Do I have dyslexia? [1]

Dear Alice,

I have been wondering if I could have mild dyslexia. I have had trouble saying exactly what I mean as long as I remember through high school. I tend to slur words together and leave things out. When I read small print for a longer amount of time, parts of letters or words seem to disappear. When I write, I put end letters on the beginning of the next word and vice-versa. I read somewhere that dyslexics bump into people when they walk, and my friends are always complaining that I do that. I never had behavior or attention problems in school, and I don't think my life is overly affected by these problems, but I was just wondering if that's a possibility. I found a picture that I drew when I was in preschool or kindergarten. Some of the alphabets and numbers I drew on it were reversed. Should I be concerned?

— a little backwards

Answer

Dear a little backwards,

Hats off to you for exploring your concerns. As a language-based disorder, dyslexia affects areas of the brain that process language, which makes tasks such as reading, writing, and spelling difficult. However, dyslexia may go undiagnosed until adulthood and is only recognized retrospectively. This is partly because there is little evidence that dyslexia is related to intelligence. It's great that you're seeking more information, but keep in mind that the only way to determine for sure if you have a form of dyslexia is to be tested by a qualified professional, such as a speech pathologist or mental health professional.

For quick reference, Mayo Clinic [2], has provided age-specific lists of indicators that a person may have some form of dyslexia. A few of the signs include:

- Problems with reading
- Difficulty spelling, especially with the sequence of letters in a word
- Difficulty pronouncing words
- Difficult with memorization
- Spending a lot of time with tasks related to reading or writing
It's possible that some of the symptoms you mentioned could have other causes besides a language-based disorder. For example, you may be experiencing eye strain from reading small print. Are you reading in a well-lit environment? Vision changes and difficulties aren't usually associated with dyslexia. You also mentioned bumping into people when walking; there is some evidence people with dyslexia seem slightly clumsier than others, but clumsiness isn't considered to be a symptom. Clumsiness is, however, a key characteristic of dyspraxia (also called developmental coordination disorder [3]), which is often conflated with dyslexia, even in the literature! Additionally, your handwriting in preschool can be pretty common among kids in that age group; many children write letters incorrectly when first learning the alphabet so your handwriting in preschool may not be a reliable indicator of a language-based disorder.

If you're still concerned about having a language-based learning disability, one option is to get tested by a trained specialist, usually a speech-language pathologist or a psychologist. Other providers, such as audiologists and neurologists, may be consulted to ensure that another problem isn't at the root of your difficulties with speech, writing, and reading. You may also want to visit an ophthalmologist (an eye doctor) for your reading struggles, which may or may not be related to dyslexia. If you're a college student, your school likely has a disability services office you can visit to learn more and explore any possible accommodations. Otherwise, you could ask your health care provider for resources and referrals.

Overall, dyslexia is difficult to diagnose, but if it turns out you've been living with dyslexia, it's a learning disability to which you've already been adapting! With proper support and instruction geared towards language learning and processing, most people with dyslexia do fine in school and their work lives. If you want to learn more about dyslexia and language-based disabilities some other resources include the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association [4] and the National Center for Learning Disabilities [5]. Further, the International Dyslexia Association [6] has compiled a large body of resources, including fact sheets, self-assessment tools, advocacy packets, and a list of local resources to get connected with support groups and health care providers.

Alice!

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