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Dyslexia and Underachievement

Characteristics

The characteristics of dyslexic underachievers often reflect the difficulties they encounter. Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds may have low self-esteem and poorly developed study skills, resulting in failure to persevere at tasks and hostility to school and formal learning. Some dyslexic pupils may be very able orally and mature in conversation but unable to write at length, with poor spelling and handwriting, leading teachers to underestimate their effort, ability and interest level. Patterns of underachievement by dyslexic learners often include:

- high cognitive ability but low self esteem
- poor work habits and unfinished tasks
- an apparent inability to concentrate
- lack of effort in some work but often an intense interest in one area
- a skill deficit in one area or subject
- a negative attitude towards self and age -peers
- manifestations of emotional frustration
- failure to respond to stimulation

Because of persistent failure in some areas, underachieving dyslexic pupils may manifest either aggressive or withdrawn behaviour alongside some characteristics of high ability and dyslexia.

Features of the aggressive underachiever are:

- rejection of set tasks
- lack of co-operation
- disruption and alienation of others

Some dyslexic pupils deliberately seek confrontation with their teachers in order to avoid set work or to be removed from the class.

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Withdrawn underachiever behaviour includes:

- lack of communication, a preference for working alone
- daydreaming, little set work undertaken
- apparent lack of concern about attitude or behaviour

Dyslexic underachievers can be hard to identify because they are both experienced and skilled at hiding their dyslexia, which often results in their ability being unrecognised. They may not have been identified as having either abilities and learning needs that are in any way different from those of their age-peers - and teachers may have neither the time nor the inclination to search for hidden abilities in uncooperative pupils.

Learning characteristics of dyslexic underachievers - they may:

- disguise their level of ability to conceal dyslexia and gain peer acceptance
- prefer to be accused of lack of effort and concentration to admitting dyslexic difficulties
- reject set tasks and fail to respond to teachers' instructions
- fear public failure, inhibiting attempts in new areas
- be frustrated with inactivity, and lack of challenge
- have low self-esteem and negative attitude towards self and peers
- develop a cynical attitude and to hide emotional frustration
- be stifled by an emphasis on reading and writing and a lack of creative opportunities
- dominate discussion, with apparently poor listening and turn taking skills
- be socially isolated and rejected by others - though outwardly self-sufficient
- be vulnerable to criticism, and respond negatively to participation in activities that might reveal their dyslexia
- often feel frustrated, angry, depressed, inadequate
- uses humour inappropriately or to attack others

Aggressive Behaviour Characteristics:

- refuses to obey classroom rules and is confrontational, rebellious or manipulative
- attention seeking, ignores the needs of others

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- prevents others from engaging with learning, disruptive
- alienation of classmates due to aggression and negative attitude
- appears bored, frustrated, stubborn and uncooperative
- tactless and impatient with slower thinkers and other dyslexic learners
- tends to challenge and question indiscreetly
- masks feelings , sometimes appearing insensitive

Withdrawn Behaviour Characteristics

- lacks communication with classmates/teachers
- appears to be time wasting or preoccupied
- takes a long time to process speech resulting in slow responses
- prefers to work alone at a pace appropriate to the impact of dyslexia
- rarely completes set work in the time allowed
- regards dyslexia as stupidity, resulting in low self esteem

Some children/young people may be confused by the difficulties caused by their dyslexia - even think these are due to mental health problems. Some dyslexic children attempt to conceal their difficulties from themselves by avoiding circumstances where they are likely to fail and by adopting diversionary behaviour. Some dyslexic children experience embarrassment, humiliation, anxiety and guilt on a daily basis. When their dyslexia remains unrecognised and unsupported, they lose confidence in themselves as learners, feeling stupid, frustrated and angry.