Reading may seem easy and automatic for people who master it without difficulty. However, reading is a complex and challenging task for our brains, so we shouldn’t be surprised that so many children struggle with it. In fact, about 15 to 20 percent of the American population has a specific reading disability called dyslexia, which is the major cause of reading failure in school. Dealing with this learning challenge can lead to frustration and self-doubt, especially when it goes undiagnosed for a long time. The good news is that we now know what dyslexia is, how to identify it from an early age, and most importantly, how to teach people with dyslexia so they can become successful readers.

**Reading and Dyslexia**

Most children begin learning to read by learning how speech sounds make up words, and then connecting those sounds to alphabet letters. Then they learn how to blend those sounds into words, and eventually, they can instantly recognize words they’ve seen many times before. Reading is a little like riding a bike: you have to do many things all at once and with precise timing. With practice, typical readers gradually learn to read words automatically, so they can focus their mental energy on comprehending and remembering what they have read.

Children with dyslexia, on the other hand, have trouble perceiving the small speech sounds that make up words and making connections between those speech sounds and letters. For this reason, reading doesn’t become automatic, so reading remains slow and labored. When a child struggles with these beginning steps in reading, comprehension is bound to suffer, and frustration is likely to follow.

Research has shown that dyslexia occurs because of subtle deficiencies in information processing, especially in the language regions of the brain. Genetics plays a strong role: when a parent has dyslexia, each of his or her children has a greater chance of also having this condition. Children who, as preschoolers, have speech and language delays, are also at higher risk of dyslexia. The presence of either of these factors should prompt close monitoring of a child’s progress as he or she begins reading instruction.
Diagnosing Dyslexia

Many children with dyslexia are not properly identified for several years. This creates a bigger reading problem and a drop in self-esteem. For these reasons, it is important to recognize dyslexia warning signs early in elementary school, and begin appropriate reading instruction right away.

In elementary school and beyond, some signs of dyslexia include difficulty with:

- Identifying speech sounds in words (for example, B-A-T, BAT)
- Learning alphabet letters and sounds
- Decoding (sounding out) simple words
- Remembering simple words seen many times
- Reading and spelling words with the correct letter sequence (for example, “gril” for “girl”)

Other signs in older students include:

- Reading far below grade level
- Avoiding reading and writing
- Working slowly on reading and writing assignments

Difficulty learning a foreign language

Dyslexia usually is diagnosed through a comprehensive evaluation by a reading or language specialist or psychologist, either at school or in the community. It is important to make sure the person evaluating your child has specific training and experience with dyslexia.
Teaching Reading To Students With Dyslexia

Fortunately, with the proper instruction and accommodations, most children with dyslexia are able to learn to read and succeed in school. A child with dyslexia typically needs to work with a specially-trained teacher, tutor, or reading specialist to learn reading and spelling skills. This specialist will use teaching methods and activities that research has proven work best for struggling readers.

Some simple accommodations in the classroom also are important, so students with dyslexia have a fair chance to demonstrate what they know. In the United States, under the Americans with Disabilities Act, a person with dyslexia is legally entitled to special help in public schools to accommodate dyslexia. Extra time for tests is really important, so kids with dyslexia have enough time to finish and show their teacher how much they have learned. Computers help a lot, too. Programs are available that “read” books out loud from the computer, and recorded books can even be downloaded to an iPod!

How Does It Feel To Have Dyslexia?

A child with dyslexia who sees peers making rapid progress in reading may feel “stupid,” because he or she is working just as hard or harder, but is not making progress. This can lead to social, behavioral, and emotional problems, in addition to academic difficulty. Early identification and proper reading instruction are critically important to avoid these problems that can last a lifetime if missed early.

Having dyslexia does not mean that a child is lazy, unmotivated, or stupid. On the contrary, students with dyslexia often turn out to be some of the most intelligent and successful people imaginable! And, they usually work harder than other students in trying to overcome their learning challenges.

Recent research suggests that having dyslexia may cause a person to have unique learning talents in other areas, such as creative problem solving, three-dimensional thinking, and the arts. Dyslexia doesn’t have to be a barrier to your child’s success in life. In fact, some of the world’s most successful entertainers, entrepreneurs, athletes, lawyers and physicians have dyslexia.

Be sure to help your child with dyslexia develop his talents and interests. Building confidence in this way will help balance the daily frustrations with school and may lead to great achievements in the future.