



The dyslexic adults I see often come in thinking they're lazy, or broken, or worse, stupid.

As children, they were told that they had a deficit - and the conversation stopped there.

When those same dyslexic adults and I do an assessment together, we learn that they are far from lazy, broken, or stupid. In fact, we end up rewriting the entire narrative of their childhood.

When working with kids, we have an opportunity to change this narrative from the beginning. We are in a position to shape the way they will view themselves and their relationship to learning for the rest of their lives!

**If we define learning disabilities by deficits, our children define themselves by deficits.**

If we present the whole picture, we help our children understand themselves as a whole person.

**Redefining Dyslexia**

Dyslexia means "difficulty reading." But **being dyslexic** is about much more than struggles with sounds and symbols.

While the diagnostic criteria for dyslexia are focused on deficits, the dyslexic brain also tends to come equipped with a unique set of strengths and superpowers.

In fact, many entrepreneurs, actors, musicians, artists, inventors, doctors, and writers cite their dyslexic thinking as the reason for their success.

By my understanding, this may be due to a few reasons, including:

- The dyslexic brain may be optimized for different things, such as seeing big-picture connections over tiny symbolic patterns
- Dyslexics are constantly having to find ways to get around roadblocks, which in turn develops their creative problem-solving skills and resilience

In other words, saying that dyslexia means "difficulty reading" is far too simplistic to truly capture the differences in this type of brain.

**Rather, dyslexia is a pattern of strengths and challenges that makes some types of tasks easy to figure out, and others much more challenging.**

## 5 Steps to Explaining Dyslexia

When we break it down, there are 5 parts to presenting a diagnosis in this way:

1. Identifying Strengths
2. Naming Challenges

3. Defining the Diagnosis
4. You're Not Alone!
5. Let's Make a Plan

Here's what it might look like for dyslexia.

## 1. Identifying Dyslexic Strengths



As the first piece of the diagnosis, we talk about the strengths we discovered throughout testing. Using the "brain-building" metaphor that I tend to reference most, this may sound like:

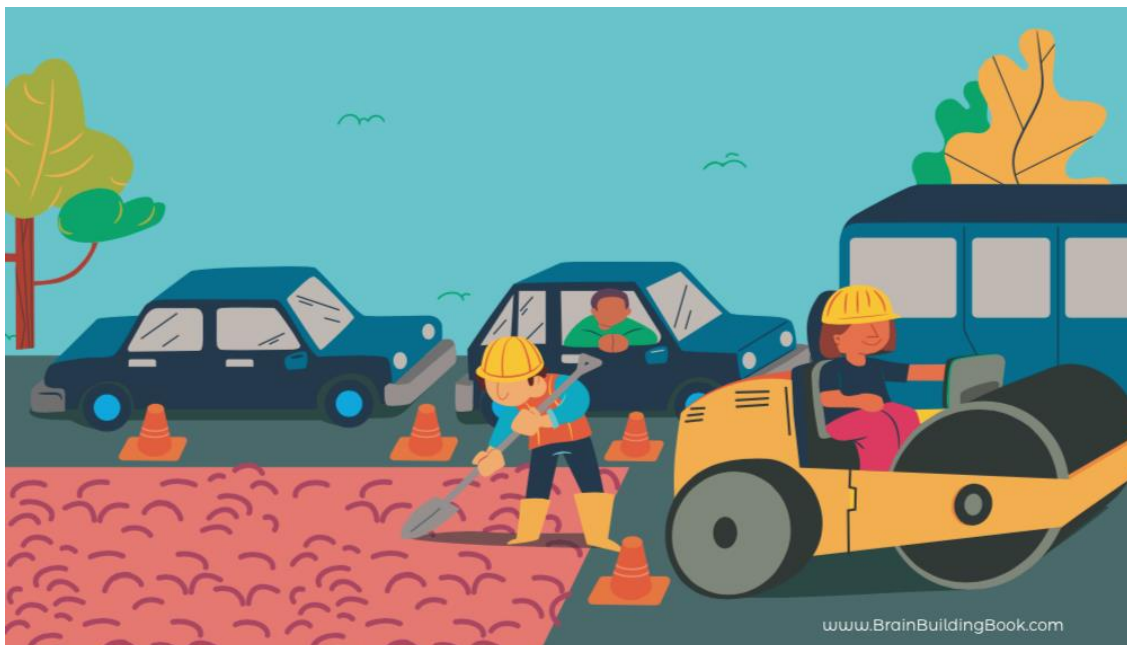
*"In our work together, we learned that your brain is built in a way that makes a lot of things come easily! These are like the super-fast highways in your brain."*

While every child will have a different list, here are a few common "highways" that may emerge from testing for kids with a dyslexia diagnosis:

- Memory
- Making connections
- Auditory comprehension
- Visual-spatial reasoning
- Interpersonal connections
- Imagination and creativity
- Visualization skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Resiliency

It is important to note that these highways are not in spite of being dyslexic - they are the **benefits** of being dyslexic!

## 2. Naming Dyslexic Challenges



The next piece is to name the challenges that are coming up.

We've just made a list of how awesome they are - but their experience is not always that awesome. Naming challenges validates a child's experience in a world that may not be supporting them in the way that they need.

As one exasperated high school student I worked with said, "I'm so !@#\$\$% tired of everyone telling me how dyslexia is a gift!"

Here's what I typically say:

*"In our work together, we also found some things that were tricky. These are your construction zones, or the skills your brain is working to build."*

Again, while every child will have a slightly different list, here are a few common "construction zones" that are likely to emerge from testing:

- Hearing sounds
- Recognizing symbols
- Working memory
- Processing information quickly or efficiently
- Remembering spelling patterns
- Attention or fatigue

Often, it's possible to draw a connection between a child's highways and construction zones. For example, dyslexic thinkers tend to see the big picture well, but may struggle with small details like letters and numbers.

### 3. Defining the Dyslexia Diagnosis



A diagnosis is simply a way of bringing the highways and construction zones together. For me this may sound like:

*"It turns out, many people have highways and construction zones just like yours. You're not alone! When we see this pattern, we call it Dyslexia."*

By defining dyslexia by the child's experience - not by the DSM definition - it is easier for the child to understand and makes it more likely that the child will be an active participant in their intervention plan.

Here are a few ways I've described dyslexia to the kids I work with:

- "Dyslexia means your brain is built in a way that makes it easy to see visual patterns like math, puzzles, or Legos; but it's harder to see letter

patterns for reading and spelling."

- "Dyslexia means your brain is not learning to read by the most common road. It also means that your brain is getting a lot of practice coming up with different ways to get there, which is giving you some amazing creative thinking powers!"
- "Dyslexia means your brain is having a hard time keeping all the sounds in your mind when you are trying to sound out a word, which can be really tiring. However, once you know the words, your brain has a much easier time understanding what the story is about!"

## 4. You're Not Alone!

I find it helpful to show kids examples of other dyslexic individuals who have been successful in different ways. For example:

- [Jamie Oliver](#) (Chef)
- [Jennifer Aniston](#) (Friends)
- [Ingvar Kamprad](#) (IKEA)

Everyone is a little different, so this is a great opportunity to emphasize that the way dyslexia shows up for them may be different than how it shows up for other kids in their class, even though it has the same name.

Here are a few additional resources that may resonate with the children you work with:

- [Famous People with Learning Differences](#)

- [Through Your Child's Eyes](#)
- [Made by Dyslexia](#)
- [See Dyslexia Differently Video](#)

## 5. Let's Make a Plan!



Finally, the child and I come up with a list of tools and strategies that will be helpful for maximizing their strengths and building new skills. For example:

- "You will be working with the Learning Specialist to help your brain get faster and faster at sounding out words."

- "Audiobooks may free up some brain space to really focus on understanding the book."
- "We're going start teaching you root words, prefixes, and suffixes to help your brain start to see chunks of words and make it more meaningful."
- "Your teacher and parents will work together to change your homework so that it's the right amount and something that's useful to practice."
- "Being part of our peer mediator program could be a great way to develop your leadership and people skills!"

In this way, the child becomes a more active participant in their intervention because **they know exactly why it's happening**, and more engaged in learning because it's about their whole person - not just their deficits.