

“My experience with children with Dyspraxia”

‘Every child deserves a champion, an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection and insists they become the best they can possibly be’ – words of Rita Pierson, Educator and Teacher for 40 years. A very significant and powerful belief which has enhanced a lot of my thought processes in the 30 years of my working with children with Dyspraxia and other learning challenges..

My experience and observations are based on the belief that these children with dyspraxia are determined, creative, empathetic, being able to see the big picture, loyal and unique, think in a different way and have a heart as big as the moon full of love and affection. However, the flip side as seen in this condition called dyspraxia are children who have a peculiar sense of physical co-ordination and awareness moving around in a discomfoting manner, sometimes falling out of their chairs for no visible reason, who leave their belongings wherever they go, who have illegible handwriting or who can’t jump, march throw and catch a ball or tie their shoes. Among the only few listed here, if one finds a child that could have one or more of the characteristics, the issue may be more than disorganization or clumsiness. The child may have Dyspraxia.

‘Dyspraxia’ – also called Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) or specific developmental disorder of Motor Function (SDDMF) in children and adults affects gross and fine motor development and can result in delays in normal developmental activities. This life-long condition affecting about 10% of the population is formally recognized by International organizations including the W.H.O. The manner in which the difficulty presents itself vary and may change over time depending on environmental demands and experiences in life. Dyspraxia is not as well known as other learning and thinking differences, such as Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia and ADHD. But it’s quite common and often co-occurs with these issues.

Dyspraxia specifically refers to those children who have problems planning, organizing and carrying out movements in the right order in everyday situations. A child shies away from taking part in Sports and any such activities that require fine and gross motor movements. It may also affect Speech and is not a result of Cerebral Palsy or stroke.

What Causes Dyspraxia?

Although the exact causes of Dyspraxia are unknown, it is thought to be caused by a disruption in the way messages from the brain are transmitted to the body. This affects a person's ability to perform movements in a smooth co-ordinated way. The sensations of your back on a chair, your feet on the floor, the air on your skin all help you to navigate the space around you. If one of it is missing, it's as though the floor or the chair disappeared suddenly. Messages that we take for granted are misinterpreted by children with Dyspraxia.

What Dyspraxia may look like?

Poor Muscle Strength : This appears to be the core issue. Children may slouch, slump and slide out of their chairs. Sitting up all day can be very exhausting for them. They also lack the hand strength to grip a pencil, crayon or pen for a long time resulting in writing and colouring issues.

A 15 minute walk would leave them fatigued, and that standing up for more than a couple of minutes is uncomfortable. There's a good chance somebody has commented about the awkward way the child walks or runs.

Clumsiness: We never realize the muscle movements we make to carry out simple tasks like filing all important papers into a folder or packing a school bag / back pack. This may seem very simple but for children with Dyspraxia numerous strategic repetitions will be needed to master these skills.

Poor Executive Functions : Difficulty following instructions, particularly ones with multiple steps is a common characteristic. Managing their belongings, impulse control, regulating emotions, staying organized and Planning ahead are found to be very challenging.

Another side effect of Dyspraxia is that they are not very good at filtering their senses, especially sounds. Background noises can disturb the attention required to listen in to a conversation or task. They are more easily overwhelmed by what's pummeling their senses, making them more vulnerable to panic attacks (often get anxious in loud restaurants).

A part of me is convinced that, somewhere, there's an alternate universe where belongings like pens, books, clothes, water bottles and phone cords live. The effect of not being able to plan and organize themselves.

Social and Behavioral Challenges : Inability to keep up with a lot of day to day tasks can result in frustration and may result in acting out behaviors. Acting out makes them wear a mask of helplessness in real life affecting their self-esteem. Lack of physical co-ordination also runs a risk of obesity which becomes visible and easy targets for bullies.

Some parts of Dyspraxia can also lead to social problems unable to fit oneself into a conversation smoothly, leading to talking over other people quite frequently. I see this as tripping into a conversation. This is yet another frustrating way in which they seem "rude". For many children with dyspraxia, speech apraxia is their biggest issue. Speech apraxia is when messages from the brain are not all getting through your lips, jaw or tongue – basically the part of your body needed to speak effectively finds it difficult to form words. This results in neuro psychopathologies like, anxiety and low self-esteem.

Supporting Students With Dyspraxia : Dyspraxia can be seen as the invisible Disorder of Co-ordination. They look the same as their peers so they are expected to perform at the same level. Whichever child one works with they have their own needs, strengths and weaknesses. We can never use a generic set of rules. However we all need a starting point which like in any disorder would be an assessment. The assessment would be conducted in three phases by a psychologist, occupational therapist and speech therapist. Inputs through

checklists and observations are also gathered from parents and school personnel. It is important that every educator be aware of this condition and start supporting children in regular classrooms too.

A few of the support routines are as follows :

Play : It is very evident that play is avoided by children with Dyspraxia. Playing unstructured games as a class, games where no one has an advantage because everyone is a novice should be considered. Avoid games that put a single child on the spot as the centre of attention.

Early Identification : Delay in milestones like sitting, walking, standing, speaking or potty training are not to be neglected. They may be things you are seeing of a larger pattern.

As children grow, support their development through Crossing Midline activities. If you were to draw a line down the middle of your body, starting at the head, this is your mid line. Every time you cross that line with either side of your body, that is crossing midline. This is something that all of us do everyday without even realizing it because it is an integral movement in our bodies from childhood. Children need it for Reading, Writing and many other important school as well as play activities. This skill is learnt by children from infancy to adulthood. Some of the activities to name a few would be (1) Playing with toy cars on a large path (2) Painting with paint Brushes (3) Wash the car (4) Wash the windows (5) Wiping the table with one hand (6) Water plants or gardening (7) Tracing or Drawing Figure 8 pattern (number eight facing side to side not top to bottom).

Break Actions down into Smaller Steps : Muscle memory is usually an issue for children with Dyspraxia and learning any motor skill will take time and effort. To draw a line joining 2 dots, to sit upright on the floor and pass items from hand

to hand around a circle all require the co-ordination of muscles and memory. Steps have to be broken down and practice given on a regular basis. This will help children with Dyspraxia remember multistep directions.

Provide Organizational Support : Consider checking in with students frequently, creating concrete achievable benchmarks to complete tasks. Create a checklist of everything the student needs to have with them when they get to class. They might need a checklist to help them remember the daily routine - morning and end of the day routines.

Students may struggle with remembering to write down their homework. And if they write it down, they may be in a rush and not copy it exactly. Get them in the habit of having their agenda checked by the teacher. This will confirm that the homework in their agenda is written down correctly and completely.

School Based Occupational Therapy Services : Therapy is meant not only for diagnosis but also help students gain strength and skills. The Therapist may provide a home plan as well. Flexible seating options suggested by the therapist can be a real boon for these children.

Equine Therapy for Dyspraxia : In a study published in the Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine, a team of Irish, British and Swedish researches evaluated the effects of equine therapy (Therapeutic Horse Riding) on a group of 40 children aged 6 - 15 years with Dyspraxia. The children participated in 6 horse riding sessions lasting 30 mts each as well as two 30 mts audio/visual screening sessions. They found that Riding Therapy stimulated and improved cognition, mood and gait of the participants. (Reference Medical News Today)

My advice to anyone who suspects their child may be struggling with Dyspraxia is to do your research. The number of professional and doctors who are familiar

with dyspraxia is on the rise, but it is still a disorder that is overlooked. It is worth trying to find a professional who can help, since it can lead to receiving therapeutic services, educational accommodations and improvement in the quality of life.

I conclude by mentioning the famous Harry Potter a hero to a generation of kids and their books. Actor Daniel Radcliffe, who plays the clever wizard had become a hero of sorts. Radcliffe who has a mild form of Dyspraxia knows the challenges it can bring. As a child he had trouble with handwriting and trying his shoe laces, his early years of growing up were very difficult. In a recent FB chat with the Wall Street Journal he spoke these words offering encouragement to a 10 year old girl with Dyspraxia. "Do not let it stop you", The fact that some things are more of a struggle will only make you more determined, harder working and more imaginative in the solutions you find for the problems". A leading neurologist has stated that the very fact he shows no sign of it at all is a great tribute to his acting skills and makes him a real model for other people with this condition.