

Dyslexia in Early Years Children: Early Identification and Support Strategie

01. Definition of Dyslexia in Early Years Children

Dyslexia is a neurodevelopmental learning difficulty that primarily affects a child’s ability to develop literacy skills, particularly in reading, writing, spelling, and phonological processing. While it can affect individuals of all ages, in early years children (typically ages 0–5), dyslexia often presents subtly through delays in foundational language and pre-literacy skills.

According to the British Dyslexia Association (BDA, n.d.), dyslexia is defined as: "Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty which primarily affects reading and writing skills. However, it does not only affect these skills. Dyslexia is actually about information processing. Dyslexic people may have difficulty processing and remembering information they see and hear, which can affect learning and the acquisition of literacy skills. Dyslexia can also impact on other areas such as organisational skills.."

Key Characteristics in Early Years Children:

In early childhood, where formal reading may not yet be developed, dyslexia is more often observed through:

- Delayed speech development or language acquisition
- Difficulty recognising rhyming patterns or learning nursery rhymes
- Problems following multi-step instructions
- Struggles with phonemic awareness (e.g., identifying initial sounds in words)
- Challenges with memory, sequencing, or motor coordination (often seen in handwriting readiness)

Although dyslexia is not typically diagnosed before the age of 6–7 (once formal reading instruction begins), identifying early indicators is crucial. These early signs can alert educators and parents to a child’s learning profile, allowing interventions and support to be introduced early — significantly reducing the risk of literacy failure and related emotional difficulties later in education (Snowling, 2015).

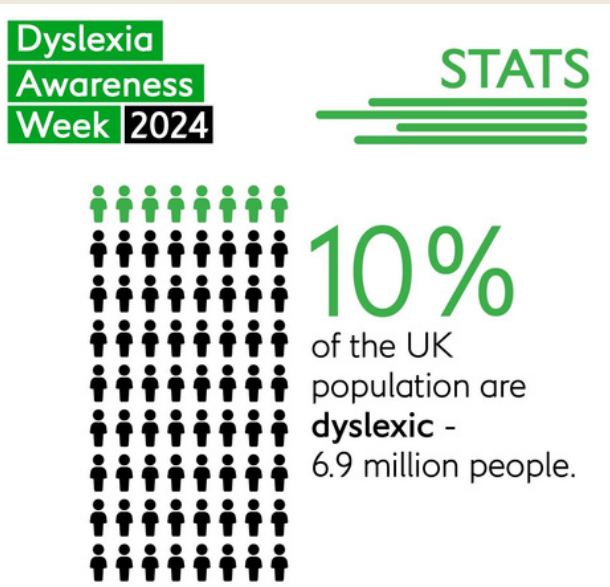
02. Prevalence of Dyslexia in Early Years

Dyslexia is one of the most common specific learning difficulties, affecting individuals across all age groups — including early years children. However, estimating prevalence in the early years (ages 0–5) is complex due to the developmental variability at this stage and the lack of standardised diagnostic tools for young children.

General Prevalence Rates

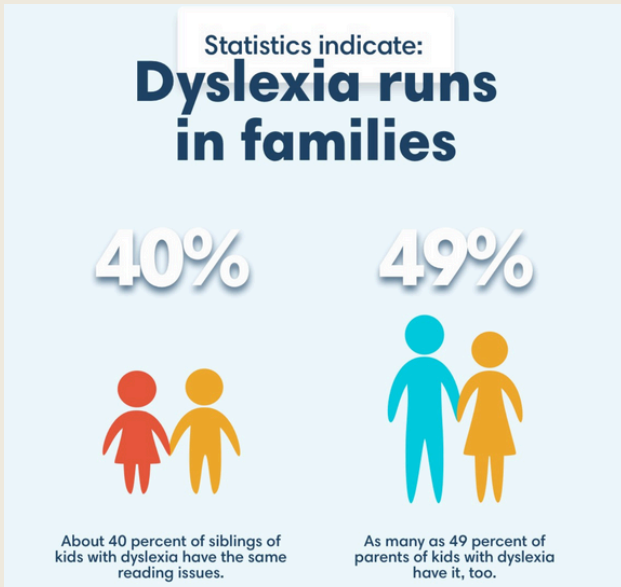
- Around 10% of the UK population is estimated to have some degree of dyslexia (Williams, 2025).

- Approximately 4% experience severe dyslexic difficulties (Rose, 2009).



(Source: British Dyslexia Association, 2024)

- Dyslexia is believed to be hereditary, with a child having a 40–60% chance of developing dyslexia if one parent is affected (Snowling & Hulme, 2012).



(Source: Dollosa, n.d.)

Prevalence in Early Years

Although dyslexia is typically not formally diagnosed until the age of six or older, early indicators can often be observed in children as young as three or four years old. These early signs may include delays in speech and language development, difficulties with memory, or challenges in motor coordination. However, obtaining accurate prevalence data for dyslexia in the early years remains difficult. This is largely due to the fact that formal diagnosis relies on observable evidence of literacy difficulties, which are not typically measurable in pre-literate children. Moreover, early developmental delays in areas such as language or motor skills do not always lead to a later diagnosis of dyslexia, as some children may catch up with their peers over time while others may continue to experience persistent difficulties.

According to studies:

- Up to 20% of preschool children may show early warning signs of reading difficulties, including those linked to dyslexia (Vellutino et al., 2004).
- Vellutino et al. (2004) conducted a longitudinal study showing that preschool children who exhibit early language and phonological deficits are significantly more likely to be diagnosed with dyslexia or reading disabilities in later years if they do not receive appropriate early intervention.

03. UK Strategy and ALN Framework Support for Dyslexia

In the UK, dyslexia is supported under broader frameworks for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)in England. This framework emphasises early identification, inclusive education, and person-centred planning, though they do not always mention dyslexia explicitly. The level of support often depends on local authorities' interpretation and provision.

SEND Code of Practice (2015) – Support for Dyslexia in England

The SEND Code of Practice (2015) sets out how to support children and young people (from birth to age 25) with special educational needs, including dyslexia. It promotes early identification and a structured method called the Graduated Approach (Assess), Plan, Do, Review (to meet each child’s needs). For those requiring more help, Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) offer coordinated support from multiple services. The Code encourages collaboration between teachers, SENCOs, families, and health professionals to create inclusive learning environments.

Limitations:

- Dyslexia is not always clearly mentioned in official guidance, leading to varied support between schools and regions.
- Lack of a formal diagnosis can make it harder to access the right help.
- Many schools face funding and training shortages, especially in under-resourced areas, affecting the quality of dyslexia support.

04. Strengths and Limitations of Methods Used to Identify and Diagnose Dyslexia in Early Years Children

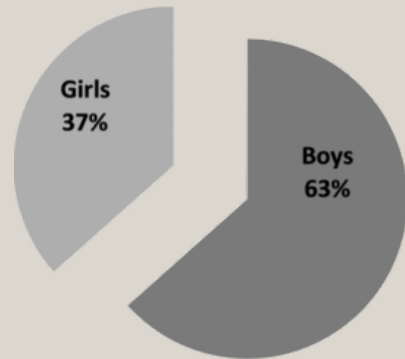
Diagnosing dyslexia in early childhood (ages 3–5) is complex due to the developmental variability and limited reading exposure at this stage. However, early identification is crucial in reducing the long-term impact of dyslexia on learning. A range of methods is used in practice, each with its strengths and limitations.

Method	Strengths	Limitations
Observation	Early, informal, accessible to teachers	Subjective, not diagnostic
Standardised Screening Tools	Quick, objective screening	Risk of misinterpretation, cultural bias
Educational Psychology Assessment	In-depth, formal diagnosis	Costly, time-consuming, not suitable for all early years children
Multi-Disciplinary Approach	Holistic and inclusive	Depends on collaboration and trained staff

While no single method is perfect, combining tools (especially observations, screening, and multi-agency input) offers the most reliable identification pathway in early years.

Gender and Language Factors

- Dyslexia is more commonly identified in boys, though research suggests it may be equally prevalent in girls but underdiagnosed due to behavioural masking (Hawke et al., 2006).
- Children from bilingual or English as an Additional Language (EAL) backgrounds may also be misdiagnosed and missed entirely, due to language acquisition factors complicating the picture.



(Source: Ihbour et., al., 2019)

05. Challenges in Identifying and Supporting Dyslexia Early

1. Lack of Specialist Training in Early Years Staff
Early years practitioners often lack training in recognising signs of dyslexia. While they may notice speech and language issues, specific markers like phonological processing deficits are less likely to be identified.

- EYFS settings focus more on general development, not literacy-based assessments.
- As a result, early warning signs may be missed or misunderstood.

Research has shown that fewer than 14 per cent of teachers are confident that they can recognise a dyslexic child, and fewer than nine per cent feel they know how to teach one. (Education Business, 2015)

2. Over-Reliance on "Wait and See" Approaches
Due to policy language that avoids formal diagnosis, many settings adopt a reactive model—waiting until a child fails to meet expected levels rather than proactively intervening.

- 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.

06. Support Strategy for Early Year Children with Dyslexia

Routine screening in early years settings can significantly improve the chances of early identification. Tools such as the Dyslexia Early Screening Test (DEST) and Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) are specifically designed for this age group. Regular screening should not wait until children are in formal schooling (Key Stage 1), as early intervention is crucial for long-term academic success.

- A preschool or nursery could implement phonological awareness tasks and rhyming games as part of the daily curriculum to identify early signs of dyslexia.
- Children who struggle with early phonological tasks (e.g., rhyming or sound blending) are often at risk for dyslexia, and identifying these challenges early can help educators provide targeted interventions, such as small group work on phonics and letter-sound relationships.