

## PARENTING MATTERS

# Managing dyslexic kids

*Children with the condition have to deal with more than just educational issues, say experts*

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**SINGAPORE** – Dyslexia used to be typically associated with educational problems in children, but it was recently revealed that the condition could also lead to various social and emotional issues in youngsters.

A study was conducted on 99 Primary 3 students with dyslexia in Singapore and 99 matched peers, from 13 primary schools. The results of the study, released in June at a conference organised by the Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS), showed that the poorer social, emotional and behavioural outcomes experienced by dyslexic children also included anxiety, depression and low self-esteem.

Tan Shi Jia, a senior specialist psychologist at DAS, defined dyslexia as “a specific learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling”.

She listed some of the common signs parents should look out for: Reading and spelling below age/grade level, numerous spelling errors in a

piece of work and spelling the same word in several different ways within the same piece of work, poor reading fluency, and difficulties with comprehension and writing due to weaknesses in reading and spelling.

Notably, the rate of dyslexia in children in Singapore has not varied much over the years.

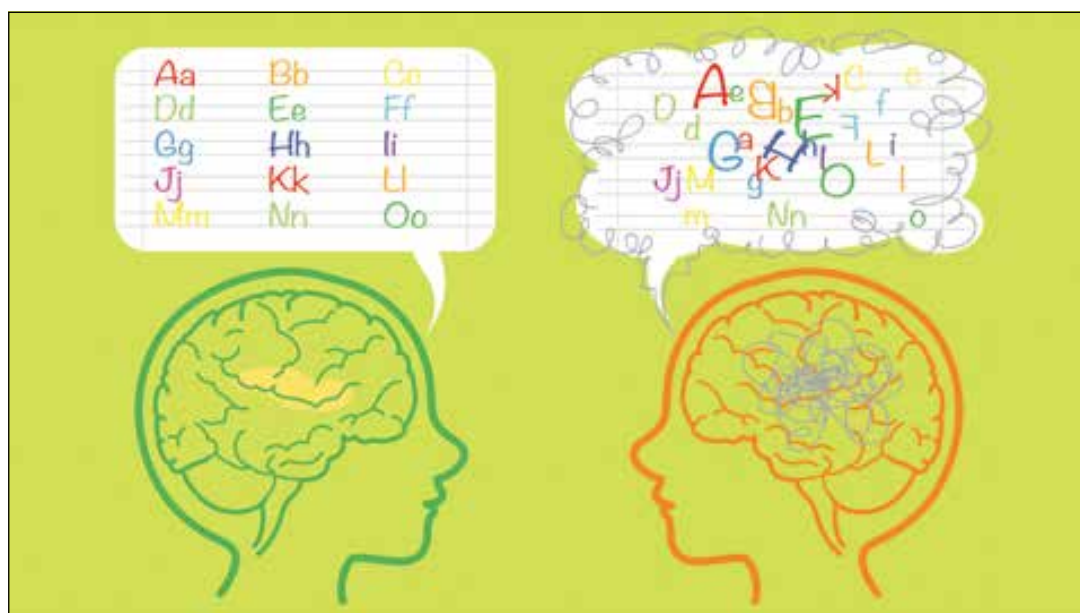
“In Singapore, the prevalence of dyslexia among the schoolgoing population is estimated to be between four to 10 per cent,” said Deborah Tan Wen Li, a senior specialist psychologist at DAS.

“These estimates suggest that in a classroom of 40 students, there will likely be one or two diagnosed with dyslexia. This rate has not changed significantly, although we do see an increased awareness and understanding of dyslexia.”

## LISTEN TO YOUR CHILD

That said, there is quite a difference between being aware of, and dealing with, dyslexia. Liu Yimei, assistant director at DAS said that if a child is diagnosed with dyslexia, the parents should first understand how to handle the child, before helping the youngster to cope with it.

“It’s about understanding that a dyslexic child would have to be taught differently, and that parents need to



Besides problems such as poor spelling, dyslexia can also affect a child’s emotional state, so parents have to keep encouraging their kids to boost their self-confidence.

PHOTO: ISTOCK

learn to listen to and communicate with their child about his/her difficulties,” she explained.

“They can help their child to set achievable goals, reward their efforts and not just results, build their self-esteem and resilience, and work on their strengths, among others.”

Liu advised that parents encourage their children to read more, starting at age-appropriate levels, as well as keep a vocabulary book. Dyslexic kids will also need to receive specialised literacy intervention, such as that offered by DAS, to help them attain adequate reading and spelling skills.

Parents can also help children with their social and emotional issues. This is because many of the emotional problems caused by dyslexia occur out of frustration with school, or in social situations because of a fear of not meeting expectations, said Irena Constantin (M.Phil), an educational psychologist at Scott Psychological Centre.

“Anxiety and anger can be two of the signs children might show. If a child doesn’t ‘try hard enough’ or is not able to ‘meet expectations’, don’t interpret this behaviour as laziness but rather as a sign (that help may be needed),” she added.

Constantin stressed the importance of being sensitive to your child’s feelings and encouraging them to talk about their feelings too. She warned that if fear and anger occur over an extended period of time, children can become more vulnerable, which can affect their self-image.

“It’s important to support and encourage your child so they start believing in themselves again,” said Constantin. “Parents and teachers should focus on their progress and reward their effort rather than focus on the ‘end product’. Try to set realistic goals for them: By helping your child set an attainable goal, you can eliminate the chances of failure.”

She suggested finding areas in which your child can succeed. For example, if your child is doing well in mathematics, let him tutor a classmate who is struggling, and maybe

that student can reciprocate as a reader for the dyslexic student. This, she said, “will improve and enhance his self-image”.

## FINDING THEIR OWN WAY

Stay-at-home-mum Mdm Mastzainah Jalil, 46, has four children, two of whom are dyslexic. Her 13-year-old daughter, Siti Hawa Najib, was diagnosed when she was in Primary 1, and dealt with her fair share of social and emotional issues.

“When she was first grappling with dyslexia, she had a lot of issues with other children,” Mdm Mastzainah shared. “She didn’t like spelling, so the other children would make fun of her, which hurt her. She cried when she came home from school.”

She added: “We talked to her a lot, asked her what was happening in school and how she felt, so we could help to make things easier for her.”

Siti went for counselling and attended extra classes at DAS, and she was taught how to handle all these issues. She now takes it upon herself to get everything right, and has become more independent.

Her mother said that while she is still very conscious about what others are saying to her and always on her guard, she has told her daughter that it is alright to be different.

Mdm Mastzainah believes that communication and support are key for dyslexic children. “My advice would be to listen to your children to find out what their issues are, and then try to address them,” she said.

“You should always support your child. As long as you support them, they’ll know that they’re not alone, and they won’t be scared. All children with dyslexia have a special talent, so you have to find out what that is and support that talent.”

This piece of advice is in line with what the experts say. “If children know how to succeed and are able to find their own ways in coping with the situation, they will develop positive feelings about themselves and have a better chance to succeed later in life,” said Constantin.

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