

Identification of reading disabilities

In a nutshell

- We define reading disabilities as a persistent and unexpected difficulty in developing age and experience appropriate word reading skills.
- If children are not taught properly then we cannot expect them to learn to read. This means that the child must attend school regularly or have alternative instructional interactions to fulfil this role.
- Continued teacher's monitoring of the development of each child's reading and spelling skills in the classroom is the basis of careful assessment.
- In addition, teachers' classroom observations are necessary concerning students' progress in developing basic reading and spelling skills, using assessment of letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, accuracy and fluency of word reading, and word spelling.
- Unfortunately, in most of the African countries, there is a lack of standardised measures for assessing reading and spelling skills in local languages. Then it is important that teachers regularly use summative assessments in reading and spelling to monitor the development of these skills and recognize risks for reading difficulties to give extra support for children in need.

Now we will focus on the identification of reading disabilities or dyslexia. The term reading disability may

refer to¹Elliot, J.G. & Grigorenko, E.L. (2014). The Dyslexia Debate. Cambridge University press.:

- anyone who struggles with accurate single-word decoding,
 - or to those with a more pervasive condition marked by various comorbid features and symptoms,
 - or to those with a significant discrepancy between decoding and another measure such as IQ or listening comprehension,
 - or to those with a certain cognitive profile associated with their reading difficulty, of which there are several more possibilities. In other words, there is a very wide range of different uses of the term dyslexia and associated definitions²Protopapas, A. (2019). Evolving concepts of dyslexia and their implications for research and Remediation. Frontiers in Psychology, 10, Article 2873..

We define *reading disabilities* as a persistent and unexpected difficulty in developing age- and experience-appropriate word reading skills. If children are not taught properly then we cannot expect them to learn to read. This means that the child must at least attend school regularly or have alternative instructional interactions to fulfil this role. This part of the definition involves not only the existence of teaching but also the teaching method applied³Protopapas, A. (2019). Evolving concepts of dyslexia and their implications for research and Remediation. Frontiers in Psychology, 10, Article 2873..

When the child struggles with reading at the beginning of school, we often use the term *reading difficulty*. Continued monitoring of the development of reading and spelling skills

in the classroom is the basis of assessment. In addition, teachers' classroom observations are necessary concerning students' progress in developing basic reading and spelling skills, using assessment with standardised measures of letter knowledge, word reading, and word spelling.

If the child fails to respond to appropriate methods of teaching reading in their local language and well-founded interventions supporting literacy skills, a more comprehensive assessment is probably needed to determine whether the child has a reading disability. An assessment should include well standardised measures of word reading, word spelling, letter knowledge, phoneme awareness, and RAN. Untimed oral reading of isolated real words and pseudowords allows measurement of the child's sight word knowledge and capacity for sounding out words. Words in list are typically ordered according to difficulty, which is an essential component of any assessment related to learning difficulties in this domain. In transparent languages such as Finnish and Bantu languages, reading fluency is an important aspect of reading performance and in defining reading disabilities⁴Aro, T. & Ahonen, T (eds.) (2011) Assessment of learning disabilities: Cooperation between teachers, psychologists and parents. African edition. University of Turku and Niilo Mäki Institute, Jyväskylä, Finland..

Additional reading

[Assessment of Learning Difficulties](#)

[Assessment of Learning Disabilities](#)

General principles for assessing learning difficulties are presented in detail in Additional Reading sidepanel:

Assessment of learning difficulties and methods⁵Elliot, J.G. & Grigorenko, E.L. (2014). The Dyslexia Debate. Cambridge University press. for assessing reading and spelling skills are described in Reading and Spelling assessment in Literacy teaching part.

In Africa, there is a problem with a lack of well-standardised measures for assessing reading and spelling skills in local languages. Accordingly, the need for special educational support is assessed using simple reading and spelling tests with local normative data. Progress monitoring in basic reading and spelling skills are very important aspects of the assessment procedure. When deciding whether a diagnosis of reading disability or dyslexia is needed to describe the child's learning difficulties or identify a need for special needs intervention, we should remember some important exclusionary and contextual factors⁶Fletcher, J.M., Lyon, G.R., Fuchs, L.S. & Barnes, M.A. (2019). Learning disabilities. From identification to intervention. Second edition. New York: The Guilford Press., as follows:

- The presence of sensory and motor problems,
- Possible intellectual disability,
- Evidence of limited language proficiency,
- Possible economic disadvantage,
- Noted behavioural problems, and
- Any comorbid disorders that may hinder learning.

The goal of any evaluation should be to intervene as soon as possible with a child who is struggling to learn to read and thus achieve in school.

References

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Read more

[Reading and spelling assessment](#)