

VOICES OF AMI TRAINING

Four Important Ways the Montessori School Supports Learners with Dyslexia

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Dyslexia, a prevalent learning disorder affecting about one in five children, is characterised by difficulties in reading, writing, and spelling. Dyslexia is a common cause of reading challenges in many languages and affects a significant number of children receiving special education services worldwide. For the learner with dyslexia, challenges occur in phonological processing, making it difficult for individuals to decode words accurately and fluently. Dyslexia is not a reflection of intelligence but rather a specific learning difference that requires tailored support and accommodations to help individuals with reading difficulties and reach their full potential. By providing a clear explanation of dyslexia to children and involving them in interventions that address their unique learning needs, Montessori education can empower dyslexic learners to succeed and thrive in their educational journey.

Montessori education, renowned for its individualised and hands-on approach, offers a range of strategies that can significantly benefit children struggling with sound awareness. The following are four key ways in which Montessori education supports children with dyslexia:

1. Rather than simply a technical skill, Maria Montessori called total reading the goal for the child, noting that “a child does not read until he receives ideas from the written word.” [1] Total reading is the emphasis on reading for understanding and capturing the emotion and intent of the author. This approach in Montessori education stands as a fundamental pillar in nurturing well-rounded literacy skills and fostering a lifelong love for reading in children. By prioritising comprehension and interpretation alongside mechanical reading skills, a holistic approach to literacy development is particularly beneficial for children with dyslexia. Understanding the deeper meaning of written text not only enhances reading proficiency but also cultivates critical thinking, empathy, and analytical skills. This approach goes beyond decoding words and focuses on extracting value from written language, empowering children to engage with texts on a profound level and develop a genuine appreciation for the written word.

2. The emphasis on the knowledge that sounds make up words establishes a crucial groundwork for literacy development, guiding children towards reading proficiency and language skills. This phonemic awareness begins early, perhaps three years old, through multisensory activities with the sounds and symbols of the child’s own language. Research indicates that teaching children specific phonemic manipulation skills, rather than a wide range of manipulations, significantly improves the ability to decode and comprehend written language. By mastering symbol-sound patterns through blending and segmenting activities,

children can establish a solid foundation for reading that supports interdisciplinary studies. This focus on sound awareness not only assists in decoding new words but also enables children to effectively apply their knowledge when faced with unfamiliar vocabulary, thereby promoting a deeper comprehension of written text.

3. Manipulative, multisensory materials and activities play a crucial role in enhancing learning outcomes for children. By engaging with tactile materials, learners can improve understanding of abstract concepts, refine fine motor skills, and enhance overall cognitive development. The interactive nature of manipulative materials promotes active engagement, independence, and retention of ideas, leading to a deeper level of comprehension and rendering learning more meaningful and engaging. Emphasizing hands-on experiences in Montessori education not only supports academic progress but also nurtures essential skills that contribute to the holistic development of children with dyslexia.

4. Finally, early intervention and monitoring of children with sound awareness struggles, combined with timely diagnosis, play a critical role in supporting these learners, as difficulties identified after about nine years old are more challenging to remediate. The reason for this is that a delay in diagnosis can lead to a compounding of initial disadvantages over time, making it harder to address reading difficulties effectively. By closely monitoring children with language processing struggles, educators and caregivers can identify potential challenges early on and provide the necessary support and accommodations to facilitate the child's learning progress. Early intervention strategies tailored to the specific needs of dyslexic learners can mitigate the impact of reading difficulties and empower children to develop essential literacy skills.

Dyslexia, a language disorder with a biological basis, involves struggles with reading and other language processing. For many children, reading difficulties can be addressed very successfully within the Montessori classroom. Although children with dyslexia require specific repetition, intervention, and support, they can be highly successful throughout school and in a multitude of vocations. The linguistic environment prepares children for total reading through multisensory activities, and the prepared adult uses the interests and strengths of the children to nurture growth and confidence. In sum, the Montessori community, from birth through adolescence, is designed to meet the needs of every individual child, including the learner with dyslexia.

NOTES

[1] Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child* (1948; New York: Random House, 1967), p. 229.

For further information on Supporting the Dyslexic Child in the Montessori Environment see <https://archives.montessori-ami.org/do/ec2ba38c-740d-4ca9-94de-5db35ead2b0c> (NAMTA Journal 39/3 09)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alison Awes has been the Director of 6–12 Training at the Montessori Center of Minnesota since 2010, and is the Director of 6–12 Training for the Maria Montessori Institute, London and the Montessori Institute Bangalore, India. She holds Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) Diplomas for Primary (ages three to six) and Elementary (ages six to twelve) levels, a B.A. in art history from Smith College, an M.A. in Latin–American studies from Tulane University, and an M.Ed. in Montessori education from Loyola University Maryland. She has taught in Montessori classrooms for ages six to nine and ages nine to twelve. Ms. Awes is an AMI examiner and consultant, and has served on the boards of private and charter (public) Montessori schools. A former board member of the AMI Elementary Alumni Association, she served as a pedagogical advisor for six years and currently works on the AMI Scientific Pedagogy Group.

As an international lecturer and keynote speaker, she has given numerous workshops and short courses on a wide variety of topics, including dyslexia, art and the work of the hand, the psychological and physical prepared environment, and moral development in the digital age. She has worked on the faculty at international AMI teacher training centers, including those in Australia, India, South Africa, and Thailand, and has also directed courses in England and Switzerland. Ms. Awes has worked to advance the philosophy, spirit, and practice of Montessori through regularly mentoring teachers in Montessori classrooms worldwide. An advocate for children with reading challenges, she also holds Level I Orton Gillingham training. Ms. Awes attended Montessori school until the age of twelve.

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