

Presentation Script: Early Identification and Support for Dyslexia in Early Years Children

Introduction

Today, we're going to explore a topic that's essential for ensuring the best possible start for children in education, understanding and supporting early signs of dyslexia.

When we think about dyslexia, we often associate it with problems in reading and writing during primary school.

But actually, the early signs can be spotted much earlier—even as young as age three—before formal schooling begins.

In this presentation, I'll cover: What dyslexia is? How does it show up in early years? Why does early identification matter? The challenges to early support? And how routine screening can help?

Defining Dyslexia in the Early Years

Let's begin by clarifying what dyslexia is. Dyslexia is a neurodevelopmental condition which means it's related to how the brain processes information.

It isn't linked to intelligence or effort.

Children with dyslexia are just as capable as their peers. They just learn differently, especially in how they process sounds and written words.

The British Dyslexia Association defines dyslexia as a specific learning difficulty that affects reading and writing but also impacts memory, organisation, and information processing (British Dyslexia Association, n.d.).

Dyslexia exists on a spectrum. Some children may experience mild challenges, while others may have more severe difficulties that affect multiple aspects of their learning. Because it impacts foundational language skills, dyslexia tends to reveal itself when children begin engaging with literacy (reading, writing, and spelling).

Early Characteristics

So, how does dyslexia show up in early childhood before reading begins?

According to the British Dyslexia Association (2012), early signs may include:

- A child may show delayed speech development, struggling to form words or use complete sentences compared to their peers.
- They may have difficulty recognising rhymes or learning familiar songs like nursery rhymes.
- Following instructions with multiple steps might be a challenge.

- They may struggle with phonemic awareness, such as identifying the first sound in a word or blending sounds to make a word.
- Some may also have issues with short-term verbal memory or motor skills, which affect early writing attempts and fine motor coordination.

These signs may seem small alone, but if they persist in combination, they may suggest deeper phonological difficulties.

Why Early Identification Matters

Now, you might ask: if dyslexia isn't usually diagnosed until age six or seven, why are we talking about identifying it so early?

Although formal diagnosis usually happens around ages 6 or 7, research shows the earlier we intervene, the better the outcomes.

Snowling (2015) explains that early support is more effective than trying to catch up later. Without support, children may experience frustration, avoid reading, or lose confidence. This can lead to long-term issues with self-esteem and engagement (Alexander-Passe, 2006).

Prevalence and the Complexity of Diagnosis

Dyslexia affects around 10% of the UK population, with around 4% experiencing more severe difficulties (Rose, 2009; Williams, 2025).

It often runs in families, children with a dyslexic parent have up to a 60% chance of also having it (Snowling & Hulme, 2012).

However, diagnosing dyslexia in children under the age of six is complex. Because what's "normal" development varies widely, and most diagnostic tools are for children who can already read (Elliott et al., 2014).

Research by Vellutino et al. (2004) shows early language difficulties at preschool age are strong predictors of later reading problems if no intervention is provided.

Gender and Language Factors

Dyslexia is more often diagnosed in boys but this could be because boys tend to act out, drawing attention, while girls may quietly struggle (Hawke et al., 2006).

Children from EAL or bilingual backgrounds can also be overlooked.

Their language challenges might be wrongly assumed to be from learning English, when they could have underlying phonological issues (Artiles et al., 2005).

That's why it's important that educators are trained to tell the difference between language learning and learning difficulties.

UK Support and the SEND Framework

In England, support for dyslexia falls under the SEND framework (SEND Code of Practice, 2015).

It encourages:

- Early identification
- Inclusive practice
- A “Graduated Approach”: assess, plan, do, and review
- Multi-agency working through Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) if needed

However, dyslexia isn't always named explicitly, so support can vary between schools and local authorities (Reid, 2016).

How We Identify Dyslexia in the Early Years

Let's now take a closer look at how dyslexia is identified in early years settings.

- **Observations:** Done by early years staff, useful but subjective
- **Screening tools:** Like DEST or PALS—structured but need trained staff and cultural awareness
- **Educational psychologist assessments:** Detailed but expensive and not always accessible
- **Multi-disciplinary reviews:** Holistic but require good collaboration

The most reliable approach, particularly for young children, tends to be a combination of methods, particularly observations, screenings, and professional judgement (Rack, 2005).

Barriers to Early Support

Early intervention is widely recognised as critical in supporting children with dyslexia. However, knowing early intervention works, many barriers remain:

One major barrier is many early years practitioners lack specific training in dyslexia. Education Business (2015) has noted that many early years staff report low confidence in this area. Even EYFS settings focus more on general development, not literacy-based assessments. As a result, early warning signs may be missed or misunderstood.

Another issue is due to policy language that avoids formal diagnosis. Many settings wait until a child is falling behind instead of acting early. Leads to delayed support and missed early learning windows. Especially harmful in cases where the child compensates in the short term but still develops reading difficulties later (Stein, 2017).

Early and Routine Screening as a Strategy

So what can we do?

Effectively identifying and supporting children with dyslexia in early years settings depends on professional practices that emphasise early intervention, inclusive education, and active family involvement. A key component of this strategy is the implementation of early and routine screening for dyslexia-related traits.

By introducing structured screening into early years settings, we can identify children who may be at risk of dyslexia before they enter formal schooling. Tools like the Dyslexia Early Screening Test (DEST) and Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) are designed for children as young as three or four. Waiting until children reach formal education, can result in missed opportunities for early intervention.

Screening doesn't mean testing in the formal sense. It can be integrated into everyday activities like rhyming games, sound-blending tasks, or simple listening exercises. These playful, low-pressure activities can reveal important information about a child's phonological awareness.

Practical Implementation

Targeted interventions might include phonics-based instruction, small-group literacy sessions, or even speech and language support.

The Rose Review (2009) and DoE (2007) recommended that screening for dyslexia should be part of early literacy development. Programs like "Letters and Sounds" offer structured phonics teaching that can help at-risk children build the skills they need.

In practice, this means early years settings need to create environments where early literacy is embedded in play and interaction. Staff should be trained not only in phonics delivery but also in identifying patterns of difficulty (Nutbrown, 2012).

Children who show repeated difficulties with tasks like segmenting sounds or remembering simple instructions can be referred for small-group interventions or additional support (Justice *et. al.*, 2003). Collaboration with parents is vital at this stage. Sharing screening results in a sensitive and supportive way helps families understand their child's needs and work with educators to support them both at home and in the setting (Rispen, 2006).

Conclusion

In conclusion, dyslexia remains one of the most common learning difficulties, it often begins to show in early childhood even before school. Early identification and support are vital for preventing long-term struggles. Although formal diagnosis is tricky in the early years, tools and observations can guide early support. Training, collaboration, and routine screening are key. In doing so, we ensure a more inclusive educational environment where children

receive the support they need, reducing the long-term impact of dyslexia on their academic and emotional development.

Thank you for your time. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

Question 1:

How can early years practitioners distinguish between a child learning English as an additional language (EAL) and a child showing early signs of dyslexia?

Answer:

That's a great question and a very common challenge in early years education. While both groups may struggle with language-related tasks, the key difference lies in consistency across contexts and languages. Children with EAL might initially struggle with English phonology but typically show strong language skills in their first language and improve over time with exposure. In contrast, children with dyslexia often have persistent difficulties with phonological awareness, memory, and processing speed, regardless of language exposure. Observing how a child performs in both languages (where possible), tracking their progress over time, and involving speech and language professionals can help clarify the underlying cause.

Question 2:

Why isn't dyslexia formally diagnosed before age six, and does that mean early screening is unreliable?

Answer:

Dyslexia typically isn't formally diagnosed before age six because many diagnostic tools are designed for children who are already reading. Before that age, language development can vary widely, which makes formal diagnosis challenging. However, early screening is not about making a diagnosis, it's about identifying children who may be at risk based on observable patterns like poor phonological awareness or memory issues. These early indicators help inform support strategies and interventions. While not definitive, early screening can be a powerful tool to ensure children don't fall behind before formal reading instruction begins.

Salmah's Presentation: Q2

Can ADHD symptoms be mistaken for behavioral issues?

Kerri's Presentation: Q1

What methods are used to test a child's hearing?

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