

Growing Stars

A Parent Guidebook for Supporting
Your Dyslexic Child

By Chris Cole



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Learning Differences Aotearoa Trust
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Why This Book Exists

This book is based on a two-day workshop for dyslexic children called **Growing Stars**, designed to help them understand and manage the emotional impact of learning differences through creative, hands-on activities.

The programme was developed by a dedicated team in 2017 and, with strong support from community funding, positively impacted the lives of many dyslexic children and their families until 2025.

As part of Growing Stars, there was a compulsory parent workshop. The aim was to help parents understand what their children were learning and how they could support them both at home and in their academic journey.

This book draws from that parent session, presented by Chris Cole, and brings together the key insights, tools, and strategies in one place.

Growing Stars is a programme overseen by Learning Differences Aotearoa Trust. Feedback from parents whose children attended the Growing Stars workshop:

‘The biggest learning was about the emotions. She is now able to say if she is feeling anxious. She is verbalising how she is feeling instead of acting out her emotions. This is a good change around for her.’

‘I didn’t realise that she was struggling like her older brother, so it has helped me to understand her and it’s great that she is more aware of herself and what is happening for her and that it’s okay.’



Growing Stars

by Learning Differences Aotearoa Trust

About the Author

Chris Cole is a parent, advocate, and dyslexia campaigner who has spent more than a decade supporting families, educators, and workplaces to better understand dyslexia. Like many parents, Chris's journey began at home, trying to make sense of her children's learning challenges. That personal search for answers led not only to the discovery that two of her boys were dyslexic, but also to the realisation that she was dyslexic herself.

Since then, Chris has worked tirelessly to shift the conversation about dyslexia, moving it away from deficit and towards recognition of strengths, potential, and wellbeing. She is the co-founder of Dyslexia Support South and Growing Stars, and the founder of Learning Differences Aotearoa Trust, as well as other dyslexia-focused initiatives.

Her work is grounded in lived experience, professional training, and years of listening to dyslexic children, teens and their families. This book is another step in that journey: presenting her practical insights and strategies to help parents feel informed, supported, and ready to advocate with confidence.



A Note for Parents

This book is full of ideas, strategies, and insights. But please know you don't have to do everything, and you don't have to do it all at once. Parenting a dyslexic child already takes courage and energy.

Think of this guide as a toolkit. Some strategies will fit your child and your family right now, while others may be more useful later. Take what works, leave what doesn't, and come back when you need fresh ideas.

Sometimes you'll discover something new. Other times you'll find yourself nodding, realising you're already doing it and that confirmation matters too.

You're not failing if you can't manage every suggestion, you're learning alongside your child. And every step you take, no matter how small, makes a difference.

How this Book Works

In this book, the word parent refers to anyone who cares for and supports a child — whether you're a parent, grandparent, or part of their wider whānau. Every caregiver plays an important role in a dyslexic child's journey, and this book is for you.



Contents

What Is Dyslexia?	8
General Overview Of Dyslexia	10
What Dyslexia Isn't	10
What You Might Notice As A Parent	12
The Emotional Impact Of Dyslexia	15
Frustration	16
Low Self-Esteem	16
Anxiety	17
Masking Behaviours	19
Navigating The Emotional Impact	23
Managing Frustration	23
Building Self-Esteem	26
Navigating Anxiety	31
When the Brain Goes Offline	31
Reducing Offline Moments	35

Strategies For Managing Dyslexia	37
Dyslexic Strengths Strategies	37
Dyslexic Challenges Strategies	43
Parents As Advocates	50
Understanding The Advocate Role	50
Dyslexic Profile	53
Raising Dyslexia With Your Child	54
Superpower Is A Tricky Word	55
Dyslexia Assessment	56
Looking Ahead	58
Acknowledgements	59
Final Words From Chris	60

Chapter 1: What Is Dyslexia?

Dyslexia is a label used to describe a different way of thinking and processing information. It brings both challenges and strengths.

Strengths of Dyslexic Thinking

Big-picture thinkers

Not just a preference, but often a necessity for understanding. Dyslexics tend to think in a global format, holding lots of information in their heads to see how something might work or look before they even begin. They often ask questions to understand the full picture.

Problem solvers

Always looking for how to make things better, faster, or more efficient. They connect information differently, intuitively, and quickly, often coming up with seemingly out-of-the-box ideas or comments. They can be very deep thinkers.

Deep empathy

Often intuitively and emotionally tuned in to others. They can sense how people feel — not just from what is said, but how it is said. They are very tuned in to tone of voice and body language.

Visual learners

Tend to retain information more easily when it's seen or visual based language is used. They often remember better if they can picture what is being said.

Challenges of Dyslexic Thinking

These challenges don't mean the dyslexic individual can't do them, it simply means their brain works differently, and it takes more effort for their brain to learn these skills. With more time, support or a different approach they can succeed.

Reading, writing, and spelling

Dyslexia is a language processing difference that requires more time and effort to learn these skills. Dyslexics find it a challenge to hear the sounds that make up words (phonological awareness). This can also affect how they speak — for example, saying 'saghetti' instead of 'spaghetti.'

But it's more than just this – it has a holistic impact...

Short-term memory

Holding onto and using information, especially in the moment, can be hard. This affects remembering instructions, recalling basic facts for maths, following what they've read, and copying from the board in class.

Ordering and sequencing

Struggles with organising thoughts or tasks in the right order, whether speaking, writing, or completing tasks e.g. knowing the steps to complete tasks whether maths calculations or tidying a bedroom. Writing thoughts down in a way that flows and makes sense can also be a challenge.

Processing verbal information

Verbal instructions can be difficult to follow without time to visualise or connect to the big picture; dyslexics often need to 'translate' what they hear into a format that suits how their brain works. They may struggle to retain verbal instructions, or easily understand verbal information.



Illustration by Robbie Cole

This picture is used to describe to young dyslexic thinkers the difference in how people can approach tasks. Some people find it easier, and the path is more straightforward. Others take a longer path, and it can be tiring and take more effort. Sometimes they even feel frustrated or like they want to stop and go no further. However, this longer pathway allows them to see different points of view along the way, it still gets them there, even though it can take longer and more effort.

General Overview of Dyslexia

Dyslexia sits on a spectrum. Some people's reading is only mildly affected, while for others, dyslexia can significantly impact their ability to read, write, and spell. Those most affected often experience overlapping learning differences such as ADHD, dyscalculia (difficulty with numbers), or visual processing challenges.

At the other end, some dyslexics compensate, usually with their strong visual memory or effective and useful coping strategies, making it easy to miss. These individuals are often referred to as 'compensated dyslexics'.

Dyslexia is hereditary with studies showing that if a parent is dyslexic, there's a 40–60% chance their child will be too (Pennington et al., 2009).

It's also common — the exact percentage depends on the criteria used to measure:

- When only literacy skills are measured (reading, writing, spelling), dyslexia is estimated to affect about **5–7%** of people.
- When fuller definitions are used (including how the brain processes and organises information), the figure rises to **10–15%**.
- Some global estimates suggest it may be as high as **20%** of the population.

What Dyslexia Isn't

Dyslexia is not a visual issue. While some dyslexics may also experience visual stress or tracking difficulties, these are separate challenges and not part of dyslexia itself.

It's not 'just writing letters backwards'. Reversing letters like b and d, or numbers like 6 and 9, is common for many young children learning to write, dyslexic or not. For dyslexic individuals, these reversals may persist longer, however, dyslexia is not defined by letter reversals.

It doesn't mean they will always be poor spellers. There are dyslexic individuals who have learnt techniques to spell very well. They may rely on strong visual memory while still having poor phonological skills, which means some words can still trip them up.

Compensated Dyslexia

Not all dyslexia looks the same on the outside. Some learners develop strategies to work around their difficulties, and this is often called compensated dyslexia. On the surface, they may appear to be coping well, but the effort it takes can be exhausting. These children usually rely on their strong visual memory, general knowledge, observation skills, and extra study time to get through school.

The challenge is that while their coping skills can hide the signs of dyslexia, they don't remove the underlying differences. In fact, compensation can come at a cost, such as stress, anxiety, or feeling like an 'imposter.' Compensated dyslexics can often manage primary school well, but their struggles may surface more strongly in high school with the pressure of increased workloads and exams.

Indicators of a compensated dyslexic learner:

- Over-reliance on memory and may memorise whole words, passages, or instructions to cover difficulties with decoding or writing.
- Written output doesn't match thinking so their ideas are strong but their writing can seem limited, unclear, or out of sync with what they can express verbally.
- Takes longer than peers to complete reading and writing tasks, often spending extra time on homework.
- Perfectionism or over-helpfulness so works extra hard or takes on 'helper' roles to avoid their own challenges being noticed.
- Underlying anxiety about their abilities; when overwhelmed, they may burn out or disengage.
- Struggle to understand math word problems or the wording of exam questions.



Did you know?

One quarter of dyslexics are considered compensated dyslexics.

What You Might Notice as a Parent

This table shows some of the behaviours you might notice in your child and what could be happening underneath. Sometimes it's just one or two things; other times, there may be a mix.

What You Might See	What Could be Happening Underneath
Avoiding reading or writing tasks	• Difficulty with phonological processing and decoding (hearing and processing the sounds that make up words) • Difficulty sequencing their thoughts from global/big picture down to a linear format. • Co-occurring visual stress issue. • Anxiety from pressure of reading • Anxiety or masking behaviours to avoid being seen as struggling
Reading slowly or guessing at words	• Weakness in phonological awareness and word retrieval • Poor short-term memory • Anxiety from the pressure of reading
Mixing up letters (like b/d or g/j)	• Visual memory overload or underdeveloped letter recognition
Inconsistent or unpredictable spelling	• Difficulty connecting sounds to letters and holding spelling patterns in working memory. • Hasn't been explicitly taught the spelling rules.
Great verbal ideas but can't write them down	• Difficulty transferring thoughts to written language due to working memory and sequencing issues. • Difficulty sequencing their thoughts from global/big picture down to a linear format.
Forgets instructions or needs constant reminders	• Short-term or working memory challenges, difficulty with verbal processing • Speaker is using too many words or speaking too fast
Struggles with multi-step tasks	• Short term memory and sequencing difficulties

Says 'I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing'	• Overwhelm, doesn't have the big picture of what is required, and difficulty processing or recalling instructions • Instructions given were not in a dyslexia friendly format
Need everything explained or asks lots of questions before going somewhere or starting something	• Needs the big picture to feel safe and understand what is going on. • Needs the big picture to help them anticipate what's coming and whether they need to mask.
Responds off-topic	• Their thinking moves at a different speed (faster) and connects ideas in unique ways. They may jump ahead and share something that seems random but makes sense to them.
Needs repetition or rephrasing	• Verbal input isn't sticking – needs visual or big-picture connections
Freezes when put on the spot	• Performance anxiety
Frustration, anger, or withdrawal	• Cumulative stress, low confidence, and mental fatigue
Says 'I'm dumb' or 'I hate school'	• Impact on self-esteem and emotional wellbeing from being in environments that don't recognise and support their way of thinking.
Avoidance of homework	• Reinforcing their challenges, making their anxiety increase. • Mentally fatigued from masking at school all day. • Don't understand the instructions.
Responds in a delayed fashion	• Verbal processing delays from spending time having to visualise or reinterpret information.
Not wanting to participate in team sports or other activities.	• May struggle with verbal instructions and sequenced drills • Feels as if others will find out they can't follow instructions easily • Don't have the big picture of what is required.



Chris's Insight

Parents often adapt their behaviour at home without even realising it. For example, if your child struggles with too many verbal instructions, you may have naturally started giving just one or two at a time.

The strengths of dyslexic thinking are more consistent than the challenges. Many dyslexic individuals use their problem-solving abilities and emotional strengths to mask their struggles and create clever work arounds, which can make dyslexia harder to spot.

Key Takeaways From This Chapter

1. Dyslexia is a different way of thinking - not a deficit
2. Dyslexia affects more than reading and writing
3. Behaviours can offer important clues to what is going on underneath
4. Parents often adapt instinctively, even before they fully understand what's happening.

Parent Reflection

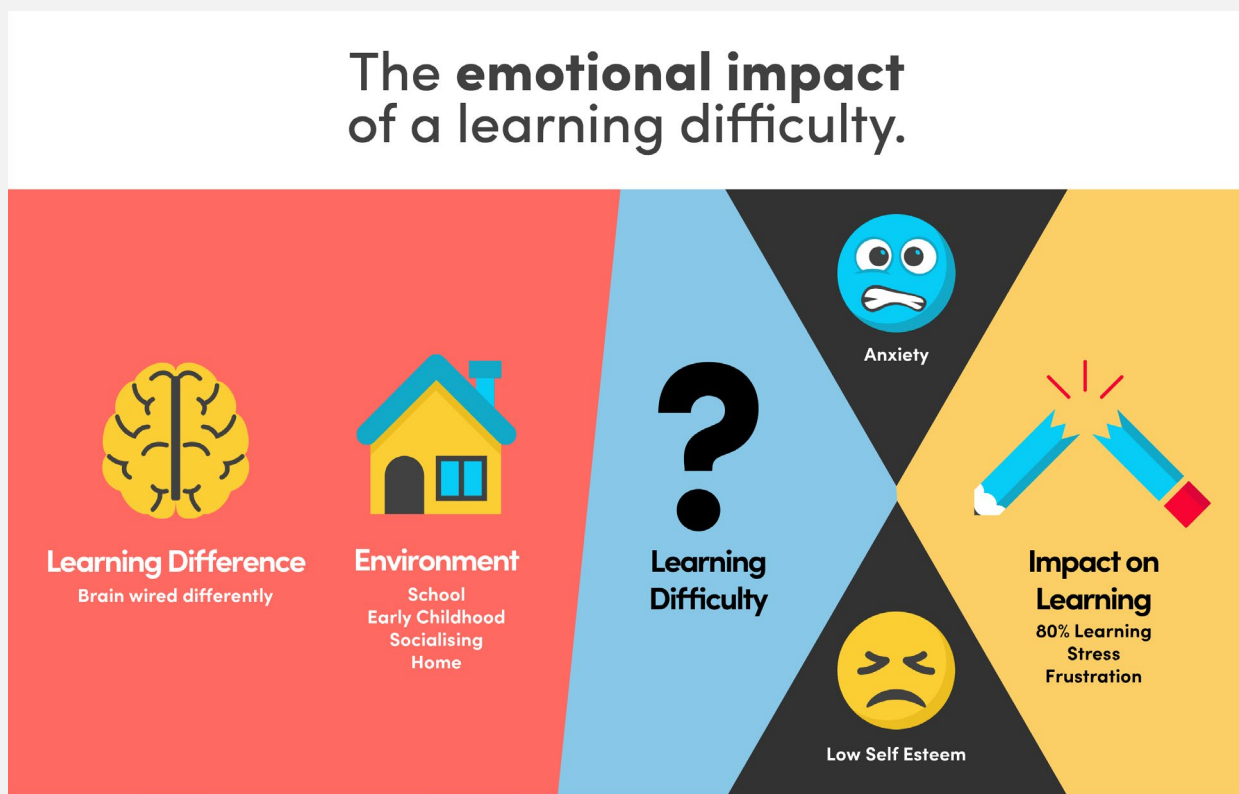
- What strengths have you already noticed in your child's way of thinking?
- When does your child seem to shine most naturally?
- What one shift could you make to help them see their dyslexia as a difference, not a deficit?

Chapter 2: The Emotional Impact of Dyslexia

For many dyslexic children, the greatest challenges aren't always the reading or writing difficulties, they are often the emotional toll of being in a system that doesn't understand how they think or learn.

When their efforts go unrecognised, or they feel unsupported, it can lead to frustration, low self-esteem, and anxiety about learning. Over time, these emotional responses can become a greater barrier to progress than the dyslexic challenges themselves.

That's why it's so important to support not just the learning challenges, but the emotional ones too. When parents understand how dyslexia can affect a child's confidence and sense of self, they can respond with strategies that build them up, helping them feel capable, valued, and understood.



Dyslexic thinking on its own is just a learning difference. But when it's placed in an environment that doesn't recognise this way of thinking, it can create emotional impacts or learning difficulties.

Frustration

What this is:

Frustration builds when dyslexic learners see others around them completing tasks more easily, for example, when a classmate writes a full page and they've only managed a few sentences despite putting in just as much effort. It's made worse by comments like 'try harder' or 'you could do this yesterday – why not today?' This frustration can also stem from not understanding instructions.

What you might see:

- Giving up easily
- Anger or outbursts
- Walking away or refusing to engage with the task

Low Self-Esteem

What this is:

Low self-esteem can develop when a dyslexic learner finds schoolwork consistently challenging and begins to believe things will never improve. They may believe their brain will always be that way. This is known as a **fixed mindset** – the belief that their ability to learn can't change. This mindset doesn't just affect learning; it also impacts their motivation to learn.

A dyslexic individual's emotional awareness partnered with low self-esteem can lead them to misread situations and take things personally. For example, if a teacher walks in frowning because they've just hurt their elbow, a dyslexic student might assume, 'They're upset with me,' or 'They've found out I'm not coping.'

What you might see:

- Believing that success is just luck, but personalising mistakes is proof they're not good enough
- Perfectionism – needing work to be 100% right or feeling it's a failure with no in-between. To manage this, they either apply extra effort to get perfection or avoid tasks to prevent failure or criticism
- Blaming others for mistakes or poor performance
- Feeling powerless over how they learn
- Avoiding new experiences or challenges
- Relying on others to make decisions for them
- Fearing embarrassment or ridicule

Anxiety

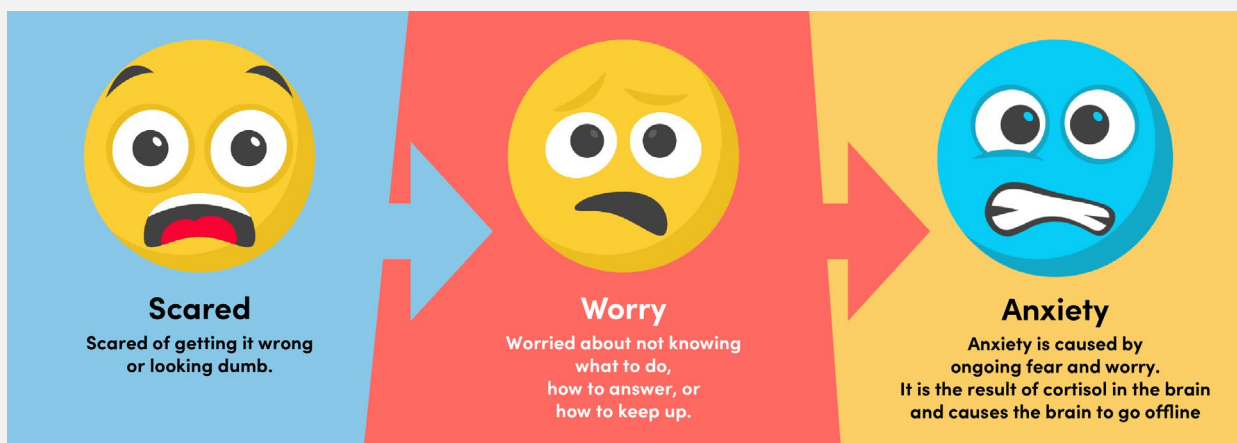
What this is:

Anxiety is a normal response when someone feels unsafe or uncomfortable and it can be helpful in genuinely dangerous situations. It happens when stress chemicals, cortisol being one of them, flood the prefrontal cortex (the thinking part of the brain), hijacking it. This essentially takes the brain offline or makes it go blank, leaving the person incapable of rational thought as the emotional part of their brain takes over. This is known as the fight, flight or freeze response.

How it impacts dyslexic individuals

For dyslexic individuals of all ages, this feeling of being unsafe or uncomfortable often happens around their learning or work, and it can occur many times a day.

Another layer of anxiety comes from their strong desire to mask or cover their struggles. This often begins at a very young age, when dyslexic learners start using strategies to cover up their difficulties with learning. When they are in situations where they fear others might find out what they can't do, their anxiety is likely to spike and take their brain offline.



This diagram explains the brain offline process for dyslexic individuals.

In classroom situations, their mind might race with worrying thoughts like:

- 'Will I understand the teacher's instructions?'
- 'Will I be able to keep up?'
- 'Will I know how to answer?'

When they feel at risk of being exposed, of others realising they're not coping, their anxiety spikes. This can push their brain into a fully 'offline' state, where the emotional part takes over and the thinking part shuts down. While in this state, they are not capable of taking in new learning or showing what they already know, even if they understand the content.

That's why understanding how the brain reacts under stress is so important. When a dyslexic learner's brain goes offline, it can have a substantial impact on their ability to learn, engage, or participate in the classroom.



Chris's Insight

Parents often say, 'My child is really struggling this year, but they were fine last year.'

My first question in this situation is always: 'How is the relationship with the teacher?'

Most of the time, the reply is: 'They don't like the teacher.'

For many dyslexic learners, this belief stems from the way the teacher speaks. A firm or 'growly' tone can easily be interpreted as dislike or disapproval. That perception alone can trigger their brain to go offline more often than in the previous year.

Anxiety Triggers

From experience, these are some common examples of what can trigger a dyslexic individual's brain to go 'offline' in the classroom:

- A teacher with a stern or growly voice. The dyslexic learner may perceive that the teacher doesn't like them.
- Anything that must be completed within a time limit, such as timed tests or having to finish writing before the bell rings.
- Hearing the word 'test' or even comments like 'we're doing reading now.'
- Struggling to form certain letters when writing, e.g. confusion between b and d, or g and j.
- Being unsure how to spell common words, such as, they, said, wh- words, or does.
- Visual overload with too much text on a worksheet or in a book.
- Auditory overload with too much verbal information given at once.

An example of how this can impact learning:

If a dyslexic learner is writing and needs to use a word with a **g** in it, a letter they struggle with, they may pause, unsure whether it should be a **g** or a **j**. If they can't recall which one to use, anxiety kicks in and their brain goes offline. Once that happens, it becomes very difficult to continue writing until their brain calms down.

Masking Behaviours

Masking behaviours are coping strategies dyslexic learners use, often unconsciously, to distract others from noticing they're struggling. These behaviours often begin at a young age and can become automatic. They are typically a response to difficulties that come from trying to complete tasks in environments that don't match how their brain processes information.

Some masking strategies can appear helpful or productive, while others are more self-sabotaging.

Examples include:

- Being overly helpful
- Being the class joker
- Working extremely hard or displaying perfectionism
- Avoiding school altogether
- Being very quiet or withdrawn
- Charming the teacher
- Being disruptive
- Copying others
- 'Forgetting' to do things (e.g. homework)



Did you know?

Dyslexic individuals can be highly creative with their masking. Here are some comments from learners themselves:

- 'If I help the teacher set up the room, the teacher doesn't notice I'm not reading.'
- 'If I create a distraction and others get in trouble, no one sees that I'm not reading.'

More about masking and anxiety:

- Masking takes a lot of energy and mental effort.
- Brain-offline triggers can differ for each dyslexic learner.
- Masking behaviours are often indicators that a dyslexic brain is struggling with a learning task or environment.



Chris's Insight

I once observed two dyslexic learners in a class who would go offline simply by seeing their teacher glance at her watch ten minutes before the lesson ended. They knew she was about to announce that time was nearly up, and their anxiety spiked. The thought of not finishing their writing made it obvious, to themselves and others, that they were struggling.



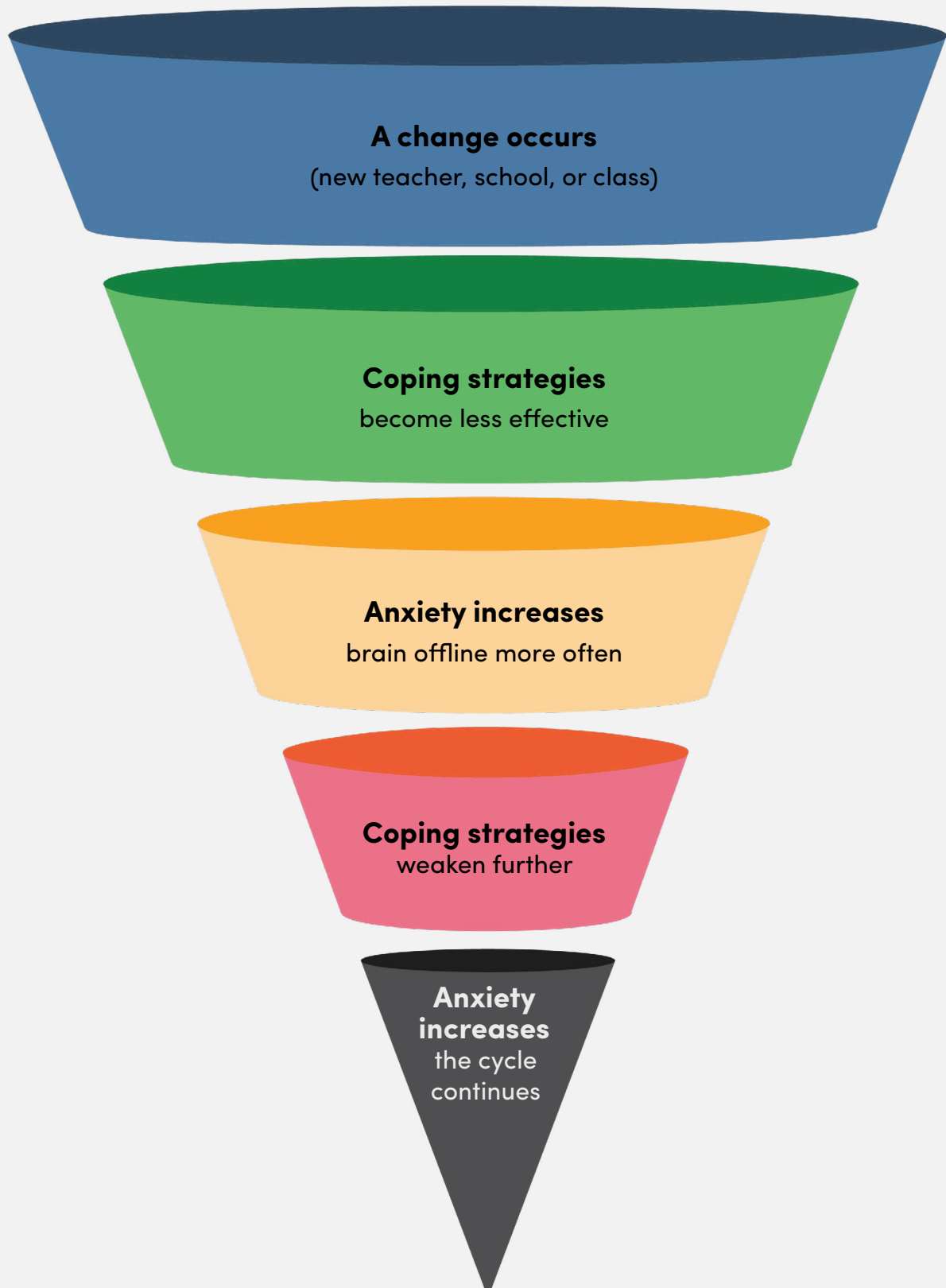
Parent Insight

'One of my dyslexic sons watched his younger brother play football for a whole year before he tried it himself. He wasn't just learning the rules and getting the big picture of what it involved — he was also building up the confidence to join in. He needed time to understand how everything worked before he felt okay to have a go.'

Transitions and the Anxiety Spiral

Transitions are periods in a dyslexic individual's life when, due to change, their usual coping and masking strategies become less effective. As a result, their stress and anxiety can become more visible, which threatens their ability to mask. When this happens, they may worry that others will notice they are struggling — a fear that can quickly increase anxiety and trigger brain-offline moments.

Once the brain goes offline more often, coping strategies weaken further, leading to even greater anxiety. This creates a spiral effect where each stage feeds the next, making it harder to manage day-to-day demands.



The Anxiety Spiral

Periods of transition can include:

- Starting a new school
- Beginning a new school year or entering a new classroom environment
- Moving from primary to intermediate school or intermediate to high school
- Increased workload or pressure, such as during high school or exam years
- A change in teacher or support staff
- A change in school structure or routines
- Stressful changes outside of school — such as a shift in family circumstances, relocation, or health issues
- Social changes — friendship breakdowns or being in unfamiliar peer groups
- Shifting from learning support to mainstream, or vice versa

Key Takeaways From This Chapter

1. Dyslexia affects more than learning — it affects how a child feels
2. Anxiety can take the brain 'offline' and impact learning
3. Masking hides the struggle
4. Transitions increase the mental load
5. Emotional support is just as important as academic support.

Parent Reflection

- What behaviours show you that your child is feeling frustrated or discouraged?
- How do you think your child tries to hide their struggles (e.g., avoiding tasks, joking, going quiet)?
- What helps your child feel emotionally supported when things get tough?

Chapter 3: Navigating the Emotional Impact

There are two key areas where dyslexic children need support:

1. **Understanding and managing how their brain works** – the mix of challenges and strengths that come with dyslexia. You'll find more on this in Chapter 5.
2. **Navigating the emotional impact** – how their experiences affect their confidence, motivation, and overall wellbeing.

The emotional side of dyslexia is often underestimated, yet it plays a major role in how well a child can engage with their learning. If they feel anxious, overwhelmed, or as though they're constantly behind at school, it's hard for any strategy, no matter how positive, to work effectively.

Parents sometimes worry about how they can help, especially if they don't feel confident supporting reading, writing, or maths directly. The truth is, one of the most powerful contributions parents can make is in the emotional support space. Helping a dyslexic child understand what is happening, and guiding them in managing their responses, can make a genuine and lasting difference. When dyslexic children feel emotionally supported, the benefits flow through into their confidence and academic progress.

And there's a benefit for you too. When you begin to understand what's going on beneath the surface, it can ease your own worry. Dyslexia can feel overwhelming, especially if you're watching your child struggle and aren't sure how to help. But once you see that their behaviour often has a reason, and that there are things you can do, it becomes far less daunting. Less anxiety for you means more calm for them. And when everyone feels a bit more settled, learning becomes much more possible.

Managing Frustration

Frustration can run high – for both dyslexic children and their parents. But often, what looks like refusal, defiance, or distraction is a signal that something isn't working for the way their brain processes the task.

The key to managing frustration is **acceptance**, and acceptance grows from understanding. When parents and children both understand how dyslexic thinking works, it shifts the focus and can reduce friction.



Chris's Insight

Understanding leads to acceptance. Acceptance gives space for change.

Strategies for Managing Frustration

1. Learn about dyslexic thinking

The more you know, the more you will notice what is really going on. Many behaviours that seem disruptive or avoidant may actually be signs your child is overwhelmed, stuck, or trying to protect themselves from being 'unmasked', that is, having their struggles noticed.

Take time to understand how dyslexia affects your child in everyday life, not just at school but at home, in social settings or in other activities. This can help reduce your own feelings of frustration, open the door to seeing more effective support strategies, and strengthen your relationship with your child.

2. Normalise how their brain works

Instead of focusing on what they 'can't do', focus on what their brain needs in order to do things differently. A key concept here is making it about the brain, not about them personally. This small shift enables them to create some distance from the challenge, so they don't internalise it as a personal failure. That space can make change feel more possible and far less daunting.

This might mean saying:

'Your brain just works in a different way. Let's figure out how to make this easier.'

You don't always have to use the word dyslexia either. Talking about 'how your brain works' is often enough, especially when you or your child are still making sense of their learning difference.

This approach helps:

- Reduce self-blame – your child sees it's not them, it's how their brain works
- Support self-advocacy – they start to think about what their brain needs
- Makes it easier to try again – mistakes or extra effort feel less personal and more manageable.

What this looks like in practice

Here are some phrases that help shift the energy away from frustration and toward understanding:

- 'That looks frustrating. Want to show me what's not working?'
- 'I can see you are really trying, maybe your brain needs a different approach.'
- 'Your brain is good at solving problems. Let's use that.'
- 'Putting ideas on paper is tough for your brain. What could help make it easier?'
- 'You remember things better when you see them — would that work here?'

Why these questions work:

- They invite collaboration, not correction
- They focus on strengths, not deficits
- They offer choice and a sense of control (agency)
- They acknowledge effort.



Parent Tip

You don't need to fix the frustration every time. Sometimes just naming it and showing your child you understand is enough to help them calm down and try again.

Responses parents can use when your child is explaining or talking about their angry feelings

- 'Yes and ' (pause for them to carry on speaking)
- 'Yes, and that must be hard for you'
- 'You are so angry about that' (match energy of the child's anger)
- 'How would you like it to be?'



Growing Stars Insight

In the children's workshop, we used colours to help them connect feelings to something visual and concrete. This can be a simple way for children to recognise and name emotions without always needing the right words. For example, 'red' might mean angry, 'blue' might mean sad, 'yellow' might mean happy. Parents can try this at home to make feelings easier to talk about.

Building Self-Esteem

Key strategies for improving self-esteem are:

- 1. Creating a growth mindset**
- 2. Highlighting what your child does well through targeted, specific feedback**
- 3. Keeping a strength-based focus**

The focus is not just on the result, but on the effort your dyslexic child puts into working towards a goal. This builds confidence and, in turn, motivation to take on new challenges. Recognising and celebrating their strengths, especially the ones that come naturally to them because they are dyslexic, helps them see the value they bring. Combined with effort-based feedback, this approach motivates them to take on new challenges and reinforces that their abilities are real and important, even if they differ from their peers.

1. Creating a Growth Mindset

A growth mindset is simply the belief that your brain can change and learn over time.

It doesn't mean learning will always be easy, but it does mean that mistakes are part of the process, not a roadblock.

When your child learns to see challenges as something they can get better at, it gives their confidence a huge boost, and they start to believe in what they **can** do, not just worry about what they can't.

Fixed Mindset



Growth Mindset



I won't do it	I can't do it	I want to do it	How do I do it?	I'll try to do it	I can do it	I will do it	Yes, I did it!
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How to encourage a Growth Mindset

Talk about the brain like it's building pathways.

- 'You're making new pathways in your brain. It's hard at first, but every time you practise, the pathway gets stronger and easier to use.'
- Celebrate mistakes as learning opportunities - "What can we learn from this attempt?"
- Connect to previous growth mindset learnings to help understand effort pays off.
- You can also link the learning to the idea of creating new pathways in the brain, so your dyslexic child understands it takes time and repetition for those pathways to become well-formed and easier to use. 'Remember how you learnt to ride your bike, it was hard at first but with practice it got easier.'



Use the word **yet** - 'You haven't got it **yet** - but you're getting there'.

2. Targeted and Specific Feedback

Giving targeted and specific feedback means concentrating on the **effort** rather than the end result. This approach builds self-esteem and increases motivation. From a parent's point of view, it also shifts your focus from 'fixing' problems to noticing and appreciating what your child is doing well, which can feel better for both of you.

The basics

- Focus on the effort, not just the outcome
- Use 'I' statements (e.g., 'I like how...', 'I noticed you...')
- Give feedback for all areas of life, not just academic work

Making it even better

- Give feedback immediately (but late is better than never)
- Be sincere and truthful because children can tell if you're not
- Talk slowly as it makes a difference to how the praise is received
- For younger children – compliment publicly
- For adolescents – compliment privately

Examples of Targeted and Specific Feedback

- 'I like how you concentrated on your reading for ten minutes.'
- 'I like how you held the door open for your friends without being asked. Good noticing.'
- 'I notice you kept trying on your writing even when it was tricky.'
- 'I notice you've organised your sports gear so you can find it easily.'
- 'I like how you are asking great questions to help you understand.'
- 'I notice you stayed calm when things didn't go to plan with your project.'
- I like how you remembered to pack your bag without being reminded.

Why it matters more for dyslexic learners

Dyslexic individuals are often praise-starved, so as long as it's true and sincere, you can't give too much targeted, specific feedback. When children know exactly what they are doing well, they are far more likely to repeat it next time.



Chris's Insight

When my parental anxiety was high with my dyslexic teen, I found it hard to spot strengths and work out how to give targeted, specific praise. I was good at giving general praise like 'That's amazing', but it never seemed to make a difference.

To help me change this, I kept a couple of 'go-to' starter phrases in mind, such as 'I like how...' or 'I noticed you...'. I also thought ahead about what I might look for. Over time, this helped me shift my mindset and give more meaningful feedback. It made a huge difference – our relationship improved, and his confidence increased.

3. Keeping a Strength-Based Focus

A strength-based focus means deliberately noticing and valuing what your child is naturally good at, not only the things they've worked hard to improve.

Noticing dyslexic strengths

For dyslexic children, this is especially important. Many of their dyslexic thinking strengths, such as, problem-solving, big-picture thinking, visual thinking, and empathy, are often overlooked because they're not widely recognised or measured in school. These strengths are so natural to them that they don't realise they are skills other people may not have.

By naming these strengths, you help your child understand that their abilities have value and you support them in building a strong sense of identity and self-worth.

Other strengths

Other types of strengths can be talents they have such as:

- Sport
- Music
- Arts
- Crafts

Or character strengths such as:

- Bravery
- Humour
- Leadership
- Kindness
- Honesty
- Curiosity
- Teamwork
- Humility

How to keep a Strength-Based Focus

- Look for patterns – What activities make your child light up or lose track of time?
- Name the strength – ‘You can see the big picture before anyone else does.’
- Link strengths to everyday life – ‘Your problem-solving skills will help you work through tricky situations at school.’
- Encourage them to use strengths in new situations – ‘You’re great at explaining things. Can you help your brother understand this?’

Key Takeaways From This Chapter

1. Support goes beyond academics
2. Understanding reduces frustration
3. Small shifts make big changes
4. Targeted and specific feedback on effort, not results
5. Recognising and naming your child’s strengths is powerful.

Parent Reflection

- When your child feels frustrated, how can your awareness of dyslexic thinking guide your response?
- How does your child react when praised for effort, not just results?
- What strength could you help your child notice and celebrate more often?

Chapter 4: Navigating Anxiety

There are two key perspectives for managing this:

1. **When the brain goes offline** – strategies to help bring it back online.
2. **Reducing offline moments** – ways to prevent or lessen how often the brain goes offline in the first place.

The main motivation for managing anxiety is to keep the brain in a state that is open and available for learning. This means that in the classroom, social situations, or new environments, the dyslexic individual can take in what is happening, participate, and show what they know.

1. When The Brain Goes Offline

When the brain goes offline, the goal is to re-engage the thinking part of the brain (prefrontal cortex) as quickly as possible. The aim is to lower stress chemicals flooding the brain so it can move out of an emotional state and back into a thinking state.

Strategies to bring the brain back online include:

1. Tummy (Diaphragmatic) Breathing

The best and simplest way to reduce stress chemicals is through **diaphragmatic breathing**. This is sometimes called tummy breathing, because it feels like the breath is going into the tummy, but it also means letting the sides and lower ribs expand, not just the stomach.

Steps:

1. Breathe in slowly through your nose, letting your tummy and sides expand like a balloon.
2. Breathe out slowly through your mouth or nose, letting your tummy flatten towards the spine.
3. Aim for the out-breath to be slightly longer than the in-breath.

This type of breathing signals the body to relax, lowers stress chemicals, and helps the brain shift back into a thinking state.



Parent Tip

Practise diaphragmatic (tummy) breathing at home so it becomes familiar. It's almost invisible (and can be done with eyes open), so your child can use it in the classroom without drawing attention.



2. Self-Soothing Techniques

Self-soothing can help calm the brain by providing comfort and reducing emotional intensity. Examples include:

- Stroking something soft or smooth (a pet, a piece of fabric, or a smooth stone)
- Using a fidget toy
- Squeezing something like playdough or Blu Tack
- Doing something physical, such as walking or going outside
- Talking to someone

3. Asking the question

Once there is awareness that the brain has gone offline, you can help your child begin to ask: 'Why did my brain go offline? What made it feel unsafe or uncomfortable?' This process activates the thinking part of the brain by shifting focus to problem-solving.

The process involves:

1. Explain 'Brain Offline'

Use the information from the Chapter 2 on anxiety to explain that this is a normal process that happens to everyone, it just happens more often for dyslexic or different thinkers, especially around learning.

Explain that going offline can be so automatic it's hard to notice, but there are body signals that give clues it's happening.

- Butterflies in the tummy
- Feeling hot or sweaty
- Lump in the throat
- Jumpy arms and legs
- Hot armpits
- Needing to go to the toilet
- Watery eyes

What parents might notice: Flushed cheeks, saying they feel unwell, or becoming fidgety.

Most children respond best to 'brain offline,' while others might prefer 'mind going blank.' Use whichever phrase connects best with the feeling for your child.

2. Starting to Ask the Question

Once they understand it's a process (not a personal flaw), you can begin asking. Choose calm, everyday moments — after school, in the car, or while having a meal.

Examples:

- 'What made your brain go offline today?'
- If they're unsure: 'What made your tummy get butterflies today?'



Parent Tip

Just listen. The aim is to help them recognise their triggers, not to fix the problem straight away.

You might follow up with: 'So when this happens (summarise their example), it makes your brain go offline?'

This reinforces the connection between a specific trigger and the offline moment, helping them build self-awareness.

3. Provide Targeted and Specific Feedback

When they clearly explain what happened, acknowledge it:

'I really like how you clearly explained what made your brain go offline. It gave me a good picture of what it's like for you.'

4. Encourage independence

Over time, step back so they can name triggers themselves.

Examples:

- 'Any triggers today?'
- 'What happened for your brain today?'



Parent Tip

- Talk about 'the brain' to depersonalise the experience and make it feel like something that can be worked on.
- Role model it: 'My brain went offline. I wonder why it felt uncomfortable?'
- Even after identifying the trigger, diaphragmatic breathing can help get the brain back online.

2. Reducing Offline Moments

Breathing techniques don't just help bring the brain back online once it has gone offline, they can also help prevent it from happening in the first place. The same calming principles apply using diaphragmatic breathing to lower the chance of the brain tipping into an offline state.

Dyslexic thinking includes big-picture thinking and therefore knowing what's coming helps reduce anxiety and keeps the brain online. The more prepared they feel, the easier it is for them to manage new or challenging situations.

Preparation

- Give your child a heads-up about upcoming tasks, changes, or transitions. For example:
 - » 'When the clock is on 8:15, we'll be getting into the car.'
 - » 'You know your English teacher has a growly voice — what can you do to keep your brain online?'
- Role-play or talk through what might happen, who will be there, and how they can respond. This isn't just for upcoming schoolwork but also for new situations, such as starting a new school or trying a new activity.
 - » Example: 'You're starting a new school soon — let's walk around the school so you can get an idea of what it looks like.'
- Practise calming strategies (like diaphragmatic breathing) in advance so they become automatic.

Recognising Early Signs

- Help your child notice early warning signs that their brain might be going offline, for example, butterflies in their tummy, tense shoulders, or sudden tiredness.
- Encourage them to ask themselves: 'What is making my brain go offline?' and/or start diaphragmatic breathing straight away.

Normalise the Brain Going Offline

- Acknowledge that it will happen in certain situations, and that's okay. This can reduce the pressure dyslexic individuals feel to 'perform' all the time.
- When they know it's likely to happen, they can plan strategies to support themselves in that moment, such as preparing for class by reading up on the topic, or watching a video about the subject in advance.



Parent Tip

Responses parents can use when their child talks about their brain being offline or when they feel worried.

- 'Yes and ...' (pause and let them fill the space)
- 'Yes and that must be hard for you.'
- 'How would you like it to be?'

Key Takeaways From This Chapter

1. Teach strategies to bring the brain back online quickly
2. Build awareness of triggers and early physical signs
3. Normalise the process to remove pressure and prepare for it.

Parent Reflection

- What signs tell you your child's brain is starting to go offline?
- Which strategies have you noticed helping your child calm down?
- What's one small change you could try at home or school to reduce stressful moments?

Chapter 5: Strategies for Managing Dyslexia

This chapter provides ideas for managing the 'physical' aspects of dyslexia for the individual. These include the dyslexic strengths of big picture thinking, problem solving, sensing how others feel and visual-based thinking, as well as the dyslexic challenges of processing language, short-term memory, ordering and sequencing information and processing verbal information.



Chris's Insight

In many cases, parents have already put some of these strategies in place at home without even realising it – simply because they make life easier for everyone.

Dyslexic Strengths Strategies

1. Big picture thinking

Characteristics:

- Needs the full picture before starting, such as, the end result, and how it applies to them.
- Takes time to process, so answers are thoughtful but may come more slowly.
- Strong at evaluating and breaking down information but may miss small details.
- Learns in bursts – connections suddenly 'click' into place.
- Once they 'get it,' can solve problems quickly and creatively, but may struggle to explain how.
- Prefers open-ended questions.



Parent Tip

Keep explanations short and to the point. Fewer words reduce the mental load and make it easier to understand and follow.

Big Picture Thinking – Strategies & Parent Examples

Strategies	Example of What a Parent Could Say
Start with the overview – show the big picture first, then fill in the details.	'Here's what we're trying to do today – once you see the whole plan, we'll go through it step-by-step.'
Outline the steps before beginning a task so they know the pathway.	'First, we'll read the story, then answer three questions.'
Give processing time – allow pauses for thinking before expecting an answer.	'Take a moment to think about it – I can wait.' (Your body language must back this up)
Use visuals and diagrams to show how ideas connect.	'Let's draw a diagram so you can see how all these parts fit together.'
Encourage summarising what they've learned to help link ideas together.	'Can you tell me in your own words what you've learned so far?'
Highlight key details they might overlook.	'This date is really important – let's circle it so you remember.'
Check understanding – discussion and talking out loud can help them make connections.	'Let's talk through what you've learned so far and see how the ideas fit together.'
Ask open-ended questions to spark deeper thinking.	'What other ways could you solve this problem?'

2. Problem-Solving

Characteristics:

- Thinking can happen in random, intuitive jumps – may seem off-topic at first but often leads to useful ideas.
- Makes connections between unrelated pieces of information
- Spots patterns in information or processes quickly.
- Can reframe problems to see them from new angles.
- Able to adapt or change approach mid-way if something isn't working.

Problem Solving – Strategies & Parent Examples

Strategies	Example of What a Parent Could Say
Encourage 'thinking aloud' – ask them to talk through their ideas step-by-step so you can follow their thinking, and they can practice explaining it.	'Talk me through your idea so I can see how you got there.'
Use mind maps or diagrams to visually capture their ideas and connections.	'Let's draw a mind map so we can see all the ideas you've got.'
Allow space for unconventional ideas before moving toward practical solutions – don't shut them down too early.	'That's an interesting thought – let's write it down and see where it might fit.'
Highlight and celebrate pattern spotting to reinforce this strength.	'You noticed that this is similar to what we did last week – that's a great connection.'



Chris' Insight

Not all dyslexic individuals like using mind maps. Some prefer using bullet points and diagrams to order the information.

3. Empathy and Intuition

Characteristics:

- Strong emotional awareness – often senses how others are feeling, even without words.
- Picks up on subtle cues like tone of voice, body language, or mood shifts.
- Naturally supportive and are inclined to help, comfort, or include others.
- Good at seeing different perspectives and understanding how situations might impact people.
- Trusts gut feelings and often makes decisions based on an intuitive sense of what's right or will work.
- Can anticipate needs before they're spoken.
- Drawn to fairness and justice – notices when something feels 'off' or unfair and can be quite vocal or upset about it.
- Able to connect with people quickly and build rapport.

Empathy & Intuition – Strategies & Parent Examples

Strategies	Example of What a Parent Could Say
Validate what they notice or feel – even if it's unspoken, acknowledge their perspective.	'I can see you picked up that your friend was upset – that's a really thoughtful observation.'
Encourage roles that let them lead, especially in support situations with younger children.	'You're a natural at helping others feel included – would you like to help the younger kids with this game?'
Model emotional vocabulary – give them words to describe what they notice and feel; if this is hard, start with describing the feeling in their body.	'When you felt nervous, was it like your stomach felt tight or your shoulders felt tense?'
Use reflective questions to connect observations with evidence.	'What makes you think they felt that way?' or 'What signs did you notice?'

Checking the facts

When this dyslexic strength is partnered with low self-esteem, it can have a negative impact. Dyslexic individuals may be highly aware of what others are feeling, but with low self-esteem they can often assume those feelings are directed at them, even when they're not.

It's important to help them think this through and check the reality of the situation. For example, a dyslexic learner might believe the teacher is upset with them.

You could respond by gently questioning their thinking:

Parent: 'What made you think it was directed at you?'

Dyslexic child: 'They frowned at me.'

Parent: 'Why do you think that happened?'

Dyslexic child: 'The class was noisy and kids were talking.'

Parent: 'What did the teacher say?'

Dyslexic child: 'Class, stop talking and focus on your writing – you have 10 minutes left.'

Parent: 'What makes you think it was directed at you?'

Dyslexic child: 'Oh... it was the whole class that was talking and she looked around the room – she didn't say my name.'

4. Visual thinking

Characteristics:

- Remembers and understands best through images, diagrams, or colour.
- May think in pictures more than words. These can be like a movie or a series of rapid photos, sometimes several at once.
- Can quickly 'see' how ideas connect.
- Often notices visual patterns or details others overlook.
- Takes them more effort to remember information given only verbally.
- May doodle or draw to process ideas.
- Finds visual or written instructions (maps, charts, photos) easier to follow than spoken ones.
- More likely to use visual based language – e.g. 'I see what you mean.'

Visual Thinking – Strategies & Parent Examples

Strategies	Example of What a Parent Could Say
Use visual supports – charts, diagrams, pictures, or colour-coded notes.	‘Let’s use colour to group the main ideas so they’re easier to remember.’
Encourage sketching or mind-mapping to capture ideas.	‘Can you draw what that might look like?’
Turn instructions into step-by-step visuals – use icons or numbered pictures to create an order.	‘Let’s draw each step so you can see the order.’
Use real-world objects or demonstrations to explain concepts.	‘Let’s show this with blocks so you can see how it works.’
Highlight key information visually – highlight, circle, or use sticky notes.	‘Let’s highlight the most important part so it stands out.’



Parent Tip

How information is presented visually can have a big impact on how dyslexic individuals process it. Too much visual information can still overload the brain. If this happens, a simple strategy is to reduce how much is visible at one time, for example, by covering parts of the page with a blank piece of paper so only the section they need to focus on is showing.

Dyslexic Challenges Strategies

1. Language Processing Issues

Characteristics:

- May struggle to find the right word when speaking. This could be looking for the word to explain an idea, feeling, or big picture or having difficulty pronouncing or recalling the word.
- Difficulty understanding complex sentences or instructions.
- Might misunderstand the meaning of words in certain contexts.
- Can find reading comprehension challenging, even if they can read the words.
- Struggles to get what is in their head down on paper.
- Difficulty learning phonological awareness (sounds that make up words), especially vowel sounds, and phonics
- Difficulty spelling words. They may get the shape of the word but not the details e.g. thay for they
- May read by gist – they don't know all the words but are able to 'guess' the meaning of the sentence. This becomes a problem in exams and math word problems when the dyslexic learner must know what each word means.



Parent Tip

Don't feel you have to do it all. Pick one or two small changes and build from there. You may be surprised to realise you've already adapted in ways that support your child.

Language Processing Issues – Strategies & Parent Examples

Strategies	Example of What a Parent Could Say
Use clear, simple language, sticking to key points and avoiding unnecessary jargon.	Say: 'Here's what you need to do.'
Break instructions into short, manageable parts with one or two steps at a time.	Say: 'First, read this paragraph. Then, answer question one.'
Check understanding through repeat-back.	Say: 'Can you tell me what you need to do first?'
Give extra processing time by pausing before expecting a response.	Do: Ask the question, then silently count to five before prompting again.
Pair words with visuals, gestures, or demonstrations to support meaning and recall.	Do: Point to the diagram while explaining or act out the step.
Provide the big picture first before explaining the smaller details.	Say: 'We're making muffins. First, I'll show you all the steps, then we'll start with step one.'
Avoid 'fluff' – keep sentences direct and to the point without long explanations.	Say: 'Put your shoes by the door.' (instead of a longer version).
Offer sentence starters or word banks to support homework writing tasks.	Do: Provide a go-to list they can refer to like, 'I think... / This is because... / My favourite part was...'
Highlight key information in written text to reduce overload and focus attention.	Say 'What parts do you think need to be highlighted?' Do: Use a highlighter to mark the three most important words/sentences.
Rephrase rather than just repeat if they didn't understand the first time.	Say: 'Let me explain that in a different way.'

2. Short-Term Memory

Characteristics:

- Finds it hard to remember lists, sequences, or multi-step instructions.
- May forget information given verbally within a short time.
- Needs frequent reminders for tasks or deadlines.
- Struggles to recall names, dates, or specific facts under pressure.
- Struggles to copy information from one place to another (e.g., from a whiteboard to paper, or between computer screens).
- May struggle to retain information while reading – often re-reading sections to try to gain understanding.
- Can struggle to keep up with the flow of group conversations.
- May lose their place when following spoken instructions or reading aloud.
- Difficulty recalling what was said earlier in a conversation or lesson without prompts.



Parent Tip

When you use these strategies, it may sometimes feel like nothing is changing. But the truth is, your efforts do sink in – often more than you realise. Progress isn't always instant, because things like your child's mental load, maturity, and self-esteem all affect how quickly they absorb new strategies. Trust that every small step you take is building a foundation.

Short-Term Memory – Strategies & Parent Examples

Strategies	Example of What a Parent Could Say
Give one instruction at a time.	Say: 'First, put your shoes on... let me know when that's done.'
Use written reminders, checklists, or visual prompts.	Do: Create a simple checklist for their morning routine and tick tasks off together.
Prompt them to recall important information more than once.	Say: 'It's PE today – what do you need to take?'
Link new information to something familiar.	Say: 'We park in the same spot as last week – next to the big tree.'
Allow them to record instructions (audio or written) to refer back to later.	Do: Let them use a phone or small recorder to capture reminders.
Use visual supports alongside verbal instructions.	Do: Show a picture or diagram while explaining the task.
Break reading into small chunks and check understanding.	Say: 'How much do you want to read before we stop and talk about it – one sentence, two, or more?'
Give them extra time to process and recall before moving on.	Say: 'Take a moment to think – it's okay to pause before you answer.'
Use cues to help them rejoin a group conversation.	Say: 'We're talking about what we did at the park – what do you remember from that day?'
Reduce the need for copying and check in on its impact.	Do: At home, place the page they're working from right next to them. For school, check in by asking: 'How is it going, getting the information from the whiteboard?' and, if possible, arrange for the teacher to provide the information instead of them having to copy it.

3. Order and Sequencing

Characteristics:

- Difficulty putting events, steps, or ideas in the correct order.
- May mix up the sequence of instructions or stories.
- Struggles with tasks that require a specific order (e.g., math problems, recipes, timelines, days of the week, instructions).
- Gets 'lost' in multi-step processes without prompts.
- Can see the 'big picture' of what to do but struggles to break it down into ordered steps.
- Has difficulty sequencing writing, such as sentence structure and the flow of a story.

Ordering and Sequencing – Strategies & Parent Examples

Strategies	Example of What a Parent Could Say
Provide step-by-step checklists or flowcharts.	Do: Create a checklist for a task like making lunch, with each step numbered. Say: 'Let's tick each step off as we go.'
Provide templates to guide order.	Do: Give a writing guide that shows where to put the introduction, middle, and ending.
Model the sequence before asking them to do it.	Do: Demonstrate completing a math's calculation or tidying their bedroom, then have them copy the process.
Break the task into smaller chunks and check each stage before moving on.	Say: 'Let's finish the first three steps, then I'll check in with you before we do the next part.'
Use visual timelines or storyboards for planning and recounting events.	Do: Draw a simple timeline for the day's activities or for a story they're telling.
Keep instructions short – allow bullet points instead of full sentences.	Say: 'You can just write short notes for each step – it doesn't have to be in full sentences.'

4. Processing Verbal Information

Characteristics:

- Needs extra time to process spoken information.
- May miss parts of a conversation, especially in noisy environments.
- Finds it hard to follow fast-paced discussions or lessons.
- Often needs information repeated or rephrased.
- Struggles to follow numerous verbal instructions given at once.
- Can become lost if too much verbal information is given at one time.
- May check in with others to ask, "What was that?" or "What do I do?"

Processing Verbal Information – Strategies & Parent Examples

Strategies	Example of What a Parent Could Say
Speak in a calm steady voice (helps keep the brain online)	Say: 'We'll take it one step at a time.'
Pause between key points to give thinking time.	Do: Say one instruction, pause for them to process, then give the next.
Use written or visual back-up for spoken instructions.	Do: Write the steps on a sticky note or show a diagram while explaining.
Ask them to summarise in their own words to check understanding.	Say: 'Can you tell me what you're going to do first?'
Limit background noise when giving important information.	Do: Move to a quieter space before explaining something important.
Use explicit, visual-based language.	Say: 'Your homework book is on the kitchen table next to the vase of flowers', compared to 'Check the table'
Be succinct and explicit – avoid jargon.	Say: 'Let's put your homework in your bag now,' instead of using vague instructions such as 'Pack your stuff for school'.
Give information or instructions in a 'little and often' format.	Say: 'Let's do these two steps, then I'll tell you the next part.'



Chris's Insight

When it says dyslexic learners need extra time to process spoken information, that time allows their brain to convert what they hear into a format that works better for them — often a visual-based format. It's not that they are slower; it's that during this conversion phase their brain is doing more mental work to process and understand it.

Key Takeaways From This Chapter

1. Lead with the big picture, then add details
2. Use a multi-sensory approach
3. Build in processing time
4. Check understanding through active listening
5. Adapt the environment, not just the task.

Parent Reflection

- What have you noticed you are already doing that supports your child's dyslexic thinking?
- Which one new strategy from this chapter feels most realistic to try at home?
- How could you adapt the way you give instructions, feedback, or support so it feels easier for your child to process?

Chapter 6: Parents as Advocates

Understanding the Advocate Role

What advocacy means

Being an advocate simply means speaking up for your dyslexic child's needs so they can do well at school and beyond.



‘Children are not things to be moulded, but are people to be unfolded.’ — Jess Lair

Advocacy vs. fixing

There's a difference between advocating and fixing (sometimes called rescuing). Advocacy is about making sure your child has the right tools, support, and understanding around them. Fixing often happens when our own parental anxiety kicks in and we jump in to solve everything for them. The tricky part is that fixing can sometimes prevent children from learning the skills they need to manage challenges themselves.

Don't beat yourself up if you find yourself in 'fix it mode' – it comes from wanting to make things better and is a natural parent response when raising a dyslexic child. But by noticing when it's happening, you can start to shift your approach towards advocacy and a growth mindset.

It often helps to notice the difference between advocating and fixing. Here are some examples.

What advocacy looks like	What fixing (rescuing) looks like
Helps the child find tools and strategies that work for them.	Solves the problem for the child so they don't have to try.
Asks teachers for changes that let the child show their strengths.	Demands quick fixes without involving the child.
Calms own anxiety before stepping in.	Acts out of panic, fear, or frustration.
Supports the child to have a voice in the process.	Speaks for the child without giving them input, often from a deficit point of view.
Encourages independence over time (e.g., 'What could you try next?').	Continues doing things for the child, even as they grow. Eg homework
Builds resilience by letting the child experience safe struggles.	Shields the child from all struggles to protect self-esteem.

Research Tells Us Why Advocacy Matters

Barbara Riddick's research shows that when dyslexic learners are understood and supported, the risk of long-term emotional harm is reduced, and they feel more recognised and able to engage (Riddick, 1996; 2001). As parents, advocacy is one of the main ways to make sure those supports are put in place.

Riddick's work makes it clear: when parents advocate early and consistently, they help change the trajectory for their child – not only in school, but in their wellbeing and confidence for the future.

Educators as advocates

Parents are not the only advocates. Teachers can be powerful advocates for your child's learning too. Many adult dyslexics can name the teacher who 'turned it around' for them – the one who believed in their abilities and knew how to support their learning needs.



Chris's Insight

Parental anxiety is normal. When we see our dyslexic children struggle in a system that doesn't always understand them, it's natural to want to step in and fix things. But just as our children need to learn to manage their anxiety, so do we. When we manage our own anxiety, we move into the thinking part of our brains, which allows us to advocate more effectively.

The urge to rescue is strong because we want to protect our children's self-esteem. Over time, though, our role shifts. We need to help them to build their own strategies and independence, so they are equipped to manage challenges when we're not there.

One way to break out of deficit thinking (which parental anxiety often fuels) is through targeted and specific feedback. This approach works for both us and our children and it can be surprisingly powerful.

I know the sleepless nights: lying awake wondering what to do next, and feeling helpless in a system that didn't see the child I saw. But here's what I have learned: children mature, they work things out, and things don't always stay the same.

Even when it feels hard, every step you take in advocacy helps change what's possible for your child.



Parent Tip

Advocacy Reminders

- Keep it factual and strength-based.
- Involve your child's voice where possible.
- Stay calm — your calmness helps the teacher listen.

Dyslexic Profile

Advocacy is easier when you have a clear picture of your child's dyslexic profile. This not only helps you explain things to teachers, but it also shows your child that you see both their challenges and their unique strengths.

Here are some things you might include:

- **Strengths** – think of their dyslexic thinking strengths, talents, and character strengths.
- **Challenges** – the things that take extra effort. Keep these specific and factual. Dyslexic thinkers often generalise their challenges, saying things like, 'I'm no good at reading'. But when broken down, the difficulty might be something more specific, for example, feeling overwhelmed when facing too much text. Once that is managed, they may be able to read a paragraph at a time.
- **Learning preferences** – what accommodations work for their dyslexic challenges eg extra time, short-term memory supports
- **Coping strategies** – what behaviours or actions they use to disguise their struggles eg perfectionism, being overly helpful, or disruptive behaviour.
- **What you've noticed at home** – Dyslexic children disguise their struggles at school, so teachers may not realise they are feeling anxious about learning.
- **'Brain offline' indicators** – behaviours or physical signs that show when your child is overwhelmed.



Parent Tip

Make sure the teacher knows if your dyslexic child is feeling anxious about their learning. What your child shows at home may be very different from what they show at school, as many dyslexic learners are skilled at masking their struggles.

Raising Dyslexia with Your Child

Many parents wonder how to explain dyslexia to their child without making them feel different or discouraged. The key is to keep it simple, honest, and hopeful, and to make it an ongoing conversation rather than a one-off talk.

Keep it simple and honest

- Explain that dyslexia is just a different way the brain works.
- You might say: 'Your brain learns in a different way. Reading and writing might feel harder, but your brain is also really good at things like problem-solving and big picture thinking.'

Balance challenges and strengths

- Acknowledge what feels hard for them (e.g., spelling, remembering instructions).
- Balance this by naming strengths (e.g., imagination, big-picture thinking, empathy, sport, or art).
- Reinforce: 'Everyone's brain works differently — this is just how yours works.'

Reassure them they're not alone

- Research for successful dyslexics to show them, especially in areas they are interested in.
- Let them know lots of people have dyslexia, including successful adults e.g., Richard Branson, Jamie Oliver, or even local role models.
- Emphasise: 'Dyslexia doesn't mean you're not smart. It means you think differently.'

Keep it positive and hopeful

- Share that there are tools and strategies that can help — extra time, different ways of learning, or using technology.
- Say: 'Our job is to figure out what works best for you, and I'll be here to help.'

Invite questions and keep talking

- Let them share how they feel.
- Be ready to listen, not just explain.
- Remind them this is an ongoing conversation, not a one-off talk.
- Find videos or books that explain dyslexia, balancing strengths and challenges.



Parent Tip

You can start with 'your brain works differently' and introduce the word dyslexia later. When you do use it, make sure it comes with both sides of the story – the challenges and the strengths.

Superpower is a Tricky Word

It can be common to hear the word superpower used to describe dyslexic thinking. This usually comes from a well-meaning place in an attempt to help dyslexic individuals feel more connected to their strengths.

But in many cases, the dyslexic thinker doesn't connect with this word. They may not feel like their dyslexia is a superpower, especially when they're struggling with learning. Instead, the word can add pressure and even make them feel like they are 'failing at being dyslexic'.

It also risks dismissing the hard bits. Dyslexia brings both strengths and challenges and only talking about it as a superpower doesn't reflect the reality of having to work harder with reading, writing, memory, or organisation. Children can end up feeling like they should be proud of something that is, in their experience, still painful and difficult.

More balanced and specific language helps. Instead of superpower, consider using words that acknowledge the positives without denying the challenges:

- Dyslexic advantage
- Dyslexic strengths
- Or ask your child what works best for them – superpower may do it!

Dyslexia Assessment

Parents often ask: Should I get an assessment? Should I tell my child the result?



What Research Says

Barbara Riddick's research shows that when children are properly assessed and understood, they often experience a major boost in self-confidence and emotional well-being. Having an explanation helps reduce self-blame and allows children to see themselves in a more positive light (Riddick, 1996)

Benefits of Getting an Assessment

- Provides a clear reason for your child's learning struggles and explains what is happening.
- Can activate support within school.
- Reduces self-blame and supports wellbeing.
- Strengthens your advocacy with teachers and schools.
- Guides next steps with recommendations and strategies.

Limitations of an Assessment

- Cost and waiting times can be a barrier.
- The quality and depth of information depends on the assessor.



Chris's Insight

When my sons had their assessments done, they said it was a relief to know why they were struggling with learning to read – and that it wasn't because they were 'dumb'.



Parent Tip

An assessment is a tool, not the whole answer. It gives you useful information, but your child's confidence and progress will come from ongoing support, encouragement, and advocacy.

Key Takeaways From This Chapter

1. Advocacy, not fixing
2. Parental anxiety is normal
3. Research shows advocacy works
4. Know your child's dyslexic profile
5. Assessment can help, but it's not everything.

Parent Reflection

- If you were to draft your child's dyslexic profile, what strengths, challenges, and learning preferences would you include?
- When you notice yourself going into 'fix-it mode,' what helps you shift back to a growth-mindset and strength-based focus?
- Who do you go to for support when you need encouragement or guidance in this journey?

Looking Ahead

Dyslexia is a Journey, Not a Destination

Dyslexia is lifelong, but so are the strengths, skills, and strategies your child will build. There will be times when things feel like they're moving forward smoothly, and times when you hit roadblocks. Both are normal. What matters most is the support, understanding, and opportunities you continue to give.

Building for the Future

- **Encourage self-advocacy** – Help your child learn to explain their strengths, challenges, and needs.
- **Stay curious** – Keep exploring strategies, tools, and resources. Dyslexia research and technology are always evolving.
- **Celebrate progress, not perfection** – Growth often comes in small, uneven steps.
- **Stay connected** – Link with other parents, support groups, and professional networks.

Taking Care of Yourself

Your wellbeing directly affects your child's wellbeing. Supporting a dyslexic learner can be rewarding but also exhausting. Make sure you:

- Take breaks and give yourself space to recharge.
- Share the load with trusted friends or family.
- Celebrate your own wins as a parent.

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Final Words From Chris

If there's one thing I want you to remember, it's this: **you are changing your child's trajectory.**

By learning, noticing, advocating, and adjusting, you are giving them the tools to step into the world with their head held high — not in spite of their dyslexia, but with it, as part of who they are.

There will be days that test your patience, days when you wonder if you're making progress, and days when you feel like starting over. But there will also be moments, sometimes small, sometimes huge, when you'll see the confidence in their eyes, hear them own their dyslexia, and know that all the effort has been worth it.

You're not just supporting a learner. You're helping to grow a thinker, a problem-solver, a creative mind, someone who will make their mark in their own unique way. And that's something worth looking ahead to.

