



**ADHD and Dyslexia:  
One, the other, or both?**

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Parents - Part 3





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**Dyslexia**




**ADHD**



**Slidebooks**  
Check out the helpful information in these slidebooks which cover topics like ADHD and executive functioning




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**Introduction**

- Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Dyslexia are separate conditions which often occur together in the same person.
- It is estimated that about 50-60% of people with ADHD will also have a learning disorder, the most common of which is Dyslexia.
- ADHD is characterized by inattention, distractibility, hyperactivity and impulsivity.
- Dyslexia is a language-based learning disability characterized by difficulties with accurate and fluent word recognition, spelling, and reading decoding.
- Although the two share some common traits, they are distinctly different.
- Proper assessment to identify both conditions is critical.


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**So, what is ADHD?**

- ADHD stands for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder.
- A complex brain disorder; a developmental impairment of the brain's executive functions (conductor of the brain).
- People with ADHD have trouble with impulse-control, focusing, and organization.
- ADHD is a developmental impairment of the brain's self-management system. Both adults and children can be diagnosed with ADHD.

(From ADDitude)




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**Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – 5<sup>th</sup> edition (DMS-5)  
© 2013**


- 1) Six or more (5 if 17+) of the following have persisted for at least 6 months to a degree that is inconsistent with developmental level and negatively impacts functioning:
  - a. Fails to give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes.
  - b. Has difficulty sustaining attention.
  - c. Does not appear to listen.
  - d. Struggles to follow through on instructions.
  - e. Has difficulty with organization.
  - f. Avoids or dislikes tasks requiring a lot of thinking.
  - g. Loses things.
  - h. Is easily distracted.
  - i. Is forgetful in daily activities.

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 **ADHD Criteria**

2) Six or more (5 if 17+) of the following have persisted for at least 6 months to a degree that is inconsistent with developmental level and negatively impacts functioning:


- Fidgets with hands or feet or squirms in chair.
- Has difficulty remaining seated.
- Runs about or climbs excessively in children; extreme restlessness in adults.
- Difficulty engaging in activities quietly.
- Acts as if driven by a motor; adults will often feel inside like they were driven by a motor.
- Talks excessively.
- Blurts out answers before questions have been completed.
- Difficulty waiting or taking turns.
- Interrupts or intrudes upon others.

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 **ADHD Criteria**

- Several symptoms present before age 12 years
- Several symptoms present in two or more settings
- Clear evidence that symptoms interfere with functioning.
- Not better explained by another condition (e.g., anxiety disorder, autism)

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 **ADHD Criteria**

**Three presentations**


**Predominantly hyperactive/impulsive** presentation

**Predominantly inattentive** presentation

**Combined** presentation

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 **ADHD Criteria**


**What is Dyslexia?**

"Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge."

Adopted by the International Dyslexia Association Board of Directors, November 12, 2002

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 **ADHD Criteria**

**Let's break that down**


Dyslexia is a **specific learning disability** that is **neurobiological** in origin.

Specific – impacts language processing


Learning – acquisition (but also performance)

Disability – impairs, interferes with, or limits.

Neurobiological – how brain cells/chemistry affect behavior

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 **ADHD Criteria**


It is characterized by difficulties with **accurate and/or fluent word recognition** and by **poor spelling and decoding** abilities.

Accurate and/or fluent – possible to be accurate but not fluent.

Word recognition – recognize written words *quickly and smoothly*

Spelling – writing the letters of a word (sounds<->letters)

Decoding - the process of translating print into speech by rapidly matching a letter or combination of letters (graphemes) to their sounds (phonemes) and recognizing the patterns that make syllables and words.

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These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the **phonological component of language** .....

Phoneme - any of the perceptually distinct units of sound in a specified language that distinguish one word from another. (Different from letters.)

Bat and Hat → B and H  
paN and paI → N and T


English has 44 phonemes (vowels, letter blends)

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.....that is often **unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities** and the provision of **effective classroom instruction**.

Unexpected in relation to – this stands out. They are capable in so many other areas (island of weakness in a sea of strengths)


Effective classroom instruction – attempts have been made to teach them to read through some conventional means.

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Secondary consequences may include problems in **reading comprehension** and **reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge**.


Reading comprehension – don't understand what they are reading.

Reduced reading experience – less experience leads to less vocabulary and knowledge acquisition.


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SO..... If ADHD is about inattention and impulse control, and dyslexia is about reading.....how could someone confuse them????





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- Both run in families (1/2 to 1/3 – genetics plays a part), and they can co-occur often, so people don't exactly know which symptoms are due to which condition (e.g., my dad has dyslexia so that must be what I have).
- Both conditions misunderstood. For example, "a child struggling in school" is sometimes globally called dyslexic. Only recently did the field develop a universal definition. (or stigma)
- Impulsive/inattentive children can be hard to test! So evaluator stops, or doesn't know how to really interpret the scores because of behavioral observations made during testing. (same of teacher or parent)

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- Both can show difficulty paying attention. ADHD more global. Dyslexia more when language/reading demands are high. First, reading is hard, and they fatigue. Second, if a child can't do a worksheet or silent reading, he will look "off task."
- Both can guess at words – ADHD more impulsivity, dyslexia can't unlock the code.
- Both can struggle with reading – but different aspects. Those with ADHD can sound out words accurately but may skip small words or punctuation, lose their place, etc. Dyslexia – inaccurate and misread small and large words.

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7) Both might struggle with comprehension – ADHD due to skipping punctuation, not having the mental counter space (working memory) to hold all elements in mind while reading. Dyslexia due to inability to unlock the code.


8) Both may avoid reading because it is hard and requires sustained mental effort.

9) Both may struggle with writing, but different aspects. Both may show problems with organization, proofreading. But dyslexia also brings with it problems with spelling.

10) Both may underachieve in school.




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### So, first things first...


- Get a thorough evaluation from someone who knows and understands both conditions. Let them know your concerns about both conditions ahead of time and perhaps suggest breaking testing up over a couple days.
  - Be sure it includes testing of phonological processing and rapid naming.




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- If a child is diagnosed with one but you still suspect "more is going on," don't wait (not matter what anyone tells you). Keep asking questions. Again, find an evaluator versed in both. Remember – it is not rare to have both!!
- A child with both conditions will have both symptom clusters.
  - Inattention/impulsivity AND problems with phonemic awareness




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### What are key things to know if a child is diagnosed with both?


- Addressing only one will not make the other go away.
  - Medication to address ADHD does not make the child now able to unlock the code of reading. \*brains with dyslexia need to be taught to read differently\*
  - Multisensory structured literacy does not make the attention and executive weaknesses go away.
  - May see SOME improvements but not 100%




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- Addressing only one can result in the interventions/strategies for the other condition being less effective.
  - A child who cannot read independently won't be able to benefit from use of the lists, templates, planners, or software/apps we suggest for those with ADHD, for example.
  - A child who cannot manage impulses may struggle with the intensive, fatiguing tutoring sessions needed to teach a child with dyslexia to read, or to follow-along with audiobooks or learn a new assistive tech.




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- ADHD is associated with cognitive difficulties (such as working memory deficits), so the therapies for dyslexia may progress slower and take longer to "take root." Be sure the academic language therapist is experienced in working with children with both conditions. The process may need "tweaking."




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- Once the basics of reading are taught to the point of fluency, there may still be lingering reading issues related to comprehension. SO BE ON THE LOOKOUT for ongoing reading issues!!!



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- Tools/strategies to address ADHD will need to be less reading-heavy. For example, use picture lists or visual planners rather than word-lists and traditional planners. And check what the students write in their planners for accuracy!!
- They may still struggle with writing even once the spelling improves. They will likely need help with punctuation, organization, and proof-reading.



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### But be optimistic....

- With appropriate supports and accommodations, folks with both conditions can go on to be very successful.
- It is never too late to diagnose these disorders and receive help.
- It is possible to learn and develop strengths and go on to lead happy, productive lives.




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### Additional Resources

- International Dyslexia Association website – particularly the fact sheets.
- *Managing ADHD In School: The best evidence-based methods for teachers* by Russell Barkley (2016).
- *Overcoming Dyslexia - Second Edition* by Sally Shaywitz (2020).
- *Executive Skills and Reading Comprehension: A guide for educators* by Kelly B. Cartwright (2015)
- My website – ChasingYourPotential.com




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