may like to know that famous folks like Tom Cruise and Orlando Bloom (Hollywood actors) and Steve Jobs (CEO of Apple Computers) are just three of the many high-flyers who have dyslexia.

Zeroing In on the Symptoms of Dyslexia

Here's the thing about dyslexia. One teacher or psychologist may tell you your child lacks "automaticity of language," or perhaps "auditory perceptual skills," while another tells you she has "dyslexia." Some practitioners never use the term "dyslexia," but psychologists who *do* diagnose it look for a fairly standard bunch of symptoms. Different symptoms reveal themselves at different ages.

The kinds of behaviors that indicate dyslexia in a preschooler include the following:

- ✓ Starts to speak late (no actual speech until after age 2)
- ✓ Says muddled-up words (*aminal* for *animal* or *gabrage* for *garbage*)
- ✓ Doesn't enjoy being read to
- ✓ Can't tell you rhyming words (*cat/hat*)
- ✓ Can't tell the difference between letters and other symbols or squiggles

The kinds of behaviors that indicate dyslexia in a school-age child include the following:

- ✓ Writes words with letters in the wrong places, like *saw* instead of *was* and *vave* instead of *wave* (called *transposing* letters)
- ✓ Reverses letters and numbers (especially *b* and *d*, *p* and *q*, and *3* and *5*)
- ✓ Writes so that her words are barely legible (letters are badly formed and the wrong size)
- ✓ Adds or leaves out small words when reading (which can totally change the meaning of the text)
- ✓ Has trouble retelling a story



For now, the main thing to keep in mind is that dyslexia, unless it runs in your family, can hit you like a shot out of the blue. Your child seems fine, or even advanced intellectually, so you just don't expect her to stumble with reading and writing. That stumble, from which your child seems unable to recover, is what dyslexia typically looks like.

In Chapter 3, I give you an overview of dyslexia symptoms at any age. I focus on symptoms in preschoolers and what to do about them in Chapter 4 and on symptoms in school-age kids and how to take action in Chapter 5.



Keep in mind that undiagnosed teenagers and adults also show a few common signs of dyslexia, including a diehard avoidance of reading and plenty of diversionary tactics for steering clear of handwriting. See Chapter 3 for details.

Deciding When to Have Your Child Tested



If you're worried that your child isn't getting the hang of reading, chances are your fears are well founded. It's better to get professional advice than to waste precious months wondering whether your concerns are valid. If it turns out that your child has dyslexia, or any other learning difficulty, the sooner you get a diagnosis the better.

That said, you can't whisk your child off to a psychologist for a dyslexia assessment much before she turns 5, because dyslexia is mostly about how well she reads. When she starts school and struggles with the alphabet, speech sounds, and text, it's time to quickly have her assessed so you can quickly start the intervention that can help her most.

The tests that your child can undergo (depending on her age) include the following:

- ✓ Language tests
- ✓ Vision and hearing tests
- ✓ Early screening tests
- ✓ IQ tests
- ✓ Performance tests
- ✓ A full test battery



The person who usually runs a full assessment for dyslexia is a psychologist. Your public school district employs an educational psychologist whose services you get for free (after making a written request for assessment). If you want an outside or second opinion, you can ask the district for a listing of private psychologists in your area. If your child attends a private school, she doesn't automatically get any of these services. Private schools make their own autonomous decisions about how they provide assessment and treatment for dyslexia and, unlike public schools, aren't legally obligated to provide assessment and an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for children who qualify for special education.

For full details on testing, including how to prepare your child for an assessment and what to do with the results, check out Chapter 6.

Exploring Different Schools and Programs for Your Child

You (of course) want the best education possible for your child, but finding the best school for her becomes even more important after she's diagnosed as dyslexic. In Chapter 7, I help you figure out whether your child's current school is doing a good job and what kinds of help other schools may offer you. I provide you with a list of questions to consider as you decide what kind of school you want your child to attend. I also introduce you to the services and staff members you find at a traditional public school and give you the lowdown on the following forms of alternative schooling:

- ✓ Charter schools
- ✓ Magnet schools
- ✓ Private schools
- ✓ Montessori schools
- ✓ Waldorf (Steiner) schools
- ✓ Schools for dyslexics
- ✓ Home schooling

If your child's dyslexia diagnosis qualifies her for special education in school, she receives an Individualized Education Program (IEP). In Chapter 8, I give you the full scoop on IEPs, including the actual fine print on the IEP document, what to expect at an IEP meeting, and how to prepare for it. This preparation includes speaking with your child's teacher, making lists and gathering important documents, and making sure that you have supportive folks with you. I also cover the acts that govern IEPs (the main one is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA) and let you know your child's rights under these acts.



In public schools you have the legal right to an IEP if your child is found to have a learning disability. You don't get this legal cover in a private school; each individual private school makes its own autonomous decisions.

What if your child doesn't receive an IEP? Don't worry. In Chapter 9, I tell you how to secure help without one. In school, you can stay in close contact with your child's teacher and enroll your child in homework clubs, tutoring programs, and extracurricular activities that make her feel confident. Outside school, you have several options for strengthening your child's reading abilities:

- ✓ Dyslexia therapies
- ✓ Reading clinics specializing in helping dyslexic folks
- ✓ Private, individual tutors
- ✓ General learning centers

Of course, you can also offer your help at home by helping your child manage her homework and setting her up with lots of handy gizmos (including those I mention in Chapter 19).

Whether or not your child has an IEP, sometimes you may feel like you have absolutely no control over what your child does in class. The teacher assigns work, your child struggles with it, and the process moves on like an avalanche you can't avert or escape. Well, ta-da! I'm here with fancy underground sensors and a helicopter to help you! You really *can* influence what happens to your child in school; you just need to know how.

In Chapter 10, I tell you how to team up with your child's teacher with regular conferences, make all the accommodations you want seem beneficial to everyone, and keep a paper trail so your nice manner has some oomph behind it.

Sound easy? Ah ha, maybe you've been lucky. At some point in your child's schooling you may find yourself worrying that your child is learning more about frustration than anything else, and that's where this book comes in *really* handy. In these pages, you get step-by-step guidance for avoiding disputes with teachers and pressing your point reasonably, and you get places to go should you find yourself locked in combat anyway.

Helping Your Child with Activities at Home

You've probably heard advice that tells you to help your dyslexic child at home by doing the following:

- ✓ Reading a lot of books with her
- ✓ Doing a lot of hands-on activities with her
- ✓ Telling her all the time how terrific she is

That advice is good. But it's a bit, well, obvious. And besides, it's vague. What *kinds* of books should she read? Should you think up your *own* stimulating activities (in between cooking meals, doing the soccer run, and oh, yes, going to work)? And what if your child knows you're telling her she's great simply because the parenting books tell you to say so? What do you do then?

In Part IV of this book, you get specific, practical advice on the following ways that you can take part in your child's dyslexia treatment.

- ✓ You can use great memorizing, visualizing, and rhyming tricks to help your child learn words fast. I cover these methods in Chapter 11, along with a list of 220 common sight words that appear frequently in all written text.

- ✔ A knowledge of phonics is crucial to reading effectively. In Chapter 12, I provide you with plenty of activities that will help your child get the hang of sounding out words.
- ✔ Practice makes perfect, especially when it comes to reading. In Chapter 13, I give a variety of reading methods you can use with your child, including setting up a reading routine, selecting the right books, and handling your child's reading errors kindly.
- ✔ *Multisensory* is a big buzzword in the world of dyslexia, but what exactly does that mean? In a nutshell, *multisensory* means "hands-on." In Chapter 14, I explain the benefits of doing multisensory activities as part of your child's education.
- ✔ Even everyday activities such as staying organized, telling time, and following steps can be difficult for a dyslexic child. In Chapter 15, I show you how to help your child handle everyday tasks with ease and build her confidence.



Something especially great is that you get road-tested materials in these chapters. Instead of impractical suggestions and lists of books as long as your arm — books that the author may or may not have read — you get doable ideas and a manageable quota of recommendations that I have personally tested or had tested by another parent/teacher. How's that for *really* useful! Get your hands on the best books and kits around and, if your child's teacher hasn't seen them yet, give him the heads up!



Helping your dyslexic child with reading and other activities at home has multiple benefits. The following are just a few.

- ✔ Your dyslexic child may not start to read until about age 10. But she's smart and good at coverup, so the rest of the world may think she's doing okay. That's where your help at home really counts. You can get a firsthand, up-close view of what's going on and clue in the teacher. If you don't clue in the teacher, and especially if your child can sound out simple words and knows a few sight words, her difficulties may not show up in school until much later (when all of a sudden pretty much everyone else but your child reads fluently).
- ✔ When your child goes through a hear-see-say-do routine (which I explain in Chapter 14) with new concepts, they stick in her mind better than when she does any one of those things on its own. The fancy name for this is *multisensory learning*, and in dyslexia circles, boy it's hot! You can do some multisensory stuff at home simply by getting your child into useful habits such as saying out loud stuff she wants to remember and words she's copying down.
- ✔ Social and sporting interests may be especially important for your dyslexic child because they give her a chance to excel and be popular. You can help at home by establishing a schedule that's strict enough for homework to get done and flexible enough to cope with play-offs and the occasional dinner of PB & J sandwiches.

Watching Your Dyslexic Child Grow

When my kids were little, I thought other people's bigger kids were, well, big. To me they looked capable and self-sufficient. How wrong was that! My kids are now middle-sized, and they need just as much help from me as they ever did and, in many ways, more. Back then, the issues I faced seemed easy — how to divide a lump of modeling clay among friends and stop them from eating it. Now, however, I have trickier issues to settle. Should I force my shy child into a soccer team for her own good and what should I do, if anything, about that heinous “other” kid who trashes *my* cherub's school locker?

Your dyslexic child needs your help long after she stops eating clay. She has subject choices to make, examinations to take, and social events to attend. She needs your guidance, and later of course, she needs you to gradually hand the reins over to her. In Part V of this book, you get practical advice for almost all things. And if I have no idea about something, like where your dyslexic child should study anthropology, I direct you to people who probably will know.

Chapter 16 is all about dyslexic teenagers. I tell you how to help her foster her independence, learn to drive, handle school challenges, and develop essential work skills.

In Chapter 17, I tell you about getting your dyslexic student into college and the choices you have for paying for it. You find out about building an impressive portfolio, researching the best majors and schools, filling out college applications, and more.

Chapter 18 is where I deal with the challenges faced by adult dyslexics. I tell you about great at-home treatments for adults and the rights you have as an adult dyslexic in the working world.

It's all here, so what are you waiting for?