Dear Teacher,

Thank you for taking the time to learn more about Dyspraxia. This letter is a summary of information that parents of a child/children with Dyspraxia think is important for teachers to know. This letter will highlight the difficulties surrounding children in the school setting; however it is important to understand that Dyspraxia affects a child in all areas of living. Please be aware that I also made an educational video about Dyspraxia which can be found online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQy9DgwYqVk

Dyspraxia is not commonly diagnosed even though it is estimated that 1 in 10 people have it. Many children with Dyspraxia may have been a preemie and/or come from a family with other family members also diagnosed with Dyspraxia because it can be hereditary. There is a wide range of severity of symptoms, and not all people struggle in all areas. Dyspraxia is due to underdeveloped neurons throughout the brain that results in life long impaired skills in motor, memory, judgment, processing, and other cognitive complications. Each person will have different abilities and weaknesses. They may also have comorbid learning disabilities or comorbid medical and neurological concerns because Dyspraxia also impacts the immune system and central nervous system.

Children with Dyspraxia look like every other kid in the class. They are often loving, caring, smart children who are masters at masking their struggles. Dyspraxia does not affect a child’s intelligence, just how they express it. Everyday tasks that typical kids consider simple and easy are demanding for children with Dyspraxia. This is due to disconnects between what they know they have to do and what they are actually able to do. These kids are generally very bright and some test very well. They should absolutely be in a typical school setting because they also learn from the other children around them. You may or may not see these children struggle in the first weeks of school because they benefit from the support you are giving to all of the students, but you will begin to see more as you decrease that support and expect these kids to have internalized the rules and procedures.

EVERY child with Dyspraxia is different. Yes, Dyspraxia affects classroom learning but there are a plethora of challenges and comorbidities that do not affect every child with Dyspraxia and these challenges can affect each child differently. It is extremely important to find out what each child’s strengths and weaknesses are and to formulate a plan for each child individually. Please work with the child’s parent/guardian, and other specialists who are involved in the child’s care to determine the best plan for that child.

Children with Dyspraxia often learn their own way. Therefore, the teaching strategies that work for most children usually do not work for these children. They must be taught according to their individual strengths. Please understand that they really do want to learn, but you have to find their way. It takes a lot for these children to attend. They are at a disadvantage because they know they are "different" but they look the same, mostly act the same, and they know that they are perceived the same as others. However, when they are concentrating intently to make their muscles stay in an upright position without wiggling they just might be too exhausted to take in anything else that is happening. Sometimes, it may seem like the child is not paying attention if they are not looking at the board or looking at the teacher’s eyes, but they are still trying to process all the information around them. Accommodations are needed for these children so they can learn the material that is being taught.

Here are some of the things you may see in children with Dyspraxia. Please note that this is not an extensive list and therefore some children may present with difficulties that are not included below.
• **Dyscalculia.** Dyscalculia is defined as difficulty with comprehending arithmetic. In particular, multistep math problems can be difficult.

• **Learning skills.** Everything can be affected from the way they listen to instruction, to how they are able to respond. Learning can be interrupted by the inability of these children to FILTER the activities and noises around them. Even a routine task such as reading, remembering and then writing a response can leave students with Dyspraxia lagging behind their classmates.

• **Reading.** Some children with Dyspraxia are excellent readers and learn to read at or before the typical time. However, other children have difficulty learning to read and they are still struggling to learn past the range of time that typical children have gained this skill.

• **Handwriting.** Handwriting can be sloppy, and letters can be reversed past the age-appropriate time. This can cause frustration as children get older and they are expected to copy notes from the chalkboard. Children with Dyspraxia can have dysgraphia, which is defined as a deficiency in the ability to write primarily in terms of handwriting, but also in terms of coherence.

• **Fine motor skills.** These children may have difficulty with tasks that require the use of fine motor skills, for example, using scissors.

• **Hypotonia.** Children with Dyspraxia often have low muscle tone. Children with low muscle tone become physically exhausted more easily than a typical child. Holding a pencil or book can be tough at times. In certain situations this can lead to inattention and emotional difficulty.

• **“Clumsy.” Lack of physical coordination.**

• **Visual-spatial skills.** Some children with Dyspraxia struggle with heights, judging distances, walking into stationary objects, or copying from a blackboard. There are many other areas that can be affected by impaired visual-spatial skills.

• **Processing delays.** Many children with Dyspraxia are unable to respond to a novel question immediately. It takes them time to formulate and articulate their answer.

• **Poor short term memory.** Even though a child “should” know a specific fact, or new it before, does not mean that they will know it when you ask. Children with Dyspraxia often have an inconsistent knowledge base. A hallmark characteristic with these children is the response, “I don’t know.” This response may indicate that they really do not remember it, or they need extra time to retrieve the requested information.

• **Short attention span.** Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a comorbidity for some children with Dyspraxia. Other children may not meet criteria for this diagnosis but may still struggle to attend in certain situations.

• **Difficulty with organization and planning.** These children benefit from looking to classmates to help them learn how to prioritize tasks. They struggle if asked to multitask.

• **Difficulty following multistep directions.** They often need to be given simple one step directions.

• **Verbal delays.** These children are often not understood because they do not know how to verbalize their feelings, as compared to their peers.

• **People-pleasers.** Most children with Dyspraxia work harder in one day than a typical child their age. Yet, when asked to perform a task, they may either decline to try because they are afraid of failing or they try their hardest even though they are unsuccessful. You will find that they really do want your praise.

• **Social skills.** Communication and interacting with peers can be difficult. It is sometimes hard for children with Dyspraxia to read social situations. They can be loners with few friends.

• **Immaturity.** Compared to other children that are the same age, there is an emotional immaturity that makes these children about three years behind their peers. As young children this may be difficult to ascertain but as they become older the differences between children with Dyspraxia and other children in their grade is more noticeable.

• **Sensory Issues.** Sensory issues can present as behavior difficulties such as humming /making clicking sounds, sensitivity to loud noises or needing to touch everything.
These children may have strong gifts in particular areas. Where they do not have gifts, they will struggle to learn the thinking process, subject matter, correct written or verbal expression, or the particular social skill step by step, and they may have to learn it over and over again before it is mastered and stored in long term memory. If they “know” an answer or a procedure one day and “forget” it the next, they are not being willful or defiant, they are still in the learning process.

Children with Dyspraxia are capable of learning and they are intelligent, but it just takes more practice (and more time) to get there. These children benefit from teachers and other providers who are able to phrase a negative in a positive way. For example, “That’s not quite right, but you did a great job at trying. Here, let me help you a little.” Do not criticize them for not writing neatly, or ripping a page out of a workbook poorly. Those tasks can be very hard and children with Dyspraxia are very sensitive to criticism. Like other children, they have their own natural abilities, but there are some strategies that can help children who have Dyspraxia. Please note that not all of these supports will help all children, but this list can be used as a guideline.

- Most children with Dyspraxia learn better with “hands-on” activities rather than abstract learning. Multisensory lessons (auditory and visual) are also beneficial.
- Limit distractions and obstacles. It does help children who have Dyspraxia to sit in the front of the classroom to reduce distractions. In addition, they benefit from having a seat that is easy to access. This limits maneuvering around objects, which may prevent injuries to the child and to others.
- Plan ahead. Give these children a copy of the notes that you will put on the board they can follow along and highlight pertinent information as you go over it.
- Breaks. Giving these children scheduled breaks throughout the day can be very beneficial.
- Repetition is important. Children with Dyspraxia have difficulty converting information into long term memory so they will know something today but may not know it tomorrow.
- Give simple directions. Many children with Dyspraxia cannot handle multiple instructions. They need it to be broken down into small steps and told to them one at a time. If they are not given the directions one at a time they may be unable to complete the task.
- These children benefit from extended time for taking tests and extra nights given to complete homework.
- Many children have a very poor sense of direction and cannot remember which way is left versus right. If switching rooms between classes they may need more time to get to each class (either leave one class early or allow them to be late).
- Putting supports in place for these children is hugely beneficial. This can range from OT/PT/SLP at school if necessary to permission to go to a safe place (nurses office, guidance etc.) if overwhelmed.
- Use of a laptop is crucial if they have poor handwriting, or dysgraphia.
- Structure. They do well during structured lessons and predictable routines, but struggle during transitions, open-ended and self-directed activity periods where they have to organize/sequence AND monitor the teacher/classmates.
- Provide organizational support for these children. Some ways this can be done include having someone check their folders at the end of the day to make sure they have all their materials, sending an extra set of books to keep at home, or highlighting important assignments in an assignment notebook. During school hours, they can benefit from a resource teacher who can check in with them to make sure they are on task.
- Emailing assignments to school helps prevent homework from getting lost between home & school because of the organizational issues.
- Email a weekly summary of progress on homework and classwork to parents.

It is important to remember that children with Dyspraxia are usually trying their hardest. It may look like they are being lazy or uncooperative but this is not the case. In addition, different skills may be affected on different days. Be patient. These children want to learn and participate but it just takes them a bit longer to do. They do not want to
irritate you and they will often not ask questions or speak up out of fear or distrust. Encourage participation, grade according to ability, and give them the benefit of the doubt but do not ever consider them stupid. Make sure that discipline is appropriate. If there is any confusion, discuss it with the parent(s) and the special needs teacher to assure the best way for that child. Remember, children with Dyspraxia are very loving and thoughtful, and may seem young for their age because developmentally they are.

I appreciate you contacting Dyspraxia USA to understand more about the child with which you are working. The parents of a child with Dyspraxia are also learning what works as they go, so keeping the lines of communication open with the student’s parents can be beneficial. With the school and parents working together the child has the best chance for success.

Warren Fried
Executive Director
Dyspraxia USA

The following is one family’s experience living with children with Developmental Dyspraxia:

“I have two amazing boys who were diagnosed with developmental dyspraxia while we were living in Europe. In the UK, New Zealand and the EU, they have had national and global consensus conferences on how to help our children and adults. Both of my boys are very intelligent (one has an IQ in the 150s and the other is around 135-140). Both of them have worked for years to overcome the challenges that dyspraxia brings to their everyday lives. They are not lazy children, though they may be forgetful or take a long time to complete an assignment. They are not bad children, though they may have trouble sitting still and upright in their chairs for long periods of time. They are not rude or disrespectful, though they may not look you in the eye, appear to be listening during class or may have questions to clarify what you just told them to do. They are not antisocial, though they may spend recess walking the fields by themselves. They may do best in a small class with sensory breaks available. They may do better with on-line type of curriculum which allows them to work at their own pace (and when you let them go, they may surprise you how far ahead they are able to work). They most likely will need extra help with organization (keeping those desks cleaned, homework going home and getting turned back in, time management in finishing a big project and keeping track of their school supplies). They will also most likely do better if allowed to use a keyboard when learning how to write essays, taking spelling test and making poster boards, etc...). You may have to think out of the box, be incredibly patient, believe in them and become an advocate for them to be successful in your class. But let me tell you, if you open your mind/eyes to the amazingness of these children and allow them to be the little star-shaped pegs that they really are, if you find star-shaped holes for them, instead of banging them into round holes and knocking those unique parts off...you will be blown away by who they can become and you will feel great satisfaction as their teacher! Best wishes from a mom of two and an adult who had to make her way with some of the same challenges.”

Ann Wilks Paré