

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

The Essex approach to teaching pupils with literacy difficulties

These are some Frequently Asked Questions to schools about literacy difficulties. They are taken from the Essex resource for schools called “Teaching Pupils with Literacy Difficulties: Practice Guidance for Essex Schools”.

They can be read alongside the leaflet “Information for parents: The Essex approach to teaching pupils with literacy difficulties”.

1. What can I do as a parent/carer if I am concerned about my child’s literacy skills?

It can be very worrying if your child is struggling to learn to read or write and this can sometimes lead to other difficulties such as changes in behaviour, emotional well-being and confidence. As a result, your child may need more reassurance than usual.

We know that pupils learn best when parents/carers and school operate in partnership. It is important that this relationship is maintained and is based on mutual respect and trust so that information can be shared and your child feels supported. It will be helpful if you can continue to talk with school staff about how you can support your child’s learning at home.

It is common for pupils who struggle to read to be reluctant to engage in reading activities at home. As a parent/carer, it would be beneficial if you were to regularly read to your child using books of their choice, whatever their age, to help to foster an enjoyment of reading.

There are an overwhelming number of websites giving information and advice to parents of children experiencing literacy difficulties. As with any internet information, some sites are more useful than others. Information about how best to help your child to practise reading and writing skills is likely to prove most helpful.

2. My child cannot read. What is the problem?

There are many reasons why children struggle to learn to read but typically, these involve multiple factors that are likely to vary from one child to another and are usually impossible to fully identify in the case of a particular child.

When difficulties emerge, it is important that initial checks are made to ensure that there is normal hearing and eyesight. Having ruled out a sensory problem of this kind, the primary focus in addressing the difficulty should be upon the child’s specific language and literacy skills and their attitudes and motivations to reading and schooling more generally.

If your child is not progressing in reading, a detailed reading assessment is required to establish what particular skills have been learnt and where there may be gaps in knowledge and understanding. This will provide important information to enable an appropriate intervention to be put into place. Such assessment should not be a one-off event but, rather, the child’s needs should be regularly monitored and reviewed. The Essex Accuracy and Fluency Assessment of Literacy Skills (AFALS) may be used, and further recommended detailed reading assessments for schools to use are in the Essex Provision Guidance Toolkit and the Essex Recommended Assessments for Identifying the Needs of Pupils with SEND.

3. My child can read fluently but really struggles to spell. What can schools do?

Some children learn to read but can find spelling difficult. This is because reading and spelling involve different skills. A detailed spelling assessment will enable schools to identify the specific areas of spelling that require intervention. The Essex Accuracy and Fluency Assessment of Literacy Skills (AFALS) may be used, and further recommended detailed spelling assessments for schools to use are in the Essex Provision Guidance Toolkit and the Essex Recommended Assessments for Identifying the Needs of Pupils with SEND.

We use different skills to spell words: spelling by remembering the whole word and how the word looks (sight word approach), spelling by sounding out the different sounds in the word (phonemic approach), and spelling by using the meanings of different parts of the word's structure (morphemic approach). A school-based assessment would determine whether an intervention is needed in any of these areas, or in generalising spelling skills into independent writing. These interventions would then need to be regularly reviewed and refined if necessary.

4. My child says that when the school uses beige coloured paper it makes the words easier to read. Why is this?

Some children who struggle with reading report experiencing visual discomfort or distortions due to the light reflected from written materials. Children who struggle with reading may be more susceptible to visual stress as they need to focus on the text more than fluent readers.

The use of coloured lenses, coloured overlays and using different colour paper have been recommended by optometrists to reduce the visual stress and make reading words less uncomfortable. However, visual sensitivity is not the cause of severe reading difficulty and there is no high-quality research evidence to support a relationship between the use of these visual interventions and reading gains. In order to improve reading, the focus needs to be on implementing specific reading interventions (as outlined in Section 7 above).

5. Does my child need extra time in GCSE exams in school?

Schools need to comply with The Joint Council for Qualifications regulations. When applying for access arrangements (e.g. extra time, a reader, a scribe), the school needs to demonstrate evidence of the 'learning difficulty' outlined in assessment completed by a qualified assessor. The focus of evidence is on test scores meeting the threshold for specialist arrangements rather than any diagnoses. Schools also need to demonstrate that there is a history of need, including evidence of the support provided and evidence of persistent difficulty over time.

6. Does my child need an Education, Health and Care Plan?

The majority of pupils' literacy needs can be met within the resources and support services available to the school via SEN Support. Very occasionally, concern about a child or young person's literacy attainment and progress continues despite a rigorous Assess, Plan, Do, Review framework that incorporates advice and recommendations from specialist support services. In such cases, further assessment can be requested from the Local Authority through an Educational Health and Care needs assessment (EHCNA), in line with the SEND Code of Practice.

7. Does my child need to be tested for dyslexia?

The most important thing is that your child's literacy difficulties are identified and recognised as early as possible and that the school responds using a structured 'assessment through teaching' approach that includes effective teaching methods to improve the targeted skills. Essentially, it is about working out exactly what your child can't yet do and helping them to learn it.

There is no scientific difference between what some people call 'dyslexia' and what others call 'severe and persistent literacy difficulties' or other such terms. There is therefore no universally agreed testing or assessment approach for identifying whether a child/young person has a condition described as dyslexia or might develop such a condition.

The usefulness of dyslexia screening tests has been questioned (e.g. Rose, 2009, p.43): "In general, evaluations of screening tests for dyslexia indicate that they do not predict later reading difficulties very well; other measures such as letter-knowledge and measures of phonological processing skill are, arguably, much better predictors. Most screening tests also produce high numbers of false positives and false negatives."

As noted above (in section 8 of this Practice Guidance), identification of dyslexia does not provide meaningful information about the cause of the difficulty, what intervention should be used, or indicate the rate of progress that a child/young person is likely to make.

In school, using assessment for intervention is the most appropriate means to identify any child who may be struggling with their reading and writing skills, and identifying the most appropriate course of action.

8. Why do some professionals identify dyslexia and others don't?

Some teachers with additional qualifications and some Educational Psychologists are involved in identifying dyslexia. However, Essex Local Authority is persuaded by research evidence that the reliability and validity of such identification, and its limited value for guiding intervention, are such that its educational value is limited. Professional reports are most useful when they provide a detailed assessment of specific literacy skills and make specific evidence-based recommendations that the school can then use to address the difficulties. At the same time, this type of information can be effectively provided by school staff.

9. Is this Practice Guidance saying that dyslexia does not exist?

Severe and complex difficulties in acquiring literacy skills clearly do exist. Our position, however, is that the term dyslexia is not particularly helpful in our goal of meeting the needs of all pupils with literacy difficulties in Essex.

This Practice Guidance is based upon an understanding that, in order to address literacy difficulties, the most effective approach is to use assessment that leads to specific and detailed descriptors of the individual's particular literacy skills (reading accuracy, reading fluency, comprehension, spelling and writing), in order to deliver effective interventions for them. It is about working out exactly what that child/young person can't yet do and helping them to learn it.

10. My child has been identified as having dyslexia. What will the school do?

Schools need to look at any reports and assessments alongside the school assessment data to identify all areas of literacy that need to be addressed.

This can then inform classroom planning and teaching and indicate whether a specific intervention is needed. Any teaching and intervention should be evidence-based and include the principles and practical implications detailed in Appendix 2.

Professional reports that are most useful for addressing literacy difficulties are those that include a detailed assessment of literacy skills and specific evidence-based recommendations that the school can use to address the difficulties, and in secondary schools, provide information that all subject teachers can take into account when teaching the other areas of the curriculum.

11. Does my child need to be taught by a specialist tutor?

Pupils with literacy difficulties require structured, focused and evidence-based interventions that are regularly reviewed and refined based on the pupil's progress (please refer to Appendix 2 for more details). These interventions are delivered in school, and if difficulties are persistent, schools should consult specialist support services, such as Essex Educational Psychologists or Inclusion Partners, for advice, guidance and/or training on refining the intervention.

Some specialist teachers or tutors have an additional qualification in work with children experiencing literacy difficulties. These teachers typically have extra training and expertise in assessing literacy skills, and planning and delivering bespoke interventions. At the same time, as noted above, the most appropriate techniques used to teach reading to children identified as having dyslexia, are the same as those used to teach any other struggling reader, and can be provided by all teachers, with appropriate training. Advice and training are available from Essex SEND Services and should be sought when required.

12. Are severe and persistent literacy difficulties/dyslexia hereditary?

There is evidence that literacy difficulties can occur within families over many generations. This phenomenon, however, does not enable us to predict with any certainty which children and young people will develop literacy difficulties and need additional intervention. The key requirement is that the progress of all developing readers is closely scrutinised from a young age and appropriate intervention put in place when needed.

13. Are literacy difficulties included in the Equality Act 2010?

A person has a disability under the Equality Act if they have a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse impact on their ability to carry out normal daily activities. Evidence of a long-term difficulty with literacy which impacts on a person's day-to-day life in a substantial way, would give protection under the Equality Act. There is no specific reference to any named condition or diagnosis within the Equality Act, and no requirement for there to be identification of any particular recognised condition in order to obtain protection under the Act.