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What is Dysgraphia?

What is Dysgraphia?

Dysgraphia is a specific learning disability that affects written expression.

Dysgraphia can appear as difficulties with spelling, poor handwriting and trouble putting thoughts on paper. Dysgraphia can be a language based, and/or non-language based disorder.

Many people have poor handwriting, but dysgraphia is more serious. Dysgraphia is a neurological disorder that generally appears when children are first learning to write. Experts are not sure what causes it, but early treatment can help prevent or reduce problems.

Writing requires a complex set of motor and information processing skills. Not only does it require the ability to organize and express ideas in the mind. It also requires the ability to get the muscles in the hands and fingers to form those ideas, letter by letter, on paper.

Dysgraphia that is caused by a language disorder may be characterised by the person having difficulty converting the sounds of language into written form (phonemes into graphemes), or knowing which alternate spelling to use for each sound. A person with dysgraphia may write their letters in reverse, have trouble recalling how letters are formed, or when to use lower or upper case letters. A person with dysgraphia may struggle to form written sentences with correct grammar and punctuation, with common problems including omitting words, words ordered incorrectly, incorrect verb and pronoun usage and word ending errors. People with dysgraphia may speak more easily and fluently than they write.

Non-language based dysgraphias are those caused by difficulties performing the controlled fine motor skills required to write. The generic term apraxia refers to a wide variety of motor skill deficits in which the voluntary execution of a skilled motor movement is impaired. Apraxia can involve a single controlled movement, or a sequence of movements, such as writing a single letter or entire words.

Some Signs of Dysgraphia

- Generally illegible writing
- Inconsistencies in writing, e.g. mixtures of printing and cursive writing, upper and lower case, or irregular sizes, shapes, or slant of letters
- Unfinished words or letters, omitted words
- Inconsistent position of letters on the page with respect to lines and margins
- Inconsistent spaces between words and letters
- Cramped or unusual grip of the writing instrument, especially
 - holding the writing instrument very close to the paper, or
 - holding thumb over two fingers and writing from the wrist
- Strange wrist, body, or paper position
- Talking to self whilst writing, or carefully watching the hand that is writing
- Slow or laboured copying or writing
- Large gap between written ideas and understanding demonstrated through speech.
- Difficulty organising thoughts on paper

How is Dysgraphia Identified?

Educational psychologists use a series of tests to determine if a person has language based dysgraphia. Occupational Therapists can identify problems with mechanical based dysgraphia or apraxia.

Supporting People with Dysgraphia

There are many ways to help a person with dysgraphia achieve success. Generally strategies fall into three categories:

- **Accommodations:** providing alternatives to written expression, such as adjusting assessments (oral).
- **Modifications:** changing expectations or tasks to minimize or avoid the area of weakness
- **Remediation:** providing instruction for improving handwriting and writing skills.

Each type of strategy should be considered when planning instruction and support. A person with dysgraphia will benefit from help from both specialists and those who are closest to the person.

DSF Psychologists are able to assess if a person has dysgraphia, and can provide recommendations for support if a person has dysgraphia caused by a language disorder. If a person has a non-language disorder, it is recommended that they receive additional support from an Occupational Therapist.

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