I have been teaching and assessing people with learning differences and problems for over 35 years. For the last decade I have been doing this in Australia. I am shocked at how little is known about assessing, diagnosing and teaching anyone who learns differently. Kids come for assessment with all sorts of labels, some I have never heard of and usually the label is incorrect.

A few months ago, I did a Skype assessment for a girl in Queensland. The poor kid turned out to have dyslexia, dyspraxia and true ADHD (true ADHD is actually very rare). She had been previously diagnosed as autistic! How could anyone have any idea of how to teach this child if they could not understand how she perceives the world and how her mind works?

Forget what anyone has told you about your child. Start afresh. It is so important to know how your child’s brain works. Everyone is different but some children are more different that others.

In this issue, I am going to talk about Dyspraxia. What is it?

Dyspraxics get confused with dyslexics all the time. They also get incorrectly labelled in Australia as ADHD. Amphetamine drugs do not help a dyspraxic child, although these drugs were invented to help with concentration so any child put on them will probably have better concentration for a while. But the long term side effects are not good and such a prescription will not help your dyspraxic child in the long term at all.

In many instances, dyspraxics need to be taught in a similar way to dyslexics. But they need a lot more help. If taught properly and young enough, they can almost be cured. I know of quite a few who have degrees and good academic jobs. I know of one who is a maths teacher.

Daniel Radcliff claims to be dyspraxic.

The word actually means “difficulty in doing” or “difficulty with muscles or movement”. But this only tells us half of the story. While these kids do come across as clumsy and do have motor problems, they also have perception problems.

The brain sends out messages and receives new information. It is a two lane highway. With a severely dyspraxic person, neither of these lanes work perfectly.

Much research has been done on this in the UK and it is thought that Dyspraxia is caused by some injury or severe health problem within a six week window of birth. If your child is struggling and you can remember some problem near birth then read on.

The Dyspraxia Foundation in the UK describes it as “an impairment or immaturity of the organization of movement” and says it “can be associated with language, perception and thought.”

Dyspraxia seems to be caused by a lack of maturity of the brain neural connections. This means that not all information taken in through the senses reaches the brain. One of the brightest dyspraxia students once described the difference between the dyspraxia she had and the dyslexia I had by using a dart board metaphor.

She said that with dyslexia all the darts thrown at the board hit the board (all stimulus reaches the brain) but some of the darts get forgotten about and do not always register with the brain. However the brain is aware of how many darts were thrown.

With dyspraxia, not all the darts hit the board or reach the brain so the brain is not even aware of how many darts were thrown or how much stimulus entered the body.
They split dyspraxia into three types:

- Developmental Motor Dyspraxia
- Verbal Dyspraxia
- Aural Dyspraxia

Most severely dyspraxic kids have all three. The term Verbal Dyspraxia is currently being used in Australia for any speech delay but this is not right because kids can have speech delays for a number of reasons, and it is important to know the reason if we are going to teach the kid. If the problem is caused by a fine motor or muscle problem, then the child needs help with movement, if it is caused by a hearing problem then the child needs a hearing aid.

Messages do not always get to and from the brain so if you want to get an idea of what it is like having this condition try walking round while opening and shutting your eyes. Try doing this in an unfamiliar place and you will find out why your dyspraxic child hates change. They perceive the world in jigsaw puzzle mode. They notice lots of things but they can’t see the whole picture.

**What to Look For**

**Does He Or She:**
- Find learning to swim or ride a bike difficult?
- Have difficulty with coordination in sporting activities and games?
- Look clumsy when running?
- Seem scared or fearful of climbing or standing on high places while being virtually fearless as a toddler?
- Get stressed and even angry when routine is broken?
- Get scared at night and want a light on?
- Want everything to be kept in the same place all the time and put away?
- Tend to become obsessive about routine and hate sudden change of routine?
- Tend to follow rituals in his/her behaviour?
- Get so angry at school or with him or herself that s/he throws objects about or breaks them?
- Throw tantrums when stressed?
- Have problems making friends?
- Have problems understanding sarcasm and sometimes jokes?
- Have problems understanding time and finds it hard to judge how long something takes?
- Have problems with judging distance and speed and therefore scared of crossing a road if a car is in sight anywhere?
- Have a poor sense of direction?
- Have poor body awareness?
- Find some clothing uncomfortable to wear?
- Dislike or extreme sensitivity to being touched?
- Tend to be very caring and try to “buy” friendship?
- Find it difficult to write letters or numbers?
- Have good ideas and verbal expression even if s/he has problems with speech?
- Have significant problems with most aspects of maths and numbers?
- Tend to miss out words when reading or read words in an incorrect order?
- Have problems learning to read but become good once s/he understands basic phonics?
- Have difficulty in understanding the content of what s/he has read?
- Have difficulty in following instructions?
- Tend to write only in the center of pages as if frightened by the edges?

**How To Help**

It is so important, when a child is finding learning hard, to concentrate on skills that the child will need for life, and not just school.

For example here is a list of comparisons between what they teach at school and what is needed for life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learn at school</th>
<th>Need in Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To hand-write essays</td>
<td>Word processing skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times tables</td>
<td>Know how to use a calculator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long division</td>
<td>Know how to manage credit cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algebra</td>
<td>Fill in forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfect spelling</td>
<td>Know how to use a spell checker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyse poems</td>
<td>Understand a newspaper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Have great difficulty in drawing a map or plan and find it hard to follow maps or plans?
• Find drawing in perspective very difficult?
• Have either very poor or excellent organization skills?
• Tend to be creative?
• When drawing, tends to begin by drawing the entire outside shape and then fill it in with color, pattern or detail?
• Get deja vu a lot or have the feeling that something has happened before or that s/he knew an event was going to happen?
• Seem bright with good ideas but gets muddled trying to explain them?

If you go to our site [www.dyslexiccentreaustralia.org.au](http://www.dyslexiccentreaustralia.org.au) and follow the links you will find tick tests for three different age groups.

Some Aids Available to Dyslexics and Dyspraxics are
• Computers
• Voice recognition word processing packages
• Dictaphones
• Spellcheckers
• Personal dictionaries
• Secretaries
• Editors
• Calculators
• Read back word processing packages or voiceovers. Some are actually free and this is built into an apple mac (for info on this visit our web site and click on voiceovers on the top menu bar)
• Family and friends
• Personal organisers

These should all be considered and experimented with. Whatever best suits a certain student should then be used.

Be visual as much as possible, for example, words can be drawn over to help the child remember the spelling.

Coordination
Many occupational therapists consider that these children need to be taught to coordinate their hands, eyes and balance through play activities before they are taught academic skills.

These children benefit greatly from coordination and body awareness exercises, particularly those involving hand eye coordination. Learning how far objects are away from each other and from themselves helps the brain to wire up properly. Many therapists actually get the children to crawl through obstacle courses. This is particularly important if the child never crawled when a baby.

Suggested activities
Anything involving balance for example:
   Skateboarding
   Surfboarding
Anything involving catching and throwing for example:
   Basketball
   Sticky darts
   Tennis
   Ping-pong
Crawling through and around things, and
Arm leg co-ordination activities for example:
   Swimming
   Football

Speech and literacy
Speech therapy is often necessary for dyspraxic kids. They need to learn in a multi-sensory way as much as possible. This means using as many senses as possible.

They need to know letter sounds and phonics and they need to learn this in a multi-sensory way. So to learn the letter sounds they must:
Hear the sound of the letter
See the shape of the letter
Feel the shape of the letter by going over it
Say the letter sound
All at the same time.

They need to know how to word build and break down words when reading and learn the rules and digraph sounds as well as how to blend letters together.

Our organisation does not sell materials itself but can direct you, through our web site, to the best resources available to help with these kids. We are about to extend our bank of resources and those we find the best will be available and demonstrated during our support group meetings. See the site for details. If you want to keep in touch with what we are doing then sign up for the newsletter at my site [www.dyslexia-testing.com.au](http://www.dyslexia-testing.com.au)

Dyspraxics often have poor handwriting because of their poor fine motor skills and therefore have a form of dysgraphia. It is best to get them typing and word processing as soon as possible. They love word processing because computers are so neat! And because they can move words and sentences about. They often have problems getting ideas down in the correct order.

Routines
It is so important to keep timetables and routines the same as much as possible. Dyspraxics miss bits of information so the world becomes a scary place. If you were to move the furniture around in a dyspraxic child’s room while he
was out, he would probably throw a huge tantrum when he got home because he would be scared of running into things and not be able to find anything.

Hints to help

- Try to have meals at the same time every day.
- If someone is visiting or your routine changes, explain in detail why this is happening before it happens.
- Do not move his/her belongings about without him/her being there with you.
- Get into a routine of doing bookwork or jobs the day before they need to be completed.
- Keep the child’s belongings in the same place. For example always put his/her bags, coats, shoes etc in a set place and ensure that you do this even if the child leaves them somewhere else.
- Time how long tasks take and always allow longer than this to complete a task.
- If you are intending to reorganise a room or a cupboard make sure that your dyspraxic child helps with the activity as that way they will better remember where items have been moved to.

Spatial

Developmental Motor Dyspraxia children will always have problems with maths of a spatial nature, such as three-dimensional objects, nets, working out area, volume and geometry. It is unfair to expect them to be able to do well at these tasks. They are unlikely to become engineers, architects or three-dimensional designers. If you know of any who do, please let me know!

Gifts

Most have a very good sense of smell. Smell is something that lingers and smells do not change rapidly so dyspraxics learn quite young that they can rely on smells. You can actually use this to calm him/her down. Whatever perfume or aftershave his parents wore for the child’s early life will comfort the child for the whole of his/her life. So if s/he is doing something or going somewhere strange then make sure s/he has that smell on him.

They make very good writers and one of my dyspraxic students in the UK won an international literacy prize at age 12. She told me that she was good at writing because long ago she stopped trusting her body and lived inside her head, inventing and creating things.

They also have uncanny ways of sometimes of reading people’s minds.

Much of this article has been taken from my book *Dyspraxia - A Guide for Parents and Teachers* which is available for download. There are a number of other books on dyspraxia but most use long scientific words and parents find them hard to understand.

You need to understand these kids to best help them. You need to understand how they perceive and to imagine what it is actually like to not “see” everything that your eyes see or “hear” everything that your ears hear and not to able to trust your muscles to do what you want them to.

But with early and correct intervention these kids can go on to do really well in life.

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Reference

1 www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk

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