

# SPELDNSW

## Learning Difficulties Q & A #2

### *Should we use a different font for children with reading difficulties?*

Over the past few months, there has been renewed media interest in a unique font called Dyslexie that the promoters claim will improve the readability of text for both children and adults with dyslexia. The underlying rationale is that the letters of the alphabet are generally too similar (particularly for people with dyslexia) and that they need to be designed in such a way that they can be easily distinguished. It is suggested by the designers of the font that Dyslexie addresses this in a number of ways:

- Parts of the letters have thicker lines;
- The letters are slightly slanted; and,
- The letters that have 'sticks' and 'tails' - such as *b*, *d* and *p* - vary in length.

**In addition to distinctive letter shapes, the font also employs larger spacing both within and, especially, between words.**

The creator of the Dyslexie font suggests that its use mitigates some of the problems experienced by dyslexics when reading, however, this claim is not supported by scientific evidence. Macquarie University in Sydney recently conducted an objective evaluation of the effectiveness of the Dyslexie font to better understand why this type of font appears to be beneficial for children with reading difficulties. To do so they compared reading speeds for texts written in Arial and in Dyslexie font.

The research concluded that the Dyslexie font is easier for low-progress readers to read than Arial font of the same size, but **only** because of the increased spacing between words and within words, not because of the Dyslexie letter shapes. **The same benefit** can be achieved using alternative fonts, such as Ariel. The National Centre for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) in the United States has reported similar findings. Between and within word spacing can be adjusted for any font using the settings on a word processing program like Microsoft Word. As a consequence, there is no need to use the Dyslexie font specifically.

Further research may support the use of increased letter spacing as a way to assist struggling readers. In the meantime, however, our focus should be on strategies that are evidence-based and that have been found to actually improve knowledge and skills. The underlying weakness for most people with dyslexia is a difficulty linking phonemes (speech sounds) to graphemes (letters). It is possible that by relying on the use of a special font as an 'intervention', individuals with reading difficulties may miss out on the opportunity to access a successful and evidence-based approach to improving their reading, such as explicit and structured phonics instruction.

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