

# Discard the Myths



Learning Ally



The institutions that you will come across and the people that you meet have created a set of expectations to define dyslexia in their own minds. Many of them are untrue. Here's a list of the most common myths I've come across, and why they are false and, when left unchecked, harmful.

## Myth #1: Including Dyslexic People Lowers Classroom Standards

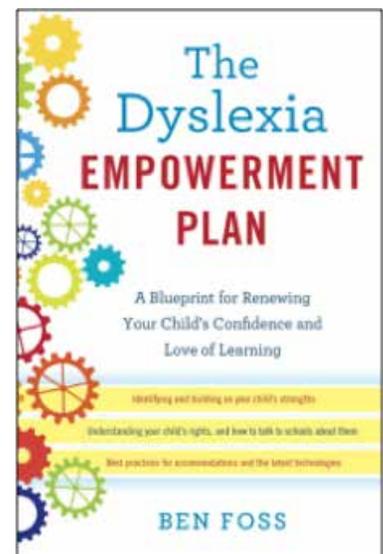
Many people in positions of authority see their role as maintaining high standards for an institution or a profession. While they might nod while you talk about accommodating dyslexia, they don't have any vested interest in changing their approach. It's not "the right way," according to them, and they likely will only pay lip service to change.

The teacher who insists that giving five hours of homework a night to seventh graders works because 25 percent of her students go on to great colleges is the equivalent of a medieval doctor who bleeds people to cure them. Yes, some children will get into college, and some of those patients got better, but the long hours of homework and the bleeding did not cause the successful outcomes.

If you measure students on their resiliency or their proactivity, rather than their spelling, you would be much more likely to pick true winners. If anyone ever suggests to you that having your dyslexic child in a mainstream classroom means that the school's standards are being lowered, you can point out that you are trying to find better ways to predict outcomes for everyone and that the current standards focused on rote learning are often the problem.

---

From the Book, THE DYSLEXIA EMPOWERMENT PLAN by Ben Foss.  
Copyright © 2013 by Ben Foss. Reprinted by arrangement with Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House. All rights reserved.





## Myth #2: Your Child Can Be Fixed



It is true that some people who have difficulty with text because of dyslexia do improve their reading over time. But they will never be in the top half of eye-reading (as opposed to ear reading or finger reading; i.e., audiobooks or Braille) ability compared to the mainstream. I can think and communicate with the best of my class from graduate school; I just cannot spell graduate half the time. Some people claim they “used to be dyslexic” or “I am a little bit dyslexic.” The key challenge here is that people who feel the need to distance themselves from dyslexia are still wrestling with shame. Shame is a feeling that you are unworthy because of something you are. It is different from guilt, which is feeling bad about something you did, such as stealing or cheating. It thrives on hiding.

Because of technological advances, including books as MP3s; voice commands, such as Siri, on smart phones; and dedicated audio devices such as the service available from Learning Ally and others, problems with eye reading or spelling perfectly are no longer a major barrier to success. If your child is dyslexic, at some point he or she will find that attempting to read the way non-dyslexics do is grossly ineffective. However, with the right classroom accommodations your child is going to learn; how she does it may just look different from what everyone else in the class is doing.

## Myth #3: Reading Is the Best Way to Learn

Humans are naturals at spoken language and have been for tens of thousands of years. Yet text as a representation of language and as a learning system is only about five thousand years old. It is really only in the last sixty years, since the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, that we have had a belief that all children should be given an equal chance at education and reading in any form.

When I come across someone invested (emotionally or traditionally) in books as the best way to learn, I usually like to point to the blind as an example of where their logic drops off. If someone lost her vision at eighteen, would we automatically tell her she is not going to college because the blind can’t learn at that level? No, we would get her access to the needed materials through Braille or audiobooks. Would it be easier if



she could read with her eyes? Definitely. But that is a result of a context. Stairs are no better a way to get into a building than a ramp, but for centuries, we made stairs the mainstream way. We all agree we must have ramps for public buildings and businesses. We need to extend this flexibility to other areas of life as well.

I fully believe that all dyslexic children should try to learn to read in the mainstream way and should be given world-class instruction in doing that, including the Orton-Gillingham system of reading. But it is also important to introduce ear reading and other forms of learning at the same time.

The critical point is that there is damage being done to a dyslexic student's psyche if you frame reading with your eyes as learning and learning as reading with your eyes. Imagine if we focused all of school on singing. Some students would take to this and thrive. Others would struggle. If we kept telling all children that they had to be good singers, we would be slowly traumatizing the poor singers into thinking they were bad people.

#### **Myth #4:** **Your Child Isn't Maturing at the Same Rate as Others**

One of the most frequent retorts that people who are either unfamiliar with dyslexia or intentionally trying to delay access to services will use to rebuff your request for help is to tell you that your child is simply maturing slowly: "He'll learn to read just like everybody else; just give it a few months." While it is true that children develop the skill of reading at different ages, dyslexia is a response to a biological difference in his brain, which has nothing to do with maturity.

#### **Myth #5:** **It's Best to Keep These Problems Hidden**

Until I learned to integrate my dyslexia into the rest of my life, I was constantly lying to the world and to myself, doing damage as a result. Early on, I developed elaborate methods of camouflage to hide who I was. At one point, I even won a contest to make a bookmark at my local library, and I had never read a book! Fast-forward to when I was fifteen. I was trying to make the varsity soccer team because I knew it would gain me the kind of praise I wasn't regularly getting in the



classroom. During a tryout scrimmage, I got caught too far off my line, and a striker lofted a soft kick up over my head and into the goal. I was furious with myself. While the play moved back down to the other end of the pitch, I stood there so angry I could scream. Being a cool kid—gone. Getting my name in the paper—gone. Never being bullied—gone. Getting out of class early for games—gone. I could feel the earth crumbling beneath my feet and me falling into an abyss. Once no one was looking at me, I turned around and punched my hand full force into the goalpost. The impact snapped the knucklebone on the ring finger on my right hand. I pulled my glove off and inspected the situation: the bone was pushing up, stretching the skin. I put the glove back on. This was a way out of the shame I felt. I walked down the field and said, quite calmly, “Hey, Coach, I think I hurt myself on the last play.” As I was whisked off to the emergency room, I knew what I was doing: I had found a physical reason to explain why I was not good at something. As wildly misplaced as my strategy was, at the time I was proud I had hurt myself to protect my high school reputation.

Your children will be inclined to do things like this, taking risks small and large that allow them to feel powerful or included, because for them it feels like life or death. You and your child will be much happier if you can get over the notion that dyslexia is best kept secret and instead tell people what is really going on with your child and look for ways to rely on his or her strengths.

## **Myth #6: Dyslexia Is the Fault of Bad Parenting**

Dyslexia is not traced to eating the wrong things during pregnancy, or waiting until nursery school to familiarize your child with the alphabet. However, if you are asking yourself whether you have the same dyslexia-predisposing genes as your kids, the answer is yes, unless of course your child was adopted. There are rare cases where a brain injury can cause difficulty with reading, but this is not the case for the vast majority of dyslexic kids. As someone once said to me, “You don’t get dyslexia from drinking the water.”

The key word in this myth is fault. Dyslexia is like your child’s height. Yes, your genes played a large role in it, but your actions did not do anything to cause it. And if you can find the sources of those dyslexia genes in the family, you can begin to create a community that will make your child feel less alone. The other element of the word fault that you need to get over is the notion that there is a problem in your child. There is



not. There is a problem in the environment your child lives in. Reading is one way to learn, but making it the only way is where the fault really lies.

### **Myth #7: Boys Are More Likely to Be Dyslexic than Girls**



There are a number of studies that show that the incidence of dyslexia in boys is the same as that in girls. One longitudinal study from Yale tracked more than four hundred students in Connecticut, demonstrating an equivalent incidence between the sexes. In another study in North Carolina, researchers tested children in first and third grades with the same result. There was even a study of two hundred identical and two hundred fraternal twins in Colorado; again, no gender skew was found.



It is true that there are more boys in special ed for dyslexia and other specific learning disabilities, but this is because boys who are frustrated by their difficulty in school tend to act out, and girls tend to clam up. Negative behavior increases the odds that a child is going to get identified, because the child is causing a problem that has to be addressed. For girls, because they tend to behave better, the teacher may think, "Jane keeps to herself, but that's fine." You will want your child to get the support he or she needs, so ignore this common misperception and find out what is really going on with your son or daughter.



### **Myth #8: Dyslexia Is a Difference, Not a Disability**

Dyslexia can be a gift or a disability, but this is dependent on the context you are in. If you are taking a spelling test, it is a disability. If you are using it as a strength to create art or a business, it is a gift. Many people will resist using the word disability to describe dyslexia. Some people don't like the word, believing that it implies that something is broken or seriously amiss, and will choose the word difference instead. Others will use a different euphemism, such as special or uniquely skilled. It would be much more effective to call it what it is and make the person feel comfortable about that reality rather than trying to sugarcoat it in the gauze of "specialness."

In a legal context it's critical to understand that dyslexia and specific learning disabilities are categorically included under the term disability. It is important for your child to maintain this designation when communicating with a school administration or with a



testing agency because of the legal rights and protections that come with the term. Separately, it's key to understand that the word disability is one that generations of people have fought to create. The Americans with Disabilities Act is not called the Americans with Differences Act.

I will grant that the term learning disability is not particularly attractive. To me, the difficulty is the use of the word learning. I do have a disability, but it is related to reading text. We already know that people who are dyslexic can learn quite well, thank you very much. There's no amount of money you could give me that would entice me to give up my dyslexic brain. This is in part because I like the way it thinks but it's also because I love the ways in which I can connect with other people in the community based on our shared experience. In time, I hope you will come to this view too.

### **Myth #9: Being Dyslexic Means You Are Stupid, Retarded, or Lazy**

As ignorant as this statement may sound, 80 percent of teachers associate the term learning disability with mental retardation. All people with disabilities should be treated with dignity and respect, but misperception is just not true of the typical dyslexic. The most malicious manifestation of this myth often occurs on the playground, where other kids will use the slur retard to describe children who are dyslexic. I'm in the camp that says once you get to know people and you hear them use retard or retarded to describe something, it's worth pointing out to them that term comes from mentally retarded, that that term is outdated even for people with developmental disabilities, and that in the context of dyslexia it is being used as an insult. Imagine if someone were to say, "What are you, a dumb Polack?" when another person made a mistake. In both cases, the slur should be dropped.

The other variation on this myth is that your child is lazy. When disability is non-obvious and you can't point to a specific physical issue that causes a problem, many people will assume that it's simply a matter of drive. Ironically, the student who is dyslexic is often working two or three times harder just to keep up with her peers. The double whammy is that the child arrives home exhausted from the day at school and has zero reserves left to do homework or participate in family activities. As a result, the child can be seen as lazy because he comes home and doesn't want to do anything. If you can provide your child with the accommodations and supports he needs in school, he'll have the energy to participate like any other kid.



## **Myth # 10: Dyslexia Is Always a Gift**

The inverse of “dyslexia means you’re stupid” is that dyslexia is a gift. Many people point to the fact that people who are dyslexic are highly creative. The reasoning goes that if you can help children understand that their dyslexia is a magic and special thing, they will embrace it. This does not work. It can be a gift if the context is right, but it is best to stay away from this characterization as a uniform description. When talking to your child, don’t try to gloss over the challenges that come with dyslexia. Not being able to eye read well is a real problem in mainstream society. The dyslexia itself is neither a curse nor a gift. It is just a trait.



## **Myth #11: Using Non-Text-Based Ways to Learn Is Just a Crutch**

Frequently parents will be concerned that if their child uses audio or kinesthetic learning at a young age, he will not learn to read because he has become reliant on a crutch. These alternative ways of accessing information are not a crutch; they are a ramp. Referring to alternative ways of learning as a “crutch” connotes that the person using those alternative strategies is broken; without the crutch, the logic goes, he would heal on his own and return to standard ways of doing things.



## **Myth #12: It’s better that I don’t tell my child that he is dyslexic.**

Frequently parents or teachers will choose to hide the fact that a child is dyslexic from the child. Sometimes the child figures it out for himself in some way, assuming that because it is being kept secret, he should be embarrassed about it. Worse the child might jump to the conclusion that he is stupid and that he will always be that way. When dealing with a young person, I always think that it is best to be both honest as well as give your child the full context of his dyslexia: both the social and scientific aspects that we’ve been discussing. It’s also important to go over the testing with him before it occurs and to explain at each step that he is smart and intelligent and cared for. As Steven Spielberg put it after he was identified as dyslexic, “it was the missing puzzle piece.”