

INFORMATION SHEET – THE HISTORY OF UNDERSTANDING DYSLLEXIA

The history of understanding **dyslexia** is a journey that spans over 150 years, evolving from vague observations of "word blindness" to a nuanced scientific and educational understanding of a neurodivergent condition.

19th CENTURY: FIRST OBSERVATIONS

- **1877 – Adolph Kussmaul**, a German neurologist, described adults with difficulty reading despite normal intelligence and vision. He coined the term "**word blindness**."
- **1887** – German ophthalmologist **Rudolf Berlin** first used the term "**dyslexia**", meaning "difficulty with words" (from Greek *dys-* = difficulty, *lexis* = words).
- These early cases were mostly in adults who lost reading ability after brain injury.

EARLY 20th CENTURY: DEVELOPMENTAL DYSLLEXIA IDENTIFIED

- Doctors began noticing children with unexplained reading difficulties despite normal intelligence and proper education.
- **1925** – American neurologist **Samuel T. Orton** proposed that dyslexia was a developmental issue, not a result of brain damage. He associated it with mixed brain dominance and introduced the idea of **visual processing problems** and **reversals** (e.g., confusing 'b' and 'd').

MID-20th CENTURY: EDUCATIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FOCUS

- **1950s–60s** – Researchers like **Benton** and **Critchley** studied dyslexia in children, noting its hereditary nature and frequent co-occurrence with problems in sequencing, memory, and motor coordination.
- Dyslexia began to be recognized as a **specific learning difficulty (SpLD)** affecting reading and spelling, separate from general intellectual disabilities.

LATE 20th CENTURY: COGNITIVE AND LINGUISTIC MODELS

- **1970s–80s** – Shift from visual theories to **phonological theories**: the main problem was now seen as difficulty in **phonological processing**—understanding and manipulating the sounds of language.
- Rise of **psycholinguistic research**, especially in English-speaking countries.
- Introduction of **early screening** and **remedial education** programs.

21st CENTURY: NEUROSCIENCE AND NEURODIVERSITY

- **Brain imaging studies** (fMRI, PET) show differences in how people with dyslexia process language, particularly in the left hemisphere.
- Dyslexia is now widely recognized as a **neurodevelopmental condition** that is **inherited** and **lifelong**, affecting reading, spelling, and sometimes writing and memory.
- Increasing recognition of **strengths associated with dyslexia**, such as creative thinking, spatial reasoning, and problem-solving.
- The **neurodiversity movement** advocates for understanding dyslexia not as a disorder, but as a **natural variation of human cognition**.