

# Dyspraxia in Secondary Schools

## What is dyspraxia?

Dyspraxia, a form of developmental coordination disorder (DCD) is a common disorder affecting fine and/or gross motor coordination in children and adults. It may also affect speech. DCD is a lifelong condition, formally recognised by international organisations including the World Health Organisation. DCD is distinct from other motor disorders such as cerebral palsy and stroke, and occurs across the range of intellectual abilities. Individuals may vary in how their difficulties present: these may change over time depending on environmental demands and life experiences.

An individual's coordination difficulties may affect participation and functioning of everyday life skills in education, work and employment.

Children may present with difficulties with self-care, writing, typing, riding a bike and play as well as other educational and recreational activities. In adulthood many of these difficulties will continue, as well as learning new skills at home, in education and work, such as driving a car and DIY.

There may be a range of co-occurring difficulties which can also have serious negative impacts on daily life. These include social and emotional difficulties as well as problems with time management, planning and personal organisation, and these may also affect an adult's education or employment experiences.

Many people with DCD also experience difficulties with memory, perception and processing. While DCD is often regarded as an umbrella term to cover motor coordination difficulties, dyspraxia refers to those people who have additional problems planning, organising and carrying out movements in the right order in everyday situations

## What causes dyspraxia?

Although the exact causes of dyspraxia are unknown, it is thought to be caused by a disruption in the way messages from the brain are transmitted to the body. This affects a person's ability to perform movements in a smooth, coordinated way.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is likely that there is one child affected in every class of 30.

In some cases dyspraxia is not identified until the child reaches secondary school. He/she may have managed to cope through their previous schools with only minor difficulties. However, the structure of secondary schools may prove to be too difficult for the child and it is at this point that problems manifest themselves especially in view of the organisational skills that are required in secondary education. If dyspraxia is not identified and the child enters secondary education there can be such a high incidence of low self esteem and disaffection that behavioural difficulties are evident.

## **What to look for**

- Difficulties with physical activities such as in P.E. especially activities that involve eye-hand and eye-foot co-ordination (i.e. ball skills), running, using equipment and working as a team.
- Poor posture, body awareness and awkward movements
- Confusion over laterality with the pupil interchanging between left and right hand for different tasks
- Poor short term visual and verbal memory - copying from the board, dictation, following instructions
- Writing difficulties both with style and speed - frequently children have an awkward pen grip
- Poorly developed organisational skills and difficulty with planning essays
- Activities which involve well developed sequencing ability are difficult
- Problems with awareness of time, pupils need constant reminders
- Often have poor exercise tolerance, tire easily and may require longer periods of rest and sleep
- Some children may have phobias, obsessive or immature behaviour
- Sensitive to external stimulation e.g. different levels of light, sound and heat intensity
- Extremes of emotions, highly excitable at times and evidence of significant mood swings
- Lack of awareness of potential danger, particularly relevant to practical and science subjects
- Often loners and have limited development of social skills

## **Is there a student with dyspraxia in your class?**

Remember:

- Give the child as much encouragement as possible and make sure they are not made to feel a failure
- Be aware of their difficulties and give strategies to reduce the frustration they experience particularly when required to complete written work
- Break down activities and tasks into smaller components
- Teach the child strategies in order to help them remember and organise themselves (e.g. use of diaries and lists)
- Assist with short term verbal memory tasks by not giving too many words in dictation and asking the child to repeat instructions to you
- Help with short term visual memory by not expecting the child to copy large blocks of text. Use strategies to help with copying from the board for example, using different colours per line or giving a ruler to copy text for each line. If demonstrating activities, break down the tasks into stages and give a few at a time
- Allow the child to finish a task before moving on; they will feel a failure when work is consistently left incomplete
- In P.E./games gain advice from the medical professionals and ensure that if the child is unable to join in a team game that he/she is given activities that will build up their particular abilities. Where possible allow the child alternatives to taking part in team games where the child will be identified as letting his/her side down
- Ensure that where required assistance is given to the pupil to find his/her way around, as they may forget where they are supposed to be

- Allow access to word processors/lap tops/palm tops if they are available, - a voice processor with at least 80% accuracy can be invaluable
- It is important to work with parents as they know their child better than anyone else
- Ensure that there is good liaison with medical professionals
- Be aware that during sudden growth spurts difficulties may manifest themselves to a greater extent
- Encourage a close relationship with another child who can act as a guide/helper especially for the first few months following transfer to secondary school
- Ensure that all instructions are always clear and precise. Make sure you explain yourself fully even if this means stating the obvious as they may not understand sarcasm or irony

**With the right support, encouragement and help children with dyspraxia do well in school**

**Further information available from:**

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