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Hidden Dyslexia and Behavioural Issues

Dyslexia concealed by inappropriate behaviour

An apparently capable pupil who appears to be unmotivated, failing in school and functioning poorly socially and who may also present violent, disruptive outbursts, will most probably be referred for assessment to the school's behaviour support team (or to the family GP). It is unlikely that any consideration will be given to whether dyslexia may be present. By the time an educational psychologist is consulted, any dyslexia has probably been ignored or misunderstood and the young person labelled as stubborn, self-centred, unsociable, disruptive or withdrawn and only social/emotional /behavioural approaches are considered.

While GPs and other health care professionals may not be expected to learn about the behavioural, emotional and learning characteristics of dyslexic pupils, it is assumed (often incorrectly) that all teachers and psychologists have had this training. While some education professionals are fully conversant with the characteristics and intellectual diversity of dyslexic learners and their typical social, emotional, and behavioural characteristics and needs, the classroom teacher is not necessarily aware of these. This lack of information and training of education (and health-care) professionals is the largest single reason (but not the only reason) for any failure to identify dyslexia.

The physiology of dyslexic learners may differ from their age-peers -they may have more allergies, sleep problems and uneven rates of development; they may suffer from 'existential depression' - when they feel that they do not fit in the classroom, the school or their family – sometimes even wondering whether they are 'mad'.

Dyslexia in able and gifted teenagers is most often misidentified as a behavioural disorder. When their ability and giftedness is recognised, any dyslexic difficulties that appear in other areas are likely to be attributed to a lack of effort, carelessness, even conceit or a belief that they do not have to work to the same standard as others because of their ability – this assumption is common when gifted performers /athletes are dyslexic.

When dyslexic learners are referred for assessment because of behavioural difficulties, the diagnostic process may be inappropriate - psychological testing, for example, may be carried out in isolation from the context of other sources of information. In order to produce a comprehensive profile of a pupil, the professional carrying out the assessment must consider some of the subtle environmental factors that affect behaviour – including an analysis of the behavioural 'triggers' - e.g. for a

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refusal to cooperate in the classroom. Comparison of a learner's behavioural triggers with a set of dyslexia indicators could quickly indicate dyslexic difficulties.

Misidentification of dyslexia as emotional or behavioural disorders may happen because time constraints lead to snap decisions being made and individuals labelled and treated without adequate understanding of the circumstances that lead to manifestations of the 'problem' behaviour. Behaviour Support teachers need to have time to identify a pupil's needs fully before developing plans for support provision. One model is illustrated below.

Identification of 'Triggers'

Behavioural difficulties in school could be due to a range of factors including:

- learning
- social/emotional
- medical/health
- level of ability
- attendance
- bilingualism
- environmental

Gathering Information

The person undertaking the assessment develops a picture of the pupil based on:

- observations and assessments from school staff (including screening for possible dyslexia)
- information from parents/pupil
- review of the learning environment
- educational records
- referrals made within school and to other agencies

Action to remove barriers to learning

Once a pupil profile has been developed and triggers for behavioural incidents identified, the teacher – in consultation with the learner, parents, other teachers and other professionals – produce a plan designed to resolve difficulties, including:

- changing the learning environment to be more dyslexic 'friendly'

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- strategies agreed to deal with dyslexic difficulties e.g.
 - individual/small group teaching
 - peer support/buddying/paired reading
 - directed in-class support from – support teacher, learning assistant
 - monitoring of attendance at 'problem' subject classes
 - setting appropriate targets that take account of any dyslexia
 - staff development on the behavioural manifestations of dyslexia

Self esteem

Anxiety is a common emotion along with fear, anger, sadness, and unhappiness, and it has a very important function in relation to the self-esteem of the dyslexic learner. Both voluntary and involuntary behaviours - aggressive or withdrawn - may be directed at escaping or avoiding the source of anxiety – which could be the curriculum, the learning environment or even the teacher. Learners with low self-esteem are accustomed to failure, so they expect to fail at new activities – divergent behaviour may be used to conceal a fear of public ridicule due to failure.