

Every Child Can Learn Podcast Episode 2: Dyslexia

- **Intro**

Glades: You are listening to the Every Child Can Learn podcast. The podcast is offered to you by Backup Uganda and Brainstud. You can listen to our podcast online on our website, www.backupuganda.org, and if you are in Gulu, you can pick up the audios offline from Mega FM, Divine Video & Music Library, Highland Primary School, Gulu Prison Primary School, Gulu Town Primary School, Mary Immaculate Primary School, St Joseph's Primary School, or Christ the King Demonstration Primary School. Do you like our podcast? Feel free to share it with your family, friends and neighbors! The more people learn about learning difficulties, the better we can help our children!

- **Episode intro**

Glades: Welcome to the second episode of Every Child Can Learn, a podcast series about how to meet every child's learning needs - even if they are a little more complicated.

- **Introduce the speakers**

Glades: My name is Glades and I work as the Lead Trainer at Backup Uganda. Today, I am joined by Ann. Ann, please introduce yourself?

Ann: Thanks Glades. My name is Ann and I work at Backup Uganda as well, as the Uganda Country Director. In today's second episode of Every Child Can Learn, we will be taking you through all the details of a specific learning disability called dyslexia. I think from now on, for those who listened to our first episode, you will understand what I mean here. But to my first-time listeners: please don't get scared, we shall get to understand the word very well, we will get familiar with all the details today, and eventually the term will become easy to pronounce.

- **Recap on the previous episode**

Glades: In the first episode, we discussed how every child can learn. We gave you a first introduction to the different learning difficulties and how they can be managed well. We hope you listened to the previous episode and if you haven't, you can find it online on our website, www.backupuganda.org, and offline at Mega FM, Divine Video & Music Library, Highland Primary School, Gulu Prison Primary School, Gulu Town Primary School, Mary Immaculate Primary School, St Joseph's Primary School, or Christ the King Demonstration Primary School. Let's try as well to look back on the conversation we ended the first episode with: asking our children about difficulties they may be facing in school. I hope you got amazing experiences, you can still share them with us on 0772630078. Now let's take it further from here. It is our responsibility as a parent, a teacher, and even as an uncle or a neighbor to know our children's learning needs as well. If you have not tried it, please, this is the time, be part of your child's learning. Now, let's get started with what we call 'dyslexia'.

- **Topic: Dyslexia**

Ann: Let's get to understand the meaning of the word **dyslexia**. The word 'dys' comes from the word 'difficulty' in another language, and 'lexia' comes from the word 'reading'. It is a common language disability that affects the learner's ability to understand and express meaning through words. This is usually because they struggle with the connection between the way words sound and the way they are written. For example, we have words like 'man' or 'fat', these are words where every single letter has a separate sound and they can be read, like m-a-n, 'man'. We also have words that are a bit more tricky, if we say the sounds one by one they don't automatically form the word, like the word 'future'. A dyslexic child may write it as 'fewcha' in the sense of f-e-w-c-h-a, because that's how the word sounds, which is of course not the correct spelling. As a consequence, you see difficulties with reading, writing and with spelling. For example, people with dyslexia have problems with reading complicated words, which affects the number of words they learn to know.

Something we also need to know is that dyslexia is not related to a person's level of intelligence or how bright the child is. Normally it is the rate or speed at which they master specific literacy skills and how well they can use these that makes it difficult for them. That is why they need a lot of patience from you. We shall discover more ways to help these children as we go along.

Dyslexia is usually identified in children, but it stays with a person for their entire life, so adults can have it as well. This is why we have adults, university students for example, that still struggle with this condition up to today. To be able to learn how to deal with it well, it is important to identify it as early as possible. Dyslexia is one of the most common learning disabilities seen in schools and probably in homes as well.

It is good to put in mind that not all people who are showing these characteristics we mentioned are dyslexic. But if the signs are seen again and again, then they have to be assessed further in order to confirm the possibility of being dyslexic. We need to look at the age of the child, plus the level of education of the child, before we can suspect that a child has dyslexia or is dyslexic, as we like to call it.

For example, if a child is in Kindergarten or in nursery school, these children are normally between 3-4 years old, and in primary school they might be 5-6 years. Although signs of dyslexia may show early, we may not immediately say that these children have dyslexia, simply because at that age and level, the child is just learning the first basic literacy skills, like how to recognize letters and sounds. Some children simply need a little more time to learn this, it doesn't always mean that they are dealing with a disability. Then in other cases, a child may have been missing school, or sometimes they keep changing schools. With all that, the child ends up missing a lot that in the end affects their learning, but this is different than having a learning difficulty or disability. This happens to many learners, even those in other classes. So, this is where we need to know when we can suspect that our children may be dyslexic and when there is probably something else going on.

The good news is that children with dyslexia can still learn how to read and write with extra support, patience, probing and more practice. In the first episode, I remember we talked about the less helpful words we use to call these children sometimes, like dull, lazy or slow. Let's always think before we call them those names and take the initiative to find out why they are struggling instead.

- **Characteristics of dyslexia**

Glades: If we want to help children with dyslexia learn better, we first need to learn how we can tell that a child may be dyslexic. In many cases, these characteristics tend to show up when these children have started school. We are going to look at the different examples to help you understand what to look for in your child, when they are growing up and even when they start schooling. Something we need to also know is that every child may show some of these characteristics when they first start learning how to read and write - that does not mean they will have dyslexia, part of this is a learning process. Let's not waste time and straight away look at the characteristics:

Normally when children with dyslexia learn how to write, they write letters and numbers the wrong way. This is very common with children in the earliest classes, but for children with dyslexia, this problem tends to stay with them for longer. For example, if they are writing numbers that almost look the same, like instead of them writing 9, the child writes 6; when it comes to writing letters, the child writes b instead of d, w instead of m. This is a challenge nearly all children get when they are just learning and normally, with practice and probing, they learn how to do it right. We have seen a lot of times children are taught letters and counting numbers with the help of charts. This is something that helps them as well, but a child who is dyslexic will need a lot of extra time, practice and guidance to master this.

Ann: Other symptoms one should be keen on, are that children with dyslexia usually have challenges in spelling. We have seen in many cases these children write the words according to the way they sound, meaning for example you tell him/her to write the word 'girl', a child who is dyslexic would probably write it as 'gal', g-a-l. Sometimes they will miss out certain letters in the word, like instead of writing 'people', they might end up writing 'people' with a missing 'o' or a missing 'e'. Like I said, this is not related to the child having sight problems, they see well but it goes wrong in the processing of what they see and providing meaning to it. A lot of young children do this when they first start to learn, so we have to be careful with our conclusions.

Dyslexic children may find it hard sounding or reading out words and splitting words as well. In this case, children have difficulties with the way certain words sound. Let's take for example the word 'man': they may not be in position to sound the letters and read it out so easily. For most of us, we can say 'm-a-n, man', and the word comes almost automatically. Children with dyslexia need a lot more practice and help to get to this point. When it comes to splitting of words into syllables for example, it may be hard for them to do it the right way. For example, if we have the word 'doctor', we can split it into 'doc-tor'. If we have the word 'sanitation', we can split it into

‘sa-ni-ta-tion’. A child with dyslexia might do it like ‘sani-ta-tion’, for example. Practicing this very well is another way they can learn how to read and at the same time write the right spelling. By the way, did you hear these two words in my sentence there, ‘write’ and ‘right’? They sound exactly the same, but they are spelled differently. That is why children with dyslexia often get stuck. Now, I still insist, if you find children with this challenge in primary 6 or 7, it could also mean they were not taught well in general in the lower classes. We will not immediately say that these children are dyslexic, because the problem has a cause that does not lie with the child.

Glades: Another challenge for them is a low sense of rhyme. You can notice this early on in a child’s development. You know how in songs or poems we have words of which the end sounds similar? Like ‘cat’ and ‘hat’. This is something we often practice with young children when they are starting to grow their literacy skills and their vocabulary. Children with dyslexia will find it much harder to tell you words that rhyme with another word.

When a dyslexic child is to write for example words that sound the same but have different meanings, it’s always a problem to differentiate those words, since they have the same pronunciation but different meanings. Words like vary rhymes with very, lessen and lesson, cat and hat, hall and ball, normally it is very helpful when teaching learners, try to explain the meaning of the words you want for them to understand. When you tell learners “I cut my hand yesterday”, which cat or cut are you meaning? A dyslexic child will end up writing a cat which is an animal, but when you explain to them through actions as well, this is more of making the lesson real, you would have helped this child know what you are meaning. This is why it is very important to use real objects when teaching, and it could be an illustration or even a drawing for the learners to understand.

Ann: Children with dyslexia also have difficulties writing words dictated and taking notes. The fact that they write words according to how they sound automatically makes it hard for them to write the correct spelling, and then they even miss out letters. For example when a teacher says “the weather is cloudy”, the child taking notes may write ‘whether’ which is used when you have a choice between alternatives, and not the weather in the sky. This is why it is very important to use real objects when teaching, it could be an illustration or a drawing, like Glades just said. All the challenges this child is facing, like understanding which spelling to write, which letter comes first, which one comes at the end, makes taking notes a challenge as well. They will need a lot more time than most children to write down their notes, and may read their notes later and get confused about what they were trying to write down. We need to know that these children usually know the correct words, but how to put it down is where the challenge comes from. That is why giving them time to finish their work, and repeating it for them would help them a lot.

Children with dyslexia usually show poor grammar. This comes with the grammatical rules we have in English, for example where to put a comma, an apostrophe, in which order we put words or which words we choose to use in the first place. For example, when writing names of items, say books, pens, a math set - a dyslexic child may not put the commas, or not in the right places.

When it comes to apostrophes, like in 'let's' or 'it's', they don't put them in at all. It is also a challenge when it comes to writing sentences, like instead of writing 'she accepted', they write 'she excepted', starting with 'e-x', which is common to children with dyslexia. Of course with a child in nursery, this is not yet noticed since they are not yet taught at that level, but this can be seen with those around primary three and above. Considering other factors causing difficulties, we should still not conclude that these children have this disability unless an expert, an educational psychologist, has properly assessed this.

Glades: Dyslexic children also tend to have difficulty in learning new languages. This comes with certain letters in the alphabet and combinations of letters that are not used the same way we are familiar with, especially if they are not always used the same way. If we take English as an example, the letter 'i' can be used in different ways. There is the word 'I' to mean 'me', and then there is the same letter in the word 'is', where it sounds completely different. But, have you ever heard people say that a language is very hard to learn? That does not necessarily mean they are dyslexic, there could be very many other reasons for this.

We need to understand that dyslexia is not the same for all the children. Some have milder cases that could go unnoticed for a long time, until they start struggling and can't handle it, then they start looking for help. For others, it starts from a young age and it starts bothering them from the moment they need to start learning how to talk, read and write.

- **Causes**

Ann: Although there is not one single known reason why children get dyslexia, we know that dyslexia affects the specific parts of the brain related to language, reading and writing. Something we need to understand is that different parts of the brain have different tasks to perform, and they also work together to complete specific tasks. When we are talking about dyslexia, it comes from the parts of your brain that are related to reading, writing and language in general that can be a different size or a different shape than they are supposed to be, or they work differently than for most people. This can happen for several reasons, because the way your brain develops is influenced by very many factors. For example, you could inherit this from your parents, or even your grandparents. Then, a lot of things have an impact on how the brain of an unborn child develops as well. If the mother drinks alcohol, for example, or uses specific medication that affects the baby, then that can change how the baby's brain is built, so to speak. In rare cases, someone can even develop dyslexia after getting in an accident that affects the brain. We therefore call that acquired dyslexia, they got it later.

Dyslexia cannot be cured, not even with a surgery or medication, so a child grows with it, and it becomes more problematic if nothing is being done about it. That does not mean that the child can't learn: with enough help from home, from school and sometimes from other experts, someone with dyslexia can still learn well. I want to emphasize that dyslexia is not related to someone's intelligence! It says nothing about how bright they are. Now let's look at how we can help children with dyslexia.

- **How to help**

Glades: Can we get to the real deal of how we can help our children without pinning names on them? Here we go, let's start with what our teachers can do. But before that, allow me to appreciate the effort teachers are already making to teach all children. Deep down, every teacher may want to teach a class of quick learners, but this is just not what reality looks like. Where would we take the ones who need more time and help? All teachers have them in their classes and you are doing your best to try and to help them in one way or the other. Has it ever crossed your mind that they didn't choose whatever difficulty they are dealing with? They need their teachers' help, so we cannot be planning and teaching without having these learners with difficulties at the back of our mind as well. It may be challenging and tiresome, but when you get to understand the different learning difficulties, how to recognize them and help, then you will change the way you teach and at the same time put a smile on the faces of these learners with learning difficulties. The best part is that your new strategies will actually help all learners at the same time. So whether you are a parent or a teacher, these are some of the strategies you can use to help learners:

If you are a teacher, try to focus on using phonics, letter sounds. This could be taking only 5 minutes of your time to introduce the sound that is going to be taught. For example, let's say the letter 'm' has both a name and a sound. The letter name is how we call it in the alphabet, and the letter sound is how it actually sounds when we use it in words. It is very important to practice with how these sounds work, especially when it is about how they come together to form words. Have your learners mention the sounds one by one and then read the word altogether, without you interrupting this process. We know some of you have already been trained how to do this very well when you are teaching children how to read. Please know that this is crucial for children with dyslexia, because that is exactly where their problem lies. You can think of all sorts of activities around the use of sounds. You could ask learners to mention anything that starts with that sound, for example man, mango, mattress, Mary and many others. What usually works best is combining the different teaching strategies of seeing, hearing, and touching or doing things with your own hands. As with all lessons, it is important to make the lesson feel real. Of course, as a parent, you can do this at home as well. Just practising with objects that you find in the house can already be helpful. I am sure you may have a mmmmmmmattress at home, you can talk about a mmmmmmother, or a mmmmmat.

Ann: Secondly, focus on developing the child's gross and fine motor skills, whether you are a parent or a teacher. Gross motor skills are needed for the big movements we make, like walking, jumping, things like that. Then, fine motor skills are the smaller, more precise movements, like writing for example. For both of these types of skills, your brain and your body need to work together, and that is where things sometimes get hard for children with dyslexia. For example, it can be a challenge for them to connect the movement of both the feet and the hands. Let's all try this for a bit. Can we all stand up? Now stand on your left leg only, and raise your right hand in the air. Are you managing? Now can you switch? Jump on your right leg and raise your left hand in the air. Are you still okay? This is the type of thing that can be hard for some children with

dyslexia. And if you want to help them, they need to practise having their brain and their body work together better. We have P.E. as a subject in school, but have we ever realized that this is something that can help children with their reading and writing? We can consider helping these learners with their gross and fine motor skills during the P.E. lessons or even while they are playing during break or at home. Let's try it out after listening to this episode, it can easily be done from home, and even when school reopens. Exercises like clapping hands, building a tower of blocks, juggling of balls or even oranges, rope skipping are some of the activities that you could use to help these children, and it's fun for everyone to do.

Developing love for books and for reading in general can help children with dyslexia stay motivated and interested. You can do this by reading aloud to the child and by monitoring while they read as well, as you guide them in a friendly way. It is not always easy for a child with dyslexia to develop love for reading when it is so difficult to do. You can help develop this through first reading for the child - meaning reading aloud, of course with expressions and actions so that the child gets interested in the story. At the same time, the child could be reading along with you, for example by following the words with their finger at the same speed. It could be as simple as taking off 30 minutes for them to read with you. If you find reading challenging on your side, even telling them stories from your memory can help them to grow to love stories. When the child reads on his/her own, try to ask them questions to see if they are understanding or for them to ask questions where they are not understanding. All this is done to help a dyslexic child learn how to read and develop a culture of reading on their own. It also helps the child improve their vocabulary, meaning they are learning more new words. Let's not think if one or two learners can read in class, the rest will just catch up. Yes, a few will, but the majority might need more guidance.

Glades: As Ann mentioned earlier, teachers need to be patient. Time pressure and rushing dyslexic children or giving them punishments may not help them improve. A lot of times these children make mistakes, not because they want to, but because they are still learning. Have we ever thought of why they are slow in the first place? Or not writing well? If not, then it is high time we started to think why and help them. Let's try being patient, probing them that they can do it and letting them know that you are there to help. For example, when giving corrections, try to explain to the learner what the exact mistake was, so that they understand well and please praise their efforts made. Sometimes one-on-one meetings with the learners can help a lot, if they need extra guidance and time.

If you want to keep them motivated, give them positive reinforcement: rewards for doing something well. This is something that all of us love. How do you feel when for example you have passed well and that is not recognized? You get demoralized to even do it better next time, simply because you were not appreciated. Let's look at this at the school level: have we ever realized that when children are not appreciated for their answer, they feel bad? We all don't like this either, even at home or at our places of work. What about this child with dyslexia? Remember, we said that these children are not dull, as people may say - they have answers, but

how to present it is always the biggest problem for them. Therefore, it comes back to being patient with them and thanking them for the work done. This could be through clapping, singing for them, and appreciating the efforts they make, even if the answer is not correct. It can be as simple as saying ‘well tried’, ‘thanks for trying’, ‘you almost got it right, who else can help’; such words really help these children so much. In the end, you want them not to give up, so they need the encouragement from their parents and their teachers.

Ann: Even if you as a parent did not get the chance to go to school when you were young, you can still play a very big role in motivating your child and encouraging them to read. Letting them know that they are not dull as others keep saying, but encouraging them not to give up with what they're doing is key. It could be that they are making a lot of mistakes, but motivate them that it is not the end of life; people always make mistakes, we all have our different things we are good at. The mere fact that you are always with them in their struggles helps them feel like they are not on their own and it builds their confidence too to love life and to keep trying. Try to make them know that not being good in reading or writing for example, shouldn't make them think that they are nobody. They could be very good in other things like craft, or even other subjects, and that doesn't make them any less important than any other person.

Lastly, let's learn to listen to our children and help them accordingly. We like talking about our children, but sometimes we forget to talk *with* them. If you show love to your children it will help them become able to listen to you and come to you with their problems. For example, make time for your children, besides your busy schedule, try to get to know what your child could be going through in learning, like “why is my child failing to read well when he/she is in primary five”, or “why is my child failing to write some words well”. Your child may come and ask your help with writing the word ‘sanitation’, because they feel they cannot write it well. Many parents will ignore the child's question or tell the child “wait, you will go to your teacher tomorrow”, just because they are either doing something else or because they think it does not concern them, it is the teacher's job. At the back of this child's mind, they may think “my parent has refused to help me” and they will not come back with another question next time. We all have a responsibility to help our children, especially now that they are home a lot. It could be that you don't know the answer, but you can find a way to show them that you're not ignoring them: you could call a brother/sister or even a neighbour's child to come and help, that would have solved the problem. Sometimes we need to put ourselves in our children's shoes, especially when they are facing learning difficulties, and see the effort they make to learn.

- **Closing**

Glades: Thank you for listening to our 2nd podcast discussing how every child can learn, where we do our best to help you understand the different learning difficulties and how they can be managed well. We hope you keep track of our next episodes to get all the details on these difficulties one by one. In the next episode, we will be talking about dyscalculia, so make sure you don't miss it. See you there!



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- **Outro**

Glades: Thank you for listening to Every Child Can Learn. Please share your thoughts with us! Join the conversation on Facebook or send your questions to 0772630078. Do you want to learn more about Backup Uganda and stay updated about our activities? Check our website on www.backupuganda.org and follow us on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn.

