



The Association
for Child and Adolescent
Mental Health

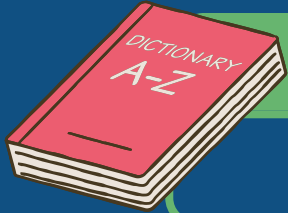
Rethinking Reading Disorders

A Guide to Key Concepts, Session Recap, and Further resources



[Start](#) →

What You'll Find in This Guide



Glossary.

Key definitions used across the session

Session recap

A summary highlighting the most important points from the session



Further reading

Selected resources for further exploration

Test your knowledge activity.

A set of questions and answers to test what you've learned and reinforce key ideas



Glossary

Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)

Persistent difficulties in the acquisition and use of oral language, affecting comprehension and/or expression (e.g. vocabulary, sentence structure, discourse), with onset in the developmental period and associated functional impact

Dyslexia

A specific learning difficulty characterised by persistent difficulties in accurate and/or fluent word reading and spelling, typically associated with phonological processing difficulties, despite adequate instruction and opportunity

Language-based skills

Oral language abilities such as vocabulary, grammar, and narrative skills that underpin reading development and support both decoding and comprehension

Phonological difficulties

Difficulties in processing the sound structure of spoken language, including skills such as phonological awareness, phonological memory, and access to phonological representations

Rethinking reading disorders

Emeritus Professor Maggie Snowling

“

“We tend to look at children once they start to learn to read, and we haven’t started early enough to look at their early development.”

“If we have a mantra, it is that reading is language. Reading is actually just the written form of language, and so we need good language in order to be able to read well.”

”

A core shift in how we understand reading difficulties

Reading difficulties are developmental and multifactorial

They are not explained by a single deficit

Reading is fundamentally a language-based skill

Children follow different developmental pathways to reading difficulties

Oral language: *the foundation of literacy*

Oral language plays a central and early role in reading development

Vocabulary, grammar, and narrative skills support both decoding and comprehension

Language skills shape phonological awareness, a key foundation for learning to read

Oral language influences how children learn letter-sound relationships



"It's those that go to school with poor language that have the greatest risk of poor reading."



More than one **pathway** to **poor reading**

Longitudinal studies show different routes to reading difficulties:

Family risk of dyslexia

Increased likelihood of phonological difficulties

Early language disorder

High risk of word reading and comprehension problems

Combined risk

Greatest vulnerability when family history and language disorder co-occur



Protective factors matter! Strong oral language can buffer risk, even in children with family history

Developmental risks do not lead to a single outcome, but to different reading profiles over time.



Dyslexia within developmental pathways

Dyslexia is a developmental reading difficulty

It exists on a continuum of severity, rather than as an all-or-nothing condition

Dyslexia often emerges over time, becoming clearer as reading demands increase

Phonological difficulties are commonly involved, but they do not fully explain reading difficulties

Dyslexia frequently co-occurs with other developmental difficulties, particularly developmental language disorder (DLD)

Dyslexia and mental health

The relationship is complex and indirect, rather than straightforward or causal

Reading difficulties are associated with higher risk of anxiety and ADHD

Emotional and behavioural difficulties are more pronounced when language difficulties are present

Links between reading difficulties and depression are weaker and less consistent



Screening and early identification

Screening aims to flag early vulnerability, rather than provide definitive conclusions

Oral language skills at school entry are a key focus for early identification


Screening should look beyond phonics alone, considering broader language development


Reading difficulties may not yet be visible when developmental risk is already present

Information Worth Sharing

 *Reading difficulties are developmental and multifactorial, not the result of a single deficit*

 *Oral language plays a central role in reading development and often signals risk before reading failure appears.*

 *There is more than one pathway to reading difficulties, shaped by different combinations of risk and protective factors.*

 *Links between reading difficulties and mental health appear complex and indirect, with language difficulties often associated with greater emotional and behavioural vulnerability*

 *Screening can help identify early risk, particularly when it looks beyond phonics alone and is used before reading failure emerges*

Recommended Reading and Resources



Reading Screen

A brief digital screener of word and non-word reading designed to help identify children who may be at risk of decoding difficulties.

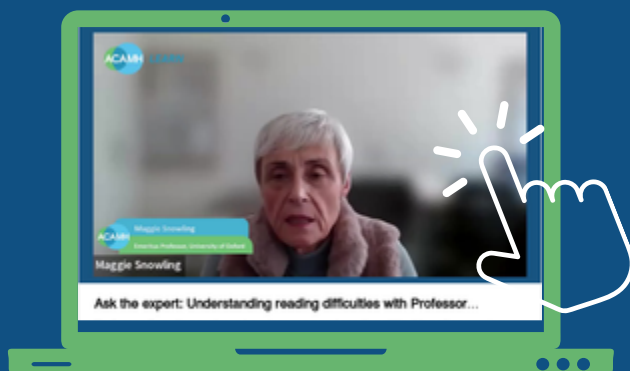


Language Screen

A short digital screener of oral language skills, supporting early identification of language-related risk that may impact later reading development.



Ask the Expert - ACAMH Learn



Selected articles



[Professor Maggie Snowling on rethinking reading disorders](#)



[Do we really need a new definition of dyslexia? A commentary.](#)



[Towards a consensus for dyslexia practice: Findings of a Delphi study on assessment and identification](#)



Test your knowledge!

1

Why does Maggie describe reading as a language-based skill?

2

T o F? "Dyslexia is best understood as a fixed, all-or-nothing diagnostic category"

3

What is the main purpose of screening in early reading development?

4

What is the relationship between family risk and language difficulties?

5

T o F? "Reading difficulties are associated with higher risk of depression"

6

How does a dimensional view of dyslexia change the way reading difficulties are interpreted over time?

[Check the answers](#)





Check your answers!

1

Because vocabulary, grammar, and broader language skills support both decoding and comprehension

2

False. Dyslexia is described as dimensional and developmental

3

To identify early risk, not to make a diagnosis

4

They represent different pathways, with combined risk linked to greater vulnerability

5

False. Links with depression are weaker, while anxiety and ADHD are more commonly associated

6

It focuses on developmental change and individual profiles rather than fixed labels



Thank you for joining us at this event!

You can explore our upcoming
CPD events and training
opportunities at
<https://www.acamh.org/events/>