

# Dyslexia Early Warning Signs Checklist

Age-grouped warning signs, key facts, and next steps if you're concerned

## IMPORTANT

Dyslexia is NOT seeing letters backward. It is a language-based processing difference that affects decoding, spelling, and fluent word recognition. The 'backward letters' myth delays identification.

### Preschool (Ages 3–5)

- Late to talk or difficulty learning new words – Language delays in toddlerhood are a risk factor, not a certainty.
- Trouble learning nursery rhymes or rhyming games – Rhyming relies on phonological awareness -- the core deficit in dyslexia.
- Difficulty learning letter names and sounds – Slower than peers despite adequate exposure and practice.
- Can't recognize their own name in print – Most children recognize their name by age 4 with typical exposure.
- Family history of reading difficulties – Dyslexia has 40–60% heritability. If a parent struggled, screen early.
- Trouble remembering sequences (days of week, counting) – Sequential memory is often affected alongside phonological processing.

### Kindergarten – 1st Grade (Ages 5–7)

- Cannot blend sounds together to read simple words (/c/-/a/-/t/ = cat) – By mid-kindergarten, most children can blend 3-sound words with instruction.
- Guesses at words based on first letter or picture rather than decoding – A compensatory strategy that masks decoding difficulty.
- Confuses similar-sounding words (e.g., 'pacific' for 'specific') – Weak phonological representations make similar words interchangeable.
- Struggles to learn sight words despite repeated practice – Sight word memory depends on phonological processing, not visual memory.
- Avoids reading or becomes distressed when asked to read – Emotional response to a task that is genuinely harder for them. Not laziness.

- Spells phonetically but inconsistently (same word different ways) – Spelling is often a more sensitive indicator of dyslexia than reading.

## 2nd – 3rd Grade (Ages 7–9)

- Reads slowly and laboriously, even practiced material – Lack of fluency after 2+ years of instruction is a significant red flag.
- Poor spelling that doesn't match reading level – Can often read words they cannot spell -- production is harder than recognition.
- Avoids reading aloud; loses place frequently – Eye-tracking issues and slow decoding make oral reading aversive.
- Difficulty with word retrieval ('that thing, you know...') – Rapid naming deficits often co-occur with decoding difficulties.
- Comprehension is better when listening than reading – If they understand audiobooks but struggle with print, the issue is decoding, not comprehension.
- Homework takes much longer than expected – The decoding load means every task with print takes 2–3x longer.

## 4th Grade and Beyond (Ages 9+)

- Reads below grade level despite adequate intelligence and instruction – The hallmark of dyslexia: discrepancy between ability and reading level.
- Writes far less than peers; avoids written assignments – Writing requires spelling, which requires the same phonological skills affected in dyslexia.
- Difficulty with foreign language learning – Learning a new phonological system is especially challenging.
- Mispronounces long or unfamiliar words – Phonological processing difficulties persist even when reading improves.
- Low self-esteem related to academics despite strengths in other areas – Years of struggle take a psychological toll. Address the emotional impact alongside the reading.

### PREVALENCE

5–17% of children, depending on definition and threshold used

### HERITABILITY

40–60%. If one parent has dyslexia, each child has ~40% chance

### GENDER

Affects boys and girls equally. Boys are referred more due to behavioral differences.

### CORE DEFICIT

Phonological processing -- not vision, not intelligence, not effort

**BRAIN DIFFERENCE**

Underactivation of left-hemisphere reading circuits; different, not broken

**TREATMENT**

Structured literacy (Orton-Gillingham approach). Explicit, systematic phonics instruction.

**Next Steps If Signs Are Present**

- 1 Don't wait and see. Early intervention (K-2) is dramatically more effective than later intervention.
- 2 Request a psychoeducational evaluation through your school district (free under IDEA) or privately.
- 3 Look for a reading specialist trained in structured literacy or Orton-Gillingham methodology.
- 4 Read 'Overcoming Dyslexia' by Sally Shaywitz for a research-based parent guide.
- 5 Connect with your child emotionally. Tell them: 'Your brain works differently, not worse. You're going to learn to read -- it'll just take a different path.'