SPELLING

How common are spelling difficulties?

Almost all people with developmental reading or language disabilities have great difficulty spelling. In the new definition of dyslexia, people with the condition known as dyslexia are noted to have "conspicuous" problems with spelling and writing. People can also have specific spelling disabilities -- that is, they can be poor spellers, even though they are pretty good readers. These problems are very common, although no one has done an accurate estimate of the prevalence to date.

What causes people to be poor spellers?

Spelling problems, like reading problems, originate with *language* learning weaknesses. Spelling disability does not reflect a general "visual memory" problem but a more specific problem with awareness of and memory for language structure, including the letters in words. People who are poor spellers typically have trouble analyzing the sounds, syllables, and meaningful parts of words in both spoken language and written language. In addition, they often have trouble learning other types of symbolic codes such as math facts and math operation signs.

In the early grades, weaknesses in speech sound awareness (phoneme awareness) predict and are closely associated with poor spelling. In the later grades, difficulty understanding spelling rules, word structure and letter patterns are the hallmarks. The "visual memory" problems of poor spellers are specific to memory for letters and words, so a better term for poor spelling is *orthographic memory problem*. A person may be a very poor speller but a very good artist, navigator, or mechanic; those professions require a different kind of *visual memory*.

How do children learn to spell? Is invented spelling good or bad?

Spelling develops in a more or less predictable sequence. Children begin by writing strings of letters and symbols that do not represent the sounds in words. Next, they begin to write a few of the sounds in words that are easily detected; then, get better at "inventing" spellings by sound, using the letters they have learned. This stage, called phonetic spelling or temporary spelling, usually occurs in kindergarten or early first grade, before children learn to spell words correctly. At this crucial early stage, inventing spellings by sounds is an effective way of discovering the separate sounds that make up words. However, invented spellings should never replace the organized instruction that should begin about the middle of first grade. Dyslexic students have difficulty going through the stages of spelling development. Phonetic spelling (spelling by sounds rather than by the correct letters) is a desirable but brief stage of early spelling development. If a student has good phoneme awareness, that is, can segment all the sounds in a simple word, the student is much more likely to remember the "true" letters and letter combinations in the word. Whole word, or "sight" word learning, is also bolstered by good phoneme awareness.

Is our English spelling system predictable or unpredictable?

English is a pattern-based writing system that uses an alphabet to represent speech sounds. The English system of using letters for sounds is more complex than some languages such as Spanish but is nevertheless a predictable, learnable system. The English spelling system is complex because the spelling patterns come from Old English (Anglo-Saxon), from Latin and Greek,

and from other modern languages. It is also complex because the regular patterns occur at several levels: the level of individual sounds, such as how we spell the sound ***/k/;*** the level of syllables, such as how we spell the syllables in the word ***ta-ble;*** and the level of meaningful parts (morphemes), such as how we spell the pieces of ***ac-com-mo-dat*e.**

Many of our odd spellings, words such as ***come, does, women,*** and ***the*y,** are Anglo-Saxon words that have been with us such a long time that they are no longer pronounced the way they are spelled. Really odd words, those that do not conform to a pattern of sound-symbol, syllable, or structural patterns in English, are less than 5% of our vocabulary.

English is predictable over all, but several "layers" of language organization must be learned by those who would spell it well.

What methods of instruction are most effective?

A well designed program for students who do not learn easily will emphasize the sounds in the words, the letter combinations that usually spell those sounds, the spellings of six basic syllable types, and how the spelling rules of English work. Such a program would teach spelling patterns in a structured sequential way. At the more advanced levels, spelling instruction should focus on the meaningful parts of words: the prefixes, roots, suffixes, and grammatical endings that are often spelled consistently. Multisensory techniques, those that join listening, saying, looking, and writing in various combinations, and that consciously engage the student in feeling how the word is spoken and how it is written, are most successful. If word lists are used they should emphasize the regular spellings for sounds and sound patterns. Special memorization techniques are necessary for the odd words that must be learned as wholes.

In summary, effective spelling instructions should emphasize these principles:

- knowledge of sounds, letter-sound association, patterns, syllables, and meaningful parts;
- multisensory practice;
- systematic, cumulative study of patterns;
- memorizing a few "sight" words at a time;
- writing those words correctly many times;
- using the words in personal writing.

The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) thanks Louisa Cook Moats, Ed.D. for her assistance in the preparation of this fact sheet.

Related Reading:

- Moats, Louisa Cook, Ed.D., 1995. Spelling: Development Disability and Instruction. Baltimore, MD: York Press.
- Schupack, Helaine and Wilson, Barbara, 1997. The "R" Book, Reading, Writing & Spelling: The Multisensory Structured Language Approach. Baltimore, MD: The International Dyslexia Association's *Orton Emeritus Series*.

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