

OCTOBER IS DYSLEXIA AWARENESS MONTH

Estimates by the National Institute of Child Health and Development suggest as many as 20 percent of all students may have some degree of dyslexia. Many people believe the word "dyslexia" is used to describe a reading problem in which people see words spelled backward. Research has shown, however, that this description is not accurate in describing the complex concept of dyslexia. Literally, dyslexia means "difficulty with words". This difficulty with words can impact speaking, reading, and/or spelling and varies a great deal from person to person. According to the National Institutes of Health, only 5 of 100 children with dyslexia are appropriately diagnosed and receiving treatment.

When learning to read and spell, two different skills are required. Students must be able to recognize the sounds that letters and letter combinations make. Then, they must apply the sounds to read and spell unfamiliar words (phonics). Students must also be able to commit words to memory in order to read with adequate speed and accuracy (sight word recall). Dyslexia may be diagnosed when a student has a significant deficit in one or both on these skills. Students who have difficulty with phonics are overly reliant upon memorization for reading and spelling. They struggle to read or spell words they have not memorized. Students who struggle with sight word recall are overly reliant upon phonics. They have difficulty committing letter patterns and whole words to long-term visual memory. These students must sound out almost every word they encounter; therefore, they have a very slow and labored reading style. Spelling is overly phonetic because even the most common words are not memorized. For example, *of* may be spelled *uv* and *was* as *woz*. Students with the most severe reading difficulties may have deficits in both areas.

Students diagnosed with dyslexia can overcome their "difficulty with words" in two different ways. They can work to decrease skill deficits through specialized intervention strategies. They can also take advantage of today's technology, such as a laptop computer and an MP3 player for written assignments. These tools can mitigate difficulties and allow students with reading and writing delays to function adequately in their classrooms. With the cooperation of a creative and flexible teacher, the classroom can be a place of comfort and success for students who face the challenge of dyslexia.

Contrary to popular belief, people with dyslexia do not read "backwards," though many dyslexics do a variety of other interesting things. Here are eight famous dyslexics and their stories:

1. Henry Winkler

With his greased hair, leather jacket, and jeans, Winkler was the epitome of cool during his decade-long run as Fonzie on "Happy Days." If only Winkler, who was diagnosed with dyslexia when he was 35. "One of the effects was being unable to make my brain understand how to coordinate the clutch, throttle and brake on a motorcycle," Winkler said of his dyslexia in 2008. "There was just no way I could figure it out, so I never got to ride that cool Harley-Davidson." Instead, the motorcycle was mounted on a wood base with wheels for all of Winkler's riding scenes. Winkler was ridiculed for his dyslexia as a child -- his parents called him Dumb Dog -- so it's no surprise that he's become an activist for others with dyslexia. Since 2003, he has published more than a dozen books about a fictional 10-year-old boy with dyslexia named Hank Zipzer. The books have sold more than 20 million copies.

2. Whoopi Goldberg

Goldberg dropped out of high school, became addicted to drugs, married her drug counselor, and

had a child by the time she was 19. She wouldn't be diagnosed with dyslexia until years later. "You don't want to be retarded all your life," Goldberg told *Ebony* magazine in 1991. "I was retarded for a good part of mine, according to all the paperwork, and I just couldn't handle it." Goldberg eventually got her life on track, catching her big break when Steven Spielberg, a dyslexic himself, cast her in "The Color Purple." "I knew I wasn't stupid, and I knew I wasn't dumb," Goldberg said in 1994. "...If you read to me, I could tell you everything that you read. They didn't know what it was."

3. Bruce Jenner

Jenner, who won a gold medal in the decathlon at the 1976 Summer Olympics and was diagnosed with dyslexia at a young age, has often described his dyslexia as his greatest gift. "If I hadn't been dyslexic, I wouldn't have won the Games because it made me special, being dyslexic," he said in 2004. "If I would have been average like everybody else, I wouldn't have needed sports at a young age. I always tell dyslexic kids, 'You may think of this as a big problem now. But it may be your greatest gift. It makes you special. Now your job is to find out what you're good at and go for it.'" Jenner has helped preach this message through his role as a motivational speaker and as the host of *Demystifying Dyslexia*, a documentary that describes modern learning tools for people with dyslexia.

4. Ozzy Osbourne

MTV's hit reality show "The Osbournes" was originally slated to have sub-titles because nobody could understand what Ozzy was saying. "Even I couldn't understand what I was talking about on television," Osbourne told *The Daily Telegraph*. Osbourne grew up a severe dyslexic and dropped out of high school, turning to music, drugs, and alcohol to occupy his mind and time. During a 2007 interview with the *London Evening Standard*, Osbourne explained why he's never read the Bible. "Have you ever tried to read that thing? I wouldn't have wanted to be alive in those days, when Adam lived to be, like, 1,000 years old. I can't do it, being dyslexic. By the time I finished page one, I'd be dead."

5. Cher

Cher dropped out of high school before launching her successful career and wasn't diagnosed as dyslexic until she was 30. The diagnosis came only after she arranged medical tests for her daughter, who was struggling in elementary school. "I'm a terrible reader," Cher said in 1985. "I don't write letters. Numbers and I have absolutely no relationship. I can dial a phone OK, as long as it's not long-distance. I write the first letter of the word, and my mind races to the last letter. I see words and jumble them together. I see great billboards, billboards no one has ever invented."

6. Jay Leno

The former host of "The Tonight Show" attributed the drive and perseverance he needed to succeed in comedy to his dyslexia. Leno, who received poor grades throughout elementary school, has said that one of his favorite career moments was calling up his fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Simon, 40 years after getting a C- on a paper about astronaut John Glenn and asking him to watch him interview Glenn. "I had Glenn sign a thing for Mr. Simon and I got my paper upgraded from a C- to an A," said Leno, who received a B.A. in speech therapy from Emerson University.

7. Agatha Christie

A number of accomplished writers are believed to have had dyslexia, including Hans Christian Anderson, Lewis Carroll, W.B. Yeats, and Christie, the British mystery author and playwright. "I, myself, was always recognized...as the 'slow one' in the family," Christie reportedly once said. "It was quite true, and I knew it and accepted it. Writing and spelling were always terribly

difficult for me. My letters were without originality. I was...an extraordinarily bad speller and have remained so until this day."

8. Charles Schwab

Charles Schwab prefers oral communication to the written word, which is perhaps one of the reasons his firm's marketing campaign suggests that you "Talk to Chuck" rather than write to him. Schwab, who wasn't officially diagnosed with dyslexia until he was 40, graduated with a degree in economics from Stanford in 1959. "The first two years [at Stanford] I struggled because there were so many subjects," said Schwab, who read the comic-book versions of classic books to get by. "I flunked English twice. They just passed me through the third time. I got an F in French. I had a tough enough time with the first language. When I came out of public high school I thought I could charm my teachers. I found out in college I couldn't."

In celebration of National Dyslexia Awareness Month, The READ Center in Knoxville, a division of Parent-Child Services Group Inc., is promoting awareness of dyslexia and related language-based learning disorders by offering free dyslexia consultations at their Kingston Pike location October 26-28. Appointments are limited and by reservation only, so call 865-766-8504 to schedule.