

Dysgraphia

You probably hear a lot about learning and attention issues like Dyslexia and ADHD. But chances are you don't hear much about dysgraphia. If your child has trouble expressing himself in writing, you may want to learn more about this condition. Writing difficulties are common among children and can stem from a variety of learning and attention issues. By learning what to watch for, you can be proactive about getting help for your child. There's no cure or easy fix for dysgraphia. But there are strategies and therapies that can help children improve their writing. This will help them thrive in school and anywhere else; expressing themselves in writing is important.



What is dysgraphia?

Dysgraphia is a condition that causes trouble with written expression. The term comes from the Greek words dys ("impaired") and graphia ("making letter forms by hand"). Dysgraphia is a brain-based issue. It's not the result of a child being lazy. For many children with dysgraphia, just holding a pencil and organizing letters on a line is difficult. Their handwriting tends to be messy. Many children struggle with spelling and putting thoughts on paper. These and other writing tasks, like putting ideas into language that is organized, stored and then retrieved from memory, may all add to struggles with written expression. Some school psychologists and teachers use the term dysgraphia as a type of shorthand to mean "a disorder in written expression." It's important to understand that slow or sloppy writing isn't necessarily a sign that your child isn't trying hard enough. Writing requires a complex set of fine motor and language processing skills. For children with dysgraphia, the writing process is harder and slower. Without help, a child with dysgraphia may have a difficult time in school.

How common is dysgraphia?

Dysgraphia is not a familiar term. But symptoms of dysgraphia are not uncommon, especially in young children who are starting to learn how to write. If a child continues to struggle with writing despite plenty of practice and corrective feedback, it's a good idea to take a closer look to see whether dysgraphia is an underlying cause.

What causes dysgraphia?

Experts aren't sure what causes dysgraphia and other issues of written expression. Normally, the brain takes in information through the senses and stores it to use later.

Before a person starts writing, he/she retrieves information from his/her short- or long-term memory and gets organised to begin writing. In a person with dysgraphia, experts believe one or both of the next steps in the writing process go off track:

1. Organising information that is stored in memory
2. Getting words onto paper by handwriting or typing them.

This results in a written product that's hard to read and filled with errors. And most important, it does not convey what the child knows and what he intended to write.

Working Memory may also play a role in dysgraphia. A child may have trouble with what's called "orthographic coding." This is the ability to store unfamiliar written words in the working memory. As a result, he/she may have a hard time remembering how to print or write a letter or a word. There may also be a genetic link, with dysgraphia running in families.

What are the symptoms of dysgraphia?

The characteristics of dysgraphia fall into six categories: visual-spatial, fine motor, language processing, spelling/handwriting, grammar, and organisation of language. A child may have dysgraphia if his/her writing skills lag behind those of his/her peers and he/she has at least some of these symptoms:

Visual-Spatial Difficulties

- Has trouble with shape-discrimination and letter spacing
- Has trouble organizing words on the page from left to right
- Writes letters that go in all directions, and letters and words that run together on the page.
- Has a hard time writing on a line and inside margins.
- Has trouble reading maps, drawing or reproducing a shape.
- Copies text slowly

Fine Motor Difficulties

- Has trouble holding a pencil correctly, tracing, cutting food, tying shoes, doing puzzles, texting and keyboarding
- Is unable to use scissors well or to colour inside the lines
- Holds his wrist, arm, body or paper in an awkward position when writing

Language Processing Issues

- Has trouble getting ideas down on paper quickly
- Has trouble understanding the rules of games
- Has a hard time following direction
- Loses his/her train of thought

Spelling Issues/Handwriting Issues

- Has a hard time understanding spelling rules
- Has trouble telling if a word is misspelled
- Can spell correctly orally but makes spelling errors in writing
- Spells words incorrectly and in many different ways
- Has trouble using spell-check; and when he/she does, he/she doesn't recognize the correct word
- Mixes upper- and lowercase letters

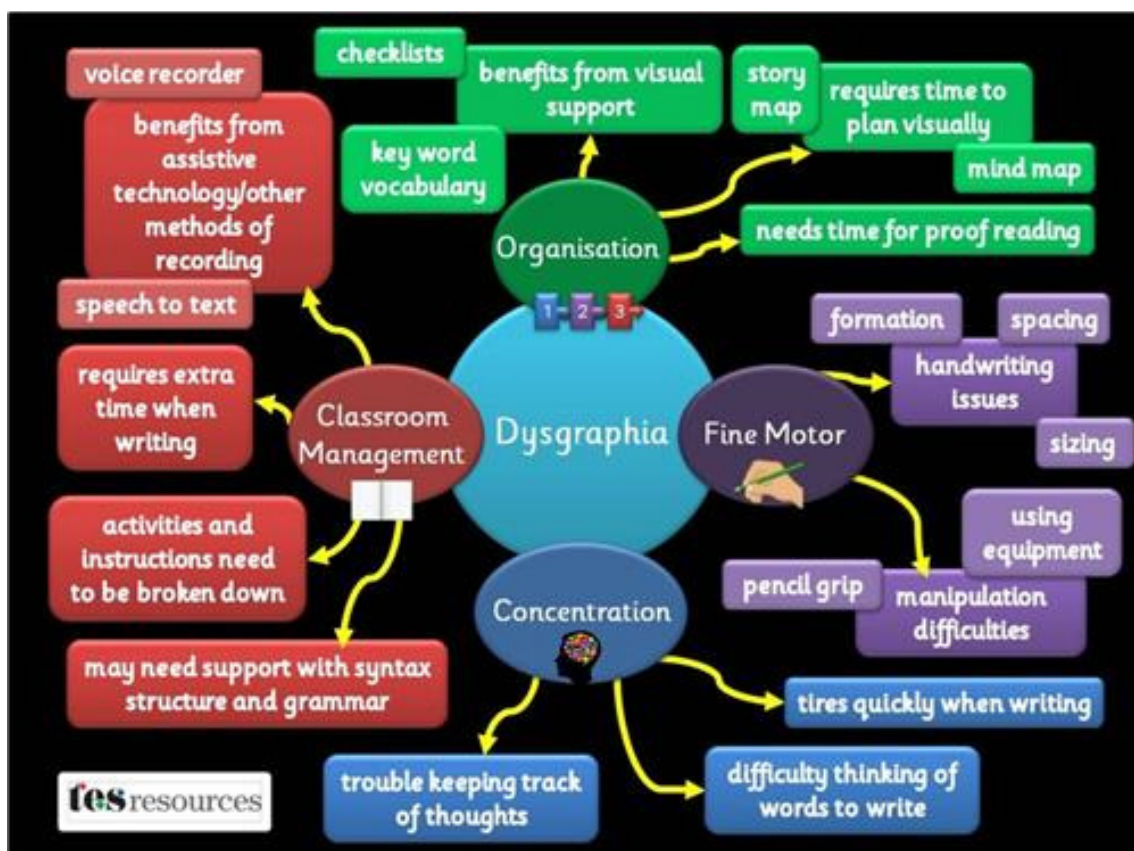
- Blends printing and cursive
- Has trouble reading his own writing
- Avoids writing
- Gets tired or cramped handed when he/she writes
- Erases a lot

Grammar and Usage Problems

- Doesn't know how to use punctuation
- Overuses commas and mixes up verb tenses.
- Doesn't start sentences with a capital letter.
- Doesn't write in complete sentences but writes in a list format.
- Writes sentences that "run on forever".

Organising of Written Language

- Has trouble telling a story and may start in the middle
- Leaves out important facts and details, or provides too much information
- Assumes others know what she/he's talking about
- Uses vague descriptions
- Writes jumbled sentences
- Never gets to the point, or makes the same point over and over
- Is better at conveying ideas when speaking



The **symptoms of dysgraphia** also vary depending on a child's age. Signs generally appear when children are first learning to write:

- Preschool children may be hesitant to write and draw and say that they hate colouring.
- School-age children may have illegible handwriting that can be a mix of cursive and print. They may have trouble writing on a line and may print letters that are uneven in size and height. Some children also may need to say words out loud when writing or have trouble putting their thoughts on paper.
- Teenagers may write in simple sentences. Their writing may have many more grammatical mistakes than the writing of other kids their age.

What skills are affected by dysgraphia?

The impact of dysgraphia on a child's development varies, depending on the symptoms and their severity. Here are some common areas of struggle for kids with dysgraphia:

- Academic: Kids with dysgraphia can fall behind in schoolwork because it takes them so much longer to write. Taking notes is a challenge. They may get discouraged and avoid writing assignments.
- Basic life skills: Some children's fine motor skills are weak. They find it hard to do everyday tasks, such as buttoning shirts and making a simple list.
- Social-emotional: Children with dysgraphia may feel frustrated or anxious about their academic and life challenges. If they haven't been identified, teachers may criticize them for being "lazy" or "sloppy." This may add to their stress. Their low self-esteem, frustration and communication problems can also make it hard to socialise with other children.

How is dysgraphia diagnosed?

Signs of dysgraphia often appear in early primary school. But the signs may not become apparent until middle school or later. Sometimes the signs go unnoticed entirely. As with all learning and attention issues, the earlier signs of dysgraphia are recognized and addressed, the better.

Dysgraphia is typically identified by licensed psychologists (including school psychologists) who specialise in learning disabilities. They will give your child academic assessments and writing tests. These tests measure fine motor skills and written expression production. During testing, the professional may ask your child to write sentences and copy text. They'll assess not only your child's finished product, but also his writing process. This includes posture, position, pencil grip, fatigue and whether there are signs of cramping. The tester may also test fine motor speed with finger tapping and wrist turning. Special education teachers and school psychologists can help determine the emotional or academic impact the condition may be having on your child.

Which conditions are related to dysgraphia?

Many children with dysgraphia have other learning issues. These conditions, which can also affect written expression, include:

- Dyslexia: This learning issue makes it harder to read. Dyslexia can also make writing and spelling a challenge.
- Language disorders can cause a variety of problems with written and spoken language. Children may have trouble learning new words, using correct grammar and putting their thoughts into words.

- Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) causes problems with attention, impulsivity and hyperactivity.
- Dyspraxia is a condition that causes poor physical coordination and motor skills. It can cause trouble with fine motor skills, which can affect physical task of writing and printing.

What can be done at home for dysgraphia?

There are many things you can do at home to help your child who has dysgraphia. Here are some strategies to consider:

- Observe and take notes: Taking notes about your child's writing difficulties (including when they occur) will help you find patterns and triggers. Then you can develop strategies to work around them. Your notes will also be useful when you talk to your child's doctor, teachers and anyone else helping your child.
- Teach your child writing warm-up exercises. Before writing (or even as a break when writing), your child can do a stress-reliever exercise. He could shake his hands quickly or rub them together to relieve tension.
- Play games that strengthen motor skills. Playing with clay can strengthen hand muscles. A squeeze ball can improve hand and wrist muscles and coordination. It's best not to try too many strategies at once. Instead, add one at a time so you know what is (or isn't) working. Praise (**see Power of Praise below**) your child for effort and genuine achievement. This can motivate him to keep building skills. Many kids overcome and work around their writing difficulties. With support, your child can, too.



What can make the journey easier?

Whether you're just learning about dysgraphia or your journey is well underway, this can help you find support for your child.

- Know your child's issues. If your child hasn't been identified with dysgraphia, consider having him/her assessed by a professional. Knowing which issues your child has is the first step toward getting the best help.
- See it through your child's eye. Get a better sense of what your child is experiencing; do research and seek professional help. The more you understand, the more you can help.
- Get advice from experts to help navigate behaviour and emotional issues that may come up along the way.
- Difficulty with writing doesn't need to hold your child back. Explore and experiment with different tools and strategies. Eventually, you'll find ways to help your child succeed.

Power of Praise

Praise can have a powerful effect on your child. Acknowledging his efforts and achievements can boost his self-confidence and help motivate him to keep trying hard and looking for effective strategies to overcome his challenges. But some kinds of praise are more helpful than others. In fact, research has shown that some kinds of praise can backfire and make kids doubt their abilities. For example, it may seem like a good idea to tell your child “You’re incredibly smart!” or “Great job!” But there are more effective ways to build his self-esteem.

Two Kinds of Praise There are two main types of praise: *personal praise* and *effort-based praise*.

Personal praise highlights your child’s natural ability, such as his/her intelligence or his/her talent for playing the piano. It’s the kind of praise parents often use to express affection. For example, you might say to your child, “You’re such a good writer” or “You have such a beautiful singing voice.” But be careful with this kind of praise. It could actually undermine your child’s confidence. Personal praise tends to focus on the talents your child was born with. If she/he believes he arrived pre-packaged with certain abilities, he/she might think he doesn’t have the ability to improve in those areas. Personal praise can make kids less willing to risk trying new things for fear of revealing just how little talent they have. Sweeping statements about your child’s abilities are not as helpful as specific statements about the things he/she does. It’s better to focus on his efforts.

Effort based praise emphasizes what he can control, such as how much time he spends on a project or which strategies he uses. That’s why effort-based praise such as “I am so impressed at how hard you worked on your science project” is more empowering than “Wow, you’re good at science!” **Reasons to Love Effort-Based Praise** Kids with learning and attention issues need to be reminded that the process of working toward a goal is just as important as reaching the goal. Your child may need to try several different strategies before he successfully completes a task.

That’s yet another reason why it’s a good idea to use **effort-based praise**. Look for opportunities to compliment the way your child is approaching a task rather than placing all your emphasis on the end result, which may not turn out how he had hoped. Effort-based praise lets you tell your child you value not only him/her, but also his/her willingness to take risks and his/her determination to work toward his goals. For example, let’s say your child’s goal is to get to school on time. There are smaller steps along the way: waking up, brushing his teeth, getting dressed and having his backpack ready. By recognizing the steps your child does well, you can help him/her see that he/she is capable of reaching the overall goal. You can also show him/her, he/she can achieve it through effort and planning.

Key Components of Effort-Based Praise Effort-based praise can be a great way to motivate your child. To maximize its effectiveness, be sure to include these components:

- **Sincerity:** “Thank you for all of the time you put into making this cake” is better than “This is the most delicious cake I’ve ever tasted!” Insincere praise can make your child wonder if you think she/he’s not capable of doing any better.

Overpraising can also make her/him wonder if you don't know what really good cake tastes like.

- **Specificity:** *"I like how you double-checked all your math problems"* is better than "Good job on your homework." Good, descriptive praise takes the guesswork out of what you're praising. This can help reinforce the positive behaviour you want your child to repeat.
- **Realistic standards:** *"Your watercolour technique is really coming along nicely; did you use any new techniques in this painting?"* is better than *"This is such a fantastic painting. Someday you'll have your own art gallery!"* Try to praise your child's efforts in a way that emphasizes growth and learning from mistakes. This can help avoid putting too much pressure on him/her to succeed the next time.

What to Watch Out For

Effort-based praise is the most helpful when it tells your child what she/he's doing well compared to herself/himself, not to other people. Praise that focuses on outperforming peers can end up reducing your child's motivation, especially if she/he stops coming out on top. That's why saying *"I like the way you had your backpack ready to go at the door this morning"* is more empowering than *"Good for you! You were ready before your sister."*

The other big thing to watch out for is inflated praise. You might think that if your child does something well, telling her/him she/he's doing it really well will give her/his self-esteem an extra boost. But researchers have found that inflated praise can actually make kids less likely to take on new challenges because they think they'll have to meet really high standards. That's why it's a good idea to stick with genuine praise about your child's efforts.

