

**Joy- December 1999**  
**Dyslexia can be beaten**

**MARTIE DU PLESSIS**

***Bear Momee I cannot reed the  
Bibil dut I luv yu. From Davib.***

David is not a dunce. In fact, according to the evaluations of several professionals he is rather intelligent. Yet he certainly has a problem, and he shares his problem with millions of other children and adults.

David, according to professionals, is dyslexic.

The word “dyslexia” comes from the Greek, meaning “difficulty with words or language”. Perhaps the simplest definition of dyslexia is a difficulty in learning to read and write – Particularly in learning to spell correctly and to express thoughts on paper. Reversing words, writing back to front and not being able to remember the sequence of letters in a word are common symptoms.

In our age of verbal and written communication, linguistic difficulties are not easy to cope with. It is a problem that can leave one feeling like a dunce. Dyslexic children are often ridiculed by their classmates.

Although home education saves a dyslexic child from many of the usual emotional scars, the problem still needs to be addressed. After all, reading and learning go hand in hand. One must learn to read in order to be able to read to learn. A child who is a poor reader will usually also be a poor learner.

Literacy is also the key to employment. Dyslexia can jeopardise a child’s entire future. It is therefore imperative to deal with

the cause of the problem and not simply alleviate the symptoms.

There is labyrinth of contradictory theories about dyslexia: what it is, its causes and its possible correction. Some theories sat that dyslexia may be the result of abnormal development of a baby’s brain during pregnancy. The resultant abnormalities interfere with the brain’s ability to understand written material.

The idea that dyslexia is a certifiable biological disorder, a physical problem that can be diagnosed and treated accordingly, gained credence during the ‘60’s and ‘70’s, but has since been refuted by extensive research.

While scientists continue to argue on what it is and how to deal with it, the number of so-called dyslexics is growing. Described as “learning disabled”, latest American figures, for example, show a shocking 160% increase of cases of dyslexia since 1976.

In the midst of plethora of theories and pronouncements (such as “dyslexia is a theory that has shown unprecedented success in practice.)

Dr Jan Strydom, an educationalist, reacts strongly to the popular notion that dyslexia is a learning disability caused by a biological deficit. “There is nothing wrong with these children. I believe there is no physical, genetic or biological reason why they have this problem.”

“The cause of dyslexia is that the foundational skills of reading and spelling have not been automated. Learning is a stratified process, in which one skill needs to be properly mastered before other subsequent skills can be learned,” he explains.

“One has to learn to count before it becomes possible to learn to add and subtract. In the same way there are skills that form the foundation or basis of reading and spelling.”

Basic skills like concentration, visual discrimination, accurate observation and memorising, skills of association, visual memory and literal thinking – form the foundation of good reading, says Dr Strydom. “All of these skills are employed constantly while a person is reading, but a good reader is unaware of these events, because they have automated.

“These foundational skills are functions that should be taught to children during their infant years. If a child has not mastered these basics, he or she will have reading and writing problems as a result. The only solution is to retrace the steps to the point where the child has missed out and go forward from there.”

The rapid increase in dyslexia worldwide is caused by our changing life circumstances, says Dr Strydom. “The conditions in which children grow up today are drastically different to what they were 40 or 30 years ago, and certain everyday experiences that are vital to the correct interpretation of the written word have been removed from their lives. It was, for example, a tradition that parents drilled their children on the ability to distinguish left from right. Today, few parents are aware that knowing left from right, is an important foundational skill of reading.

“Parents of previous generations also spent much time teaching their babies to talk. In that way, they acquired a good command of whatever language their parents spoke. Today, on the contrary,

much time is spent in front of the television set. Although they hear language while watching TV, there is too little repetition to enhance their language ability.”

Undoubtedly, language plays a vital role in reading. According to Dr Beve Hornsby, author of *Overcoming Dyslexia*, about 60 percent of dyslexics are late talkers.

“Parents should ensure that their children are adequately equipped to benefit from reading instruction. In this way dyslexia can be prevented, “is the advice of Dr Strydom.

For more information on how dyslexia can be prevented or overcome, take the opportunity to obtain one of two free copies of the book *The truth about Learning Disabilities*. The book deals with Dr Jan Strydom’s research.