

Dyslexic Teens in the Library

Trends and Best Practices

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LIS 506

15 December 2014

I. So, what is dyslexia?

Dyslexia is classified as a learning disability, and it's one with which between 10 and 20 percent of the world's population lives—despite common assumptions, it isn't limited to English-speakers (the sheer amount of research from other countries should make this quite clear!). It isn't related to economic status, primary language, or intelligence. It has nothing to do with vision. It is related to brain structure, and it's hereditary. In a nutshell, dyslexia makes it incredibly hard for people to decode language, both written and—especially in noisy environments—spoken as well (see Chandrasaekaran, Hornickel, Skoe, Nicol, & Kraus, 2009, for more information). However, researchers including Neil Alexander-Passe (2006); S. Gunnell Ingesson (2007); Anne Elizabeth Dahle and Ann-Marie Knivsberg (2014); Dahle, Knivsberg, and Anne Brit Andreassen (2011); Knivsberg and Andreassen (2008); Anastassia Plakopiti and Ioanna Bellou (2014); and Daniele Mugnaini, Stefano Lassi, Giampolo La Malfa, and Giorgio Albertini (2009) have noted correlations between dyslexia and depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. It's not just a reading disability—it affects every part of a person's life.

II. That's great, but what can we do?

We can't wave our magic librarian wand and make the world an easier place for dyslexics—there is no cure. But we *can* make our libraries more inviting and easier for our teens with dyslexia to use. Many of the changes we can implement have an added benefit: they will help our libraries—and our websites—comply with the Americans With Disabilities Act. They'll help make libraries friendlier for our teen dyslexics. Since dyslexia is hereditary, changes we implement in the teen section may also end up helping our teen dyslexics' parents, thus getting *them* into the library more, too. (And, just think: you can bring all these cool ideas for making your library ADA-compliant and dyslexic-friendly to your next staff meeting!)

Perhaps best of all, we aren't working in a void as we try to make our libraries more dyslexic-friendly (and, along the way, more friendly to others with differing abilities). IFLA has consistently put out guides for library service to dyslexics, including an expanded 2014 draft under consideration now. Even better, IFLA (2014) offers a poster called “Dyslexia? Welcome to our Library!” It's available as a downloadable .pdf file (it's available here: <http://www.ifla.org/files/assets/lsn/publications/draft-dyslexia-guidelines-checklist.pdf>), for quick reference for libraries serving dyslexics—which, let's face it, is all of us, since dyslexics may be anywhere from 10-20% of the total population. So, while studies on libraries and dyslexics are in unfortunately short supply, we *do* have guidelines and suggestions to help us better serve dyslexic patrons.

III. The Collection

Do you ever think about the readability of YA books? I'm not talking about their lexile range, or where they fall on Common Core standards, although these can certainly affect a dyslexic's ability to read a book. Instead, I'm referring to font style and size, which can have a big impact on a dyslexic's ability not only to read the text but to fully decode what it's saying as well. In fact, research has shown that font *size* can have detrimental effects on a dyslexic's ability to read and process information, with font sizes of between 18 and 22 points proving much easier to read and information presented in these sizes better decoded than that in either smaller or larger fonts (Rello, Pielot, Marcos, and Carlini, 2013, 4-7). If it's possible, try to get at least a few YA books in large type. This will, in the long run, help more teens than just dyslexics—it could be helpful for vision-impaired teens as well.

Does your library have a good graphic novel and comic collection? Not only are these helpful for reluctant readers, but they can prove helpful for dyslexics as well. If you don't have a graphic novel collection, you might want to consider building one. Similarly, do you have any of your YA material on audiobooks? While every dyslexic is different, audiobooks are helpful for many, and are one of IFLA's (2014) recommendations for making your library dyslexic-friendly. And, of course, since graphic novels (and audiobooks!) often draw in reluctant readers, you might gain even more teenagers as devoted library users. What's not to like?

Does your library circulate ebooks as part of its collection? Depending on the vender and the vender's settings—as well as, of course, the individual dyslexic—ebooks can be very helpful for patrons with dyslexia. Font style and size can be changed, which, considering how helpful a larger font size can be (Rello, Pielot, Marcos, and Carlini, 2013, 4-7), is no small thing for dyslexic readers. However, as IFLA (2014) cautions, technology isn't a magic bullet, either (Draft Guidelines, 35). It's just another tool in your toolbox, but, as such, it can definitely help some of your dyslexic readers. Best of all, since no one can see what someone else is doing on an ereader or a tablet, a dyslexic teenager doesn't have to worry about being thought weird for using larger font when reading.

#### IV. The Web (and Your Social Media Presence)

When we turn to website accessibility, we're in luck: considerable research has been done on what makes a website dyslexic-friendly. Clearly, we want to find the Goldilocks of fonts: not too big, not too small, but just *perfect* for reading and decoding for dyslexics (Rello, Pielot, Marcos, and Carlini, 2013, 4-7). Also clearly, this means we need websites with fonts larger than 12-point Times New Roman or Arial. Similarly, we should really try to avoid, as much as possible, italic font—both italics and cursive are really hard for dyslexics to decode (Rello and Baeza-Yates, 2013, 6). We should also be careful with our word choices. As much fun as our LIS acronyms are, it's best to use language that is quickly and easily understandable. This will help everybody—but it's especially beneficial for patrons who have trouble decoding language.

We also shouldn't abandon our social media presence: dyslexics are definitely on social media! Indeed, IFLA (2014) recommends using a multipronged social media approach, making use of everything from the audiovisual (YouTube and podcasts) to Facebook and Twitter (Welcome to Our Library!). Since this can help a *lot* when you're trying to get the word out about your

services for dyslexics, it's going to prove helpful in more than one way. And, if you've got a good teen advisory council, you might want to consider getting them involved in creating podcasts, YouTube videos, Instagram posts, and other things aimed at their peers (and themselves). And who knows? One of them might be dyslexic, and some of them almost certainly *know* dyslexics, so it might become very personal to them, very fast.

#### V. Working With Dyslexics

We won't necessarily know which of our young adult patrons are dyslexic, but, since dyslexics can't filter out the background noise that neurotypical people can, we should be ready to offer quiet study space to those teens who may need it. After all, for a dyslexic patron, that kid bouncing off the wall in the children's department isn't just obnoxious—it may make it impossible to get anything done at all. But, again, quiet spaces aren't the only things we can offer teenage dyslexics. We also know that every dyslexic is different—and, sadly, that many are afraid to “out” themselves due to pressure and prior bad experiences (Evans, 2014).

Our dyslexic teens are dealing not just with being teenagers but also being teenagers with learning disabilities that affect every part of their lives. Sometimes, the very best we can do for them is to acknowledge that, despite their struggles with reading and decoding language in all its forms, we know that they're *people*. Try not to judge teens who might need a little more help, or a quieter space, or who sometimes struggle to come up with words. Make sure signage is easy to read—just as on our web sites, we want that Goldilocks font (definitely not in italics!), because we want signs to be as easily accessible as possible for *all* our teens. Since many dyslexic teens (and dyslexics in general) are incredibly creative, we can try to get them involved in our teen advisory councils—they might struggle with decoding, but they have a *lot* to offer us.

#### VII. How Can We Move Forward?

Now that you're all ready to start implementing accessibility measures for your dyslexic teens, you're probably wondering—what next? There's always maintenance to be done on websites and signage, and collections can always be weeded, built, and strengthened. But, for those interested, there is also a need for advocacy for dyslexics, both in the library world and the world at large. Many dyslexics, including our teens, are too afraid to ask for help because of prior bad experiences (Evans, 2014). They struggle with decoding language, can't separate their conversation from the background noise, and often try to cope themselves, without assistance. They are also all different: dyslexia is a very personal thing, and it manifests slightly differently in nearly everyone. Nonetheless, with the suggestions here—as well as those offered by IFLA—we can begin to make our YA sections friendlier places for teens with dyslexia. Let's work together to create safe, accessible, fun spaces for dyslexics in all our YA sections!

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