

# Dysgraphia



# A NEW WAY TO SUPPORT FAMILIES

Welcome to the Missouri Developmental Disability Resource Center (MODDRC). You are receiving this letter with an enclosed packet of information because a request was made by you (or someone on your behalf) to the MODDRC.

We have compiled information from a number of sources and have included them in this packet, which is divided into the following sections:

- **Overview of a specific disability, special health care need, or other major topic**
- **Current practices**
- **Personal Stories**
- **Family support, advocacy and services**
- **Missouri Service Systems**

The MODDRC, which has now expanded to include Missouri's Family-to-Family Health Information Center, seeks to inform and connect individuals with disabilities or special health care needs and/or their families to peer support. We also provide opportunities for leadership development and volunteerism. When contacting the MODDRC, you are connecting to staff that have first-hand knowledge about disability related issues because they have the experience of living with the disability, either as an individual, parent or family member.

Thank you for using the MODDRC. This packet of information is one of the many ways that the MODDRC can support you in your journey with disability. We hope you will connect with us again.

**Missouri Developmental Disability Resource Center/Family-to-Family Health Information Center is housed within Missouri's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Services (UCEDD) at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, Institute for Human Development.**

*This packet was developed with funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Division of Services for Children with Special Health Needs, grant number H84MC08005 as well as Federal Funding from the Missouri Planning Council on Developmental Disabilities as established through the - P.L. 106-402*



# Overview

The purpose of this section is to help you gain a better understanding of a specific disability or special health care need. It is intended to provide a basic explanation of the disability and possible causes and characteristics.

If you would like more in-depth information on this topic, other topics of information or if it is not the topic you requested, please feel free to contact us again.



## Overview: Dysgraphia

When a child is learning to put pencil to paper, getting letters to look just right can be hard to do. But for persons with a learning disability called dysgraphia (dis-graf-ee-uh), simple practice doesn't always make perfect.

Dysgraphia is a "learning disability" (LD) that affects a person's ability to write. The term learning disability is the name for a group of disorders that affect a person's ability to listen, read, write, speak, or do math. People from all races and income levels can be born with a learning disability. And just because a person has a learning disability, it doesn't mean they lack intelligence. Some people with learning disabilities are smarter than most of the rest of us.

Regular people. Regular lives. Regular brains - except for one thing: the way they take in, process, and then communicate information. Dysgraphia is more than just bad handwriting, and can involve any of the following:

- writing words that can't be read by others
- getting tired quickly and easily when writing or drawing
- not finishing words in sentences, or even leaving them out entirely
- mixing print and cursive letters, upper and lower case, and different sizes or directions when writing



- tight, unusual hand and finger grip on pencil or other writing utensil
- awkward body position when writing
- saying words out loud to self while writing
- extreme difficulty with the rules of writing like spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure
- problems organizing thoughts on paper
- a large gap between understanding of a subject and ability to explain it in written form
- experiencing difficulty even when going slowly and carefully

When students have enough trouble with these things to meet state Department of Education criteria, special education services might be needed. This may include Occupational, Physical, or Speech Therapy as well as one-on-one help from the classroom teacher and/or a special education teacher. Schools can help by providing strategies, practice, and tools to become better writers. (see Current Practices section for more information on this topic.)

Dysgraphia is not a disease, but it is a life-long challenge. Having a learning disability like dysgraphia doesn't mean a person will be kept from reaching their goals in life. Many adults with dysgraphia lead happy, successful lives by finding ways to work through and around their challenges. It can actually make them stronger people in the long run.

Remember that it's never too late to find help for dysgraphia, even as an adult, and getting that support can make a world of difference.

Learning about Dysgraphia can be confusing. Don't be afraid to ask questions of your teachers, other families who have gone through it too, and our staff here at the Missouri Developmental Disability Resource Center/Family-to-Family Health Information Center. We're here to help.



# Current Practices

The purpose of this section is to provide you with the most current techniques and procedures for supporting people with developmental disabilities or special health care needs. These could include such things as:

- Information on therapies
- Medical treatment
- Accommodations
- Interventions

If you would like more information on current practices, please feel free to contact us again.



*On the following pages, you will find more information on dysgraphia from sources the MODDRC regards as respected and trustworthy. All information has been reprinted with permission and is for educational purposes only. For more information regarding your personal situation, please consult your team of school and medical professionals.*



**National Center for Learning Disabilities, Inc.**  
*The power to hope, to learn, and to succeed*

## Dysgraphia: What Strategies Can Help?

There are many ways to help a person with dysgraphia achieve success. Generally strategies fall into three categories:

- Accommodations: providing alternatives to written expression
- Modifications: changing expectations or tasks to minimize or avoid the area of weakness

- Remediation: providing instruction for improving handwriting and writing skills

Each type of strategy should be considered when planning instruction and support. A person with dysgraphia will benefit from help from both specialists and those who are closest to the person. Finding the most beneficial type of support is a process of trying different ideas and openly exchanging thoughts on what works best.

## Examples of How to teach individuals with dysgraphia to overcome some of their difficulties with written expression.

### Early Writers

- Use paper with raised lines for a sensory guide to staying within the lines.
- Try different pens and pencils to find one that's most comfortable.
- Practice writing letters and numbers in the air with big arm movements to improve motor memory of these important shapes. Also practice letters and numbers with smaller hand or finger motions.
- Encourage proper grip, posture and paper positioning for writing. It's

important to reinforce this early as it's difficult for students to unlearn bad habits later on.

- Use multi-sensory techniques for learning letters, shapes and numbers. For example, speaking through motor sequences, such as "b" is "big stick down, circle away from my body."
- Introduce a word processor on a computer early; however do not eliminate handwriting for the child. While typing can make it easier to write by alleviating the frustration of forming



letters, handwriting is a vital part of a person's ability to function in the world.

**Be patient and positive, encourage practice and praise effort - becoming a good writer takes time and practice.**

**Young Students**

- Allow use of print or cursive - whichever is more comfortable.
- Use large graph paper for math calculation to keep columns and rows organized.
- Allow extra time for writing assignments.
- Begin writing assignments creatively with drawing, or speaking ideas into a tape recorder.
- Alternate focus of writing assignments - put the emphasis on some for neatness and spelling, others for grammar or organization of ideas.
- Explicitly teach different types of writing - expository and personal essays, short stories, poems, etc.
- Do not judge timed assignments on neatness and spelling.
- Have students proofread work after a delay - it's easier to see mistakes after a break.
- Help students create a checklist for editing work - spelling, neatness, grammar, syntax, clear progression of ideas, etc.
- Encourage use of a spell checker - speaking spell checkers are available for handwritten work
- Reduce amount of copying; instead, focus on writing original answers and ideas
- Have student complete tasks in small steps instead of all at once.
- Find alternative means of assessing knowledge, such as oral reports or visual projects

**Encourage practice through low-stress opportunities for writing such as letters, a diary, making household lists or keeping track of sports teams.**

**Teenagers & Adults**

- Provide tape recorders to supplement note taking and to prepare for writing assignments.
- Create a step-by-step plan that breaks writing assignments into small tasks (see below).
- When organizing writing projects, create a list of keywords that will be useful.
- Provide clear, constructive feedback on the quality of work, explaining both the strengths and weaknesses of the project, commenting on the structure as well as the information that is included.
- Use assistive technology such as voice-activated software if the mechanical aspects of writing remain a major hurdle.

Many of these tips can be used by all age groups. It is never too early or too late to reinforce the skills needed to be a good writer.

Though teachers and employers are required by law to make "reasonable accommodations" for individuals with learning disabilities, they may not be aware of how to help. Speak to them about dysgraphia, and explain the challenges you face as a result of your learning disability.



## How to Approach Writing Assignments

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### Plan First

- Plan your paper (Pull together your ideas and consider how you want them in your writing.)
- Organize your thoughts and ideas
- Create an outline or graphic organizer to be sure you've included all your ideas.
- Make a list of key thoughts and words you will want to use in your paper.

### Write a Draft

This first draft should focus on getting your ideas on paper - don't worry about making spelling or grammar errors. Using a computer is helpful because it will be easier to edit later on.

### Edit Your Work

- Check your work for proper spelling, grammar and syntax; use a spell checker if necessary.
- Edit your paper to elaborate and enhance content - a thesaurus is helpful for finding different ways to make your point.

### Revise Your Work, Producing a Final Draft

- Rewrite your work into a final draft.
- Be sure to read it one last time before submitting it.

*This excerpt reprinted with permission from the National Center for Learning Disabilities. To access the full article as well as additional information regarding dysgraphia, please visit the NCLD website at <http://www.nclld.org>.*





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# Personal Stories

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The purpose of this section is to provide you with the perspective of parents, family members and those living with the disability or special health care need. These stories give you insight of what life was like growing up and what life looks like now, as well as some of the joys and challenges that were experienced.

Written personal stories are one way of connecting to others who have similar experiences. Another way of connecting with others is through the Sharing Our Strengths peer support network. This service of the MODDRC provides you with an individualized match specific to what you want. This may include being matched to mentors with a similar disability experience, a mentor located in a similar part of the state or around a specific issue. If you are interested in being matched or in becoming a mentor for someone else, please contact us.



## Parents Can Make a Difference

*By Peggy, mother of a child with dysgraphia*

Moms just know. We see when our children are struggling. Their signs of frustration, disappointment, and sometimes even anger come bubbling out. We can feel the toll it takes on our child's self-esteem. It's a heavy load to bear. Thankfully, a parent can do something about it.

My daughter Jackie was in 2nd grade when I saw the signs. Smart daughter. Good learner. Poor handwriting. With heavy eraser marks, she tore right through the paper, erasing again and again. She felt she just couldn't get it to look right, at least not the way she wanted. Her writing would start out okay, but get worse and worse until she hit some sort of wall inside herself. This seemed to happen more frequently when there were time limits placed on her.

Her school responded to her difficulties in creating written work by placing her in a reading tutoring group. We knew her reading skills were fine. It was the writing that was giving her fits.

We already knew she was experiencing high anxiety at school, and were taking steps to get her some help. We wondered if the writing difficulties were a sign of a possible obsessive-compulsive disorder. But that didn't seem to fit quite right.

After doing some research on my own, I started to think that a learning disability could be the source of her struggle. But we knew we needed expert help to find out for sure.

I carefully recounted what I'd seen to the psychologist we were referred to by Jackie's medical team. In this case, like many others, a watchful and informed parent was the key to finding solutions more quickly. It was just the information the doctor needed to know in order to narrow down the causes. That way, she knew where to focus Jackie's testing.

After looking at all the possibilities, the psychologist felt certain that Jackie was showing signs of dysgraphia, a learning disability that affects a person's writing skills. Her father and I felt we had found the answers to many of our questions. But we still had more.

We looked at different options for helping Jackie to succeed. Not everyone will make the same choice, but in our case, we felt home schooling was the best way to meet Jackie's needs: one-on-one attention and flexibility about how she showed her learning progress.

When we began home schooling, we removed the pressure of time limits. Her work improved when anxiety about finishing "in time" wasn't part of the project. We also gave Jackie greater freedom of expression. If needed, she could draw us a picture to communicate her knowledge, rather than writing a paragraph. At the same time, we learned to use the things she loves to inspire her learning. For example, Jackie loves animals, so she recently began designing a chicken coop as part of her curriculum.

We also focused on learning important keyboarding skills and how to write in cursive. Both of these methods have been much easier for her than writing in print, and helped her produce better work.

Jackie is now in the 4th grade. It took us a year and a half to see the signs of her dysgraphia, find answers, and make the changes she needed to find success. The time we spent to do this was well worth it. She is artistic, athletic, and independent. She could go down any number of paths in her life ahead. We are proud of her, and we are so glad we found ways to encourage her through her struggles instead of letting them knock her down.





# Family Support, Advocacy and Services

The purpose of this section is to provide you with a listing of organizations specifically designed to meet the support needs of individuals with developmental disabilities or special health care needs and their families. This listing includes parent organizations, support groups or other advocacy organizations.



## Support for Families

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### **Sharing Our Strengths (SOS) Peer Support Network**

215 E. Pershing Road, 6<sup>th</sup> floor  
Kansas City, MO 64108  
Toll free: 800-444-0821  
Web: <http://www.sharingourstrengths.com>

SOS is a statewide support network of parents, family members, individuals with developmental disabilities and/or special health care needs, and professionals who are matched with peer mentors to share experiences, offer emotional support and to network with others. You can request an individual parent to parent or peer support match with another parent or individual who has experienced similar circumstances.

### **Learning Disabilities Association of MO**

Cathy Einhorn, President  
1942 E. Meadowmere #104  
P.O. Box 3303  
Springfield, MO 65808  
Phone: 417-864-5110  
Email: [ldamo@cland.net](mailto:ldamo@cland.net)  
Web: <http://www.ldamo.org/>

Local affiliate organizations located in Columbia, Kansas City, Ozark region, and St. Louis.

### **National Center for Learning Disabilities**

381 Park Avenue South, Suite 1401  
New York, NY 10016  
Phone: 212-545-7510  
Toll free: 888-575-7373  
Email: [nclcd@nclcd.org](mailto:nclcd@nclcd.org)  
Web: <http://www.nclcd.org> or <http://www.ld.org>





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# Missouri Service Systems

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The purpose of this section is to provide you with a listing of agencies focused on areas such as educational, medical care or social services to individuals with developmental disabilities or special health care needs. This includes listings such as state or local agencies, hospitals, clinics or education systems.



## Missouri Service System Contacts

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### Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

#### Division of Special Education

205 Jefferson Street

PO Box 480

Jefferson City, MO 65102

Phone: 573-751-5739

Fax: 573-526-4404

TDD: 800-735-2966

Web: <http://dese.mo.gov/divspeced>

Email: [webrepliespe@dese.mo.gov](mailto:webrepliespe@dese.mo.gov)

