

Written Testimony of David Boies

Millions of children and their family members suffer from the consequences of dyslexia. Most of those consequences are unnecessary; they are the result of a failure to timely recognize and properly treat those children.

Recognizing the presence of dyslexia, and understanding what it is (and is not) is critical to enabling children with dyslexia to realize their potential and enjoy the happy, productive lives of which they are capable.

Dyslexia's primary effect is to make it difficult for someone who is dyslexic to read as easily, and as fast, as they otherwise would. That effect is challenging enough. Reading is one of the most important ways by which we ordinarily acquire information -- and it is the primary way most students, particularly in grade school, learn what they are tested on. Moreover, reading (particularly, again, in grade school) is valued, and tested, in its own right.

Consequently, the ability to read becomes both the gateway to how students do on the tests by which they are judged by their parents, peers, teachers, and themselves and itself a marker for their success.

Recognizing dyslexia early can enable students to receive both training that can improve their reading skills and help in using other ways of acquiring information.

My dyslexia was not diagnosed until I was in my 30s and my reading skills in school were poor. I did not read essentially at all until late in third grade. However, my father was a high school history teacher and, including by attending his classes, I was

fortunate to learn early the value of listening as a way of acquiring information.

Recognizing dyslexia early has another, perhaps even more important, benefit. One of the most corrosive consequences of dyslexia is that its effects (difficulty in reading, poor scores on standardized tests) are often misinterpreted as low intelligence.

Dyslexia is an input issue; it makes it difficult for people to read conventionally, and hence acquire information that way. It does not limit judgment or intelligence, or the ability to process information. In fact, there is some data that suggests dyslexia may be positively correlated with creativity.

In school, particularly early grades, the ability to acquire information, and particularly the ability to read, is often treated as the equivalent of intelligence. Students who are slow in reading, and who accordingly fail to quickly acquire the information that conventional exams test, are too often classified by their teachers, their parents, and themselves as “dumb”, “stupid”, or simply inadequate.

Difficulty in reading, and poor results on exams, can of course be due to lower than average intelligence, but the difficulty in reading that is caused by dyslexia has nothing to do with, and is not at all correlated with, intelligence.

Difficulty in reading caused by dyslexia will inevitably affect a student’s performance on examinations testing what a student has learned from reading assignments. But again this is not a reflection either of intelligence or the ability to learn -- it is merely a reflection of the difficulty in learning in a particular way at a particular speed.

Confusing an input problem (difficulty in reading) with a processing problem (low intelligence) not only prevents steps to solve the problem but also further erodes the student's confidence, and even their sense of self-worth; it can discourage a student from continuing to try, and discourage a student's teachers, and even parents, from continuing to try to encourage and help.

Failing to timely recognize and properly understand and treat dyslexia has three consequences. First, children fail to get the help and training that can improve their ability to acquire information. Second, the lack of such help and training causes the child to fall further and further behind. Third, as the child falls further and further behind, and because the problem is perceived as a lack of intelligence that will follow the child throughout life, the child (and the child's teachers and families) become discouraged, and too often give up.

Recognizing the real issue can enable the child to receive the help needed to improve reading skills and to learn to use alternative means for acquiring information. Even more important, it enables everyone to understand that the problem is largely temporary; success in life depends on judgment, intelligence, integrity, and commitment -- not on how fast a person reads.

Even though my dyslexia was not diagnosed early, I was fortunate. Growing up in a small Midwest farming town in the 1940's reading was not a metric by which young boys measured their self-worth. My parents, both public school teachers, were supportive and my father in particular helped me learn by a combination of what I would now call lectures and what I have since come to recognize as Socratic dialogues.

It is much harder for today's young people who grow up in a time where there is academic competition to get into "junior pre-kindergarten" (which, of course, is the year the student spends in school before "senior pre-kindergarten", which in turn is the year the student spends in school before kindergarten).

There is so much emphasis on early learning and testing that students can be forgiven for concluding by the time they are teenagers that they will either be masters of the universe or abject failures based on how their academic progress to that point has been evaluated. Both, of course, are likely wrong. But the perception can derail both from reaching their potential.

The debilitating effect that dyslexia can have on a child's confidence and sense of self-worth is aggravated by the fact that the very time reading and input most dominate reasoning and judgment in conventional test results, is the very time children are at their most vulnerable.

Recognizing that the difficulty in reading dyslexia causes can be mitigated by training, that alternative ways of acquiring information can be emphasized, and that dyslexia does not imply anything about a person's ability to reason, analyze, or communicate can give students the patience to continue to work and achieve, and give their teachers and parents the patience to help and support them.

Today some students whose families (and schools) can afford the best in testing are fortunate in having their dyslexia identified, understood, and treated early. However, the vast majority of students with dyslexia are not so fortunate. Their future, and the future contributions they can make to our society, is at severe risk. That risk is preventable.

Dyslexia is not an indication of, and need not affect, the ability of a person to succeed in life. There are many well-known examples, and many, many more unknown examples, of people with dyslexia who are highly effective, productive, successful, members of society. Success in life is not a function of how fast a person can read. Life is rarely a timed test; even when it is, it is rarely if ever based on reading speed.

We need to recognize this reality. We need to enable children, teachers, parents, and test administrators to recognize this reality. And we need to provide the resources and guidance that will help, not impede, children from reaching their potential. They deserve it. And our country needs it.