

Dyslexia and older people

Introduction

There has been very little research undertaken into the specific issues around older people and dyslexia. Recognising dyslexia in older people is extremely important as not only can it affect their literacy and numeracy skills but it may also affect their quality of life, independent living and decision-making.

This briefing sheet aims to raise the awareness of people working with older adults, to the possible impact of dyslexia on this age group. It will be of interest to those in the workplace, care settings, voluntary organizations and providers of adult education and training.

Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty, or learning difference, that affects many aspects of life and learning. There is no one, definitive definition of dyslexia and the different definitions give greater or lesser weight to various aspects of the syndrome.

The word 'dyslexia' comes from the Greek. It means 'difficulty with words'.

Many definitions of dyslexia focus on the negative aspects; deficits and difficulties that are experienced. However, other definitions focus to a greater degree on the associated talents and skills that people with dyslexia often exhibit.

People with dyslexia may experience a range of the following difficulties with differing degrees of severity:

- Difficulties with literacy (e.g. reading, comprehending, spelling, handwriting, structuring writing)
- Difficulties with numeracy (e.g. learning times tables, getting numbers in the wrong order, confusing numerical signs)
- Poor organisation
- Directional confusions
- Difficulties with sequencing information
- Poor sense of time
- Problems making skills become “automatic”
- Difficulty taking in oral information
- Problems with pronouncing some words
- Problems finding the right words (word retrieval)
- Difficulty learning and applying rules eg punctuation rules

Not all people with dyslexia experience all of these difficulties. Everyone is different; people with dyslexia may also experience some of these strengths, again to differing degrees:

- Intuition
- Visualisation, including in 3D
- Creativity
- Seeing the whole picture
- Making links between things, seeing connections
- Problem solving
- Synthesising information
- Verbal communication

Older people with dyslexia may have difficulties accessing services and benefits, which are vital to their quality of life. This lack of access when combined with mobility or financial constraints, may lead to isolation or exclusion. For example, problems with the following;

- Official literature
- Form filling
- Direct payments for care
- Direct payments for pension
- Pin codes
- Utilities
- Bills
- Banking
- Text messaging
- Emailing
- Use of the internet

“Exclusion can be particularly acute for older people. One in five – 1.2 million – older people suffer from ‘multiple exclusion’ – and miss out on the basics of life. Effective public services can make a real difference – making later life a time of opportunity, not vulnerability.”¹

What causes dyslexia?

The causes of dyslexia are not fully understood. However, there is strong evidence to suggest biological differences between the brains of dyslexic and non-dyslexic people. These differences are small but significant and affect the processing of visual, motor and auditory information, particularly in relation to language, as well as the ability to make skills “automatic”.

Dyslexia tends to run in families and adults may become aware of their own dyslexia for the first time when younger family members are identified as having dyslexia. There is growing evidence of a genetic basis for dyslexia. There is no “dyslexia gene”; rather, several chromosomes have been identified as important, and this may account for the wide variety in symptoms and severity from person to person. These biological and genetic differences mean that information, especially language, is processed differently.

Issues for older people with dyslexia

At present, the effects of aging on dyslexia are under-researched. Dr. Rebecca Thompson, a psychology research fellow at the Research Institute for the Care of the Elderly at St. Martin's Hospital, Bath reports that, "Little is known about the effect that dyslexia has on the older adult and this clearly is an area of research that warrants further investigation, to identify changes in the adult with dyslexia that can be considered 'normal' age-related decline and to establish how these changes differ from the age-related changes observed in the non-dyslexic older adult."²

In addition to thinking about the effects of aging on dyslexia, work in this area also needs to take into account the fact that many older adults may never have had their dyslexia identified because at the time when they were being educated, it was a little known and little diagnosed condition. They have therefore had to develop coping strategies to deal with their lives, but as you can see from the sample of learners' quotes on the following pages, these people feel that they are 'missing out' because of their lack of literacy.

Most adults are assessed for dyslexia and receive support either through participating in learning, or in connection with their workplace. Older adults who are engaged in learning tend to take part in informal or community based learning activities. Whilst support for learners with dyslexia in Further and Higher Education is relatively well developed, the support available in informal and community settings is less so. As a result older adults may find it more difficult to access dyslexia support services, including assessment.

Getting assessed

The assessment of dyslexia in adults, and older adults, can be complex because many adults with dyslexia have developed coping strategies, which may effectively compensate for any difficulties they experience. In addition, older adults may have reduced visual and auditory acuity, as well as medical conditions that may affect their processing of information and their memory. All of these need to be accounted for during the assessment process.

Shirley Cramer, Chief Executive of Dyslexia Action, National Council Member, The Learning and Skills Council, reported that, "The consequences of years of failed policies for children with dyslexia are that there are hundreds of thousands of adults with dyslexia who have never been identified. For these adults, further education through colleges or work-based learning is their second chance and it is critical that there are appropriate services available to enable them to succeed. Colleges and other providers need to have a robust screening system to identify these adults with hidden disabilities and appropriate teaching strategies and tools to ensure that the person does not experience failure again. Understanding the 'baggage' that goes along with these difficulties is another important aspect of the support."³

It is essential that learning for leisure is available for older people as a 'gateway' to further learning. The Government stated in 'Opportunity Age', "...we have given a commitment to safeguard the continuing availability of a wide range of learning for leisure, personal interest and community development. We expect older people to be significant beneficiaries of this safeguard."⁴

Emotional impact

Some older learners' experiences, demonstrating the impact addressing their dyslexia has had on their lives, (expressed in their own words).

"I could not read when I left school so I taught myself to read; as a result of attending family literacy at school I found out that I was dyslexic. This was a relief because it felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Finding out about the dyslexia I became determined to improve my literacy and joined several classes at school and college. I have overcome my difficulties because of the tutors' encouragement and reassurance.

I wanted to be able to write properly before I went to my grave. I have been able to write my own Christmas cards for the first time, it was a lovely feeling, it really felt good.

I have been able to help my grandsons, and now I am going into a local primary school to help children to read and gain confidence.

It means an awful lot. It means that I can learn more for myself. I can write more and have the confidence to pick up a pen. I want to do more. Learning becomes infectious."

65 year old – female - Senior Learner of the Year nominee 2006.

"I was unable to read and write and, at the age of 60, I decided I couldn't carry on like that. I couldn't go shopping properly or go to the library, for example. I was unable to function normally. If I couldn't find someone to help me with letters or bills, I just threw them in the bin. I never really did overcome my difficulties before I came to college.

I have enjoyed meeting new people within the college. My learning has made me much more confident. For the first time in my life I can express myself in writing. When I came to college I said I wanted to write a book about myself. I have now done this. Although the book itself is only small, it has been a major achievement for me. I can also now do things like buy a T.V. guide and see what will be on TV. Little things like this make all the difference in the world to me."

60 year old – male - Senior Learner of the Year nominee 2005.

"I wanted to join an art class at the Adult Education Centre, when the young lady told me to fill in form, I asked the young lady if she could help me as I am not very good at reading and writing. She told me why not join the adult education class for reading and writing. So I join the literacy and numeracy class and that how it all started. Now I am glad that I take that young lady's advice.

Adult learning as meant a lot to me, and help me in a meaner way, if you had sent me this form over three years ago, I would not have been able to read the form or answer any of the questions in writing. I would just have taken one look at it and put it in the bin."

65 year old – male - Senior Learner of the Year nominee 2005.

Research

Previous research on older adults and dyslexia has mainly been medical, often focusing on acquired dyslexia. There is little research into how dyslexia impacts upon older peoples' lives and learning. We think that the following questions could usefully be addressed;

- How do diseases associated with ageing impact on dyslexia, particularly memory and concentration?
- Do older people have different barriers to accessing dyslexia services than other adults?
- What is the range of teaching and other support available for older adult learners with dyslexia?
- Do older people need different assessment approaches to other adults with dyslexia?
- What is the impact of dyslexia on older adults' attitudes to and experiences of learning?
- What impact does dyslexia have on older people's quality of life, and confidence, if they were not diagnosed earlier in life, but were given a different label?

References

1. Social Exclusion Unit. (2006) **A sure start to later life : ending inequalities for older people.** Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.
2. Thompson, R. (2004) **Understanding dyslexia in the memory clinic.** The Journal of DementiaCare. Vol. 12, No. 6, Nov/Dec 2004. ISSN 13518372
3. Cramer, S. (2005) **Dyslexic adults – a story of lost potential.** www.dyslexia-inst.org.uk/news43.htm
4. HM Government. (2005) **Opportunity age : meeting the challenges of ageing in the 21st century.** www.dwp.gov.uk/opportunity_age/

Useful resources

Access for all. Department for Education and Skills, 2002. ISBN 1853386952. Email: dfes@prolog.uk.com. Written as a companion to the adult literacy and numeracy core curricula, this suggests teaching approaches and materials that may be used with learners from Entry 1 to Level 2 who have a disability or learning difficulty, including dyslexia. The dyslexia section in the introduction is very clear and easy to understand, and the teaching suggestions within the document are an excellent resource.

Developmental dyslexia in adults: a research review. NRDC, 2004. ISBN 0354649281. Website: www.nrdc.org.uk. This document reviews academic research about dyslexia in adults.

Dyslexia assessment materials. DfES, 2004. ISBN 7777084372. This is a pack of assessment materials with tutor notes, designed to assist Skills for Life tutors in devising appropriate ILPs for dyslexic learners. The assessments are mapped to the Core Curricula. They do not, however, provide the means to diagnose dyslexia.

Dyslexia demystified. Newsletter. Produced by NIACE, 2005. Contact Emma Tierney, 0116 2042826. One-off newsletter.

A framework for understanding dyslexia. Department for Education and Skills, 2004. ISBN 1844781593. Email: dfes@prolog.uk.com. This document, written for a non-specialist audience, collects together information on the key theoretical

NIACE's work on dyslexia

Access for All

NIACE runs the national training for Access for All (2002).

Framework for Understanding Dyslexia

NIACE and the Learning and Skills Development Agency led the project that culminated in the development of the Framework for Understanding Dyslexia (2004).

The Development Officer for dyslexia is **Rachel Davies**. Current areas of interest are supporting people with dyslexia in the workplace and the issues around older learners and dyslexia. Contact the Literacy Language & Numeracy Team at: 21 De Montfort Street, Leicester, LE1 7GE. Tel: 0116 2044218, Fax: 0116 2042823. Email: rachel.davies@niace.org.uk

Useful contacts

Adult Dyslexia Organisation

Ground Floor, Sector House
Minet Road, Loughborough Estate
London, SW9 7TP

Tel: 020 7924 9559 (helpline)

Website: www.adult-dyslexia.org

Work relates to adults with dyslexia (including in employment), runs support groups and provides a helpline, provides training and tuition, lobbies on behalf of adults with dyslexia.

British Dyslexia Association

98 London Road
Reading, RG1 5AU

Tel: 0118 966 8271

Website: www.bdadyslexia.org.uk

Provides advice to teachers and employers on dyslexia issues, provides training for teachers, has a helpline for individuals with dyslexia, local associations, and approves specialist training qualifications for teachers.

Dyslexia Action

Park House, Wick Road

Egham, TW20 0HH

Tel: 01784 222300

Website: www.dyslexiaaction.org.uk

Email: info@dyslexiaaction.org.uk

Provides training for teachers and tuition for individuals with dyslexia, publishes research and materials about dyslexia.

International Dyslexia Association

Website: www.interdys.org. Based in the USA.

LLU+

London South Bank University

103 Borough Road

London SE1 0AA

Tel: 020 815 6290

Website: www.lsbu.ac.uk/lluplus

Provides training for teachers of adult students with dyslexia, and consultancy.

This is the seventy-eighth in a series of briefing sheets, which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues. Many earlier titles in the series are still available including:

77. Funding support for adult with dyslexia
76. What is dyslexia?
67. Adult education working in care settings
66. Promoting literacy, language and numeracy programmes
65. Learning and Skills Council funding for literacy, language and numeracy
64. Embedding literacy, language and numeracy
63. Promoting financial capability provision for older people

Requests for briefing sheets in other formats, such as large print are welcomed, we will be pleased to consider your request. Copies of this and other sheets are available from NIACE

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They are also available on the website at www.niace.org.uk/information

NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties, or insufficient resources. Registered charity number 1002775; Company registration number 2603322.