**Portsmouth CITY COUNCIL**

# Supporting children and young people with reading difficulties

# Contents

# The purpose of this policy

This document has been written by the Portsmouth Educational Psychology Team to provide guidance to schools, parents, support teachers, and other professionals on the issues involved in helping children and young people with reading difficulties.

This guidance will be reviewed again following an impending report from the Division of Educational and Child Psychology of the British Psychological Society (BPS).

On a day-to-day basis, schools are responsible for supporting pupils with literacy difficulties and each school should describe their provision in their Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Support Plans.

In this document when use the term 'parents' we are referring to both parents and carers. Similarly, when using 'child', we are referring to both children and young people.

# Reading difficulties or dyslexia?

There is a view held by many that dyslexia is a distinct and easily defined problem, that there is a straightforward way of diagnosing dyslexia and once a diagnosis is made there is a clear and 'special' treatment available. However, the term dyslexia is often a substitute word for literacy difficulties and definitions are so broad that they fail to identify anything special or different about dyslexia in comparison to 'poor' readers and spellers. For example:

*"Dyslexia is evident when accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling develops very incompletely or with great difficulty. This focuses on literacy and the word level and implies that the problem is severe and persistent despite appropriate learning opportunities."*

Dyslexia, Literacy and Psychological Assessment, Report of the Working Party of the Division of Educational and Child Psychology of the BPS (1999).

Diagnosis is often made on the basis of assessments that fail to identify how a child with needs described as dyslexic differs from a 'poor' reader and how persistent their difficulties will be. Moreover, there is nothing in the literature that identifies special and different instruction needed for children with 'dyslexia' as opposed to 'poor' readers/spellers.

We believe it is important to support all children with reading difficulties – regardless as to whether there is a diagnosis of dyslexia or not, we will work with children and families to provide guidance, advice and support.

Elliot and Gibbs (2008) state that 'there appears to be no clear-cut scientific basis for differential diagnosis of 'dyslexia' versus 'poor reader'. We believe that all children with reading difficulties require urgent intervention.

Whilst we acknowledge individual differences in how and when children learn to read, we hope using the term reading

difficulties will promote early intervention for all children, including those at risk of persistent difficulties so that teachers are free to invest their time and resources to meeting the needs of all poor readers.

Experiencing reading difficulties can lead to considerable distress and disengagement. Interventions for older children with the most persistent difficulties are less effective than early intervention (Denton & Vaughn, 2010). Therefore, we believe interventions should proceed as soon as possible. Children can be identified with simple school based measures of reading performance. Educational assessment can specify whether the child's reading difficulties relate to reading accuracy, reading fluency or reading comprehension.

A child's perceptions of themselves as a reader need to be taken into account when carrying out any reading assessment, in order to understand the impact their difficulties may have on their motivation, confidence and self-esteem.

# Reading skills and cognitive ability

Difficulty learning to read is a distinct and very real problem for some children and is not related to overall cognitive ability or effort (Stanovich, 1994).

Teachers and others should not make judgements about children's intelligence on the basis of their literacy skills alone.

Some children experiencing reading difficulties tell us they can feel 'stupid' and 'different'. It is vital that they understand that their difficulties are not related to 'cleverness' and that their skills and strengths in other areas are recognised and celebrated. There is evidence that nearly all children can be expected to read regardless of their intelligence (Torgesen, 2005).

Children with reading difficulties may also have difficulties in other areas such as:

- Memory

- Processing Speed

- Motor-coordination

However, they are **no more likely to have these difficulties than a good reader**.

With the exception of phonological awareness[1], there is **no evidence** that interventions aimed at improving any of these cognitive level skills improve reading (Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014).

1. The knowledge that sounds make words and words can be split into sounds.

# Early reading skills for monolingual and bilingual children

There are some risk factors associated with poor reading skills that can be identified at pre-school. These may include poor language development and poor phonological skills. Early intervention during the pre-school years should focus on developing a rich literacy and language environment at home and in pre-school settings. Children should have access to lots of books, texts, stories, songs and rhymes in their language. They should be read to regularly and have many opportunities to explore and talk about books.

Parents of children learning English as an additional language (EAL) should be encouraged to talk and read to children in their first language as this will result in vocabulary growth as well as general knowledge and concept acquisition, all of which will aid reading skills in English.

Before engaging in the formal process of learning how to read children should have mastered the following foundation skills:

- Vocabulary (knowledge of words, knowing that different words can mean the same thing or fall into the same category e.g. dogs are animals)

- Being interested in books

- Print awareness – the knowledge that print conveys meaning, knowledge of the conventions of writing in English (e.g. running left to right)

- Being able to tell a story, recount your day

- Letter knowledge (knowledge that symbols represent sounds and letters)

- Phonological awareness (knowledge that sounds make words and words can be split into sounds

For children entering school without these skills the focus of teaching should be on the above rather than on learning basic reading skills.

If, at the start of school, children learning EAL have little or no experience of the English language their monolingual peers will have a four or five-year head-start in English oral language experience. It has been estimated that children learning EAL require two years to develop peer appropriate communicative language and between five and seven years to develop full cognitive/academic language proficiency (Cummings, 1984).

# How do children learn to read?

Children tend to begin reading with a whole word awareness of visual and spoken words (for example, recognising their name or a shop logo) and then tend to become aware of increasingly smaller units over time. Reading development is supported by exposure to print (regularly reading to your child from a very early age) and vocabulary development (talking and singing nursery rhymes with your child).
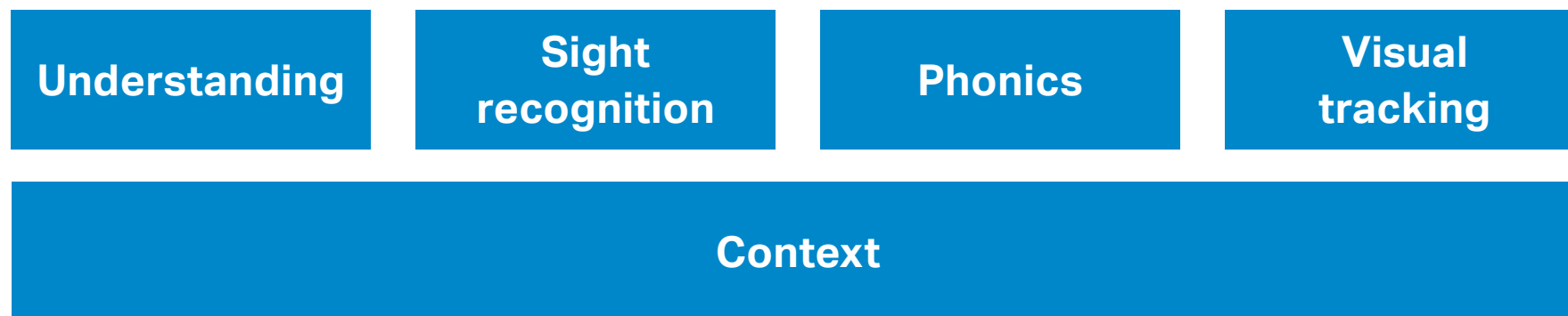
Being able to hear and identify the different sounds in words (phonological awareness) is a key skill and a predictor of later reading success. As children learn to read, they start to work out the relationship between parts of words (e.g. sh) and what they sound like. This may occur through breaking down the sounds in words (decoding) or through recognising whole words that rhyme.

Over time, words which have been decoded (sounded out) will move into memory so that they can be identified quickly by sight. This helps children to begin to read fluently and efficiently which allows for them to develop their understanding of what they are reading (comprehension). When a child understands what they are reading this helps them to guess new words. Some children develop accurate decoding skills, but their comprehension of text lags behind. This is often true for children learning English as an Additional language as comprehension in English text is dependent on a child's general language ability in English, i.e. their existing oral language skills. The weaker vocabulary knowledge of children learning EAL can therefore impact on comprehension related skills. It is common to find that a child with EAL with good decoding skills may give the impression of having good reading skills, and, as a consequence poor linguistic comprehension skills may not be identified at an early enough stage.

The diagram below shows the key building blocks involved in learning to read:

| Understanding | Sight recognition | Phonics | Visual tracking |
|---|---|---|---|

| Context |
|---|

**Context:** This is a crucial building block as it underpins all the others. The context refers to *how* the reading takes place – *what* is the child reading, why are they reading, *who* are they reading with and *how* do they feel about reading? Reading does not take place in a vacuum and the context of reading is hugely important. For example, reading flashcards in class versus reading a favourite story at home. Whatever the situation, a child is likely to perform at their best when they feel supported, confident, engaged by what they are reading and feel emotionally safe (e.g. comfortable to make mistakes).

**Understanding:** This is obviously a very important reading skill. For example, by understanding what a story is about, we can make guesses about what words we expect to see (e.g. character names) and when reading a sentence we can make guesses about what a word might be by working out what makes sense or by what we can see in the picture. In order for children to be able to use their understanding to help them read, it is important that they have a good level of vocabulary.

**Sight recognition:** Reading can be quite a slow progress if we don't develop our sight vocabulary, where we learn to read words 'off-by-heart'. Lots of children begin to read using this, such as learning to find their own name. Also, when learning to read, sight vocabulary can help children to feel successful as it helps them to develop the speed of their reading.

**Phonics:** This is when we learn to recognise that letters or groups of letters make different sounds and can be put together (blended) to make words. As we get better at phonics we begin to recognise words with similar letter patterns (e.g. words ending in 'tion') and can use our phonics and our knowledge of words to quickly word out what something says. As we become more experienced readers, we need to use our phonics less often.

**Visual tracking:** Children need to learn that words (in English) go from left to right and that each line goes down the page. They need to learn to track these words as they read. When learning to read, this can sometimes be tricky and children may benefit from using a finger or a place holder (e.g. ruler or bookmark) to help them to know where they are.

# A staged approach to support

## The role of the school

In line with the SEND Code of Practice staged approach, the class teacher takes responsibility for recognising the possible signs of reading difficulties and putting steps in place to identify the specific nature of the difficulties the child is having. The teacher, with help from the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo), will adapt learning and teaching approaches to ensure the child's needs are met appropriately. Teachers will involve parents and children at the earliest stage of identification, planning and intervention so that they are fully engaged in the process.

## Quality-First teaching

All children should have access to appropriately differentiated, quality-first teaching based on:

- Clear objectives.

- Carefully explained new vocabulary.

- Lively, interactive teaching styles with a high degree of pupil involvement.

- Appropriate use of teacher questioning and modelling with an emphasis on co-operative learning.

- The regular use of encouragement and authentic praise to engage and motivate pupils.
(Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008)

Good quality teaching of reading should always include:

### Meaningful exposure to letters and print

- Providing opportunities for children to explore letters and print in a variety of formats.

- Phonological activities to support children make connections between the spoken and written word.

- Encourage curiosity by linking print exposure to children's areas of personal interest (motivating).

### Supporting children to develop their phonological awareness

- Encourage children to experiment with the sounds in words.

- Rhyming and alliteration activities.

- Adults modelling the different sounds in words.

### Systematic phonics teaching using a multi-sensory approach

- Children are provided with opportunities to identify letters, make words (blend) and break words down into component sounds (segment).

- Opportunities should be provided for children to identify and practice reading these words in books and in environmental print (e.g. signs).

## Exposure to a wide range of vocabulary and language in children's home language as well as English

- Modelling of new words and phrases and encouraging children to use these, particularly in context.

- Nursery rhymes / songs.

- Use naturally occurring learning opportunities to provide children with a context.

- Speaking and listening activities to provide children with practice opportunities.

- Teaching of more complex vocabulary through a variety of books and topics.

- Reading to children.

- Offer a wide range of fiction and non-fiction books.

- Pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) will need to extend their vocabulary learning, and especially their expressive vocabulary in order to close the vocabulary knowledge gap with their peers and improve their listening and comprehension skills.

## Opportunities for children to learn a range of strategies to read words

- Strategies may include: sounding out, reading on and using the context.

- Explicit teaching and modelling.

- Opportunities for children to transfer their phonic knowledge into reading, using real books.

- Teach sight vocabulary (e.g. using flash cards / touchy feely bags) for irregular words.

- Provide daily opportunities for children to read books which are appropriately matched to their level.

## Meaningful opportunities for both monolingual and bilingual children to develop their reading comprehension skills

Vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension have been shown to have a reciprocal relationship. The more children understand the text, the greater the opportunity to learn vocabulary. As vocabulary knowledge increases, so does the likelihood that the text is understood.

(Stanovich et al.,1984). In the Early Years pupils with EAL develop an understanding of English through social interaction and involvement in activities, so enabling them to access the meaning of early reading material. In later school years as written texts become more advanced and require understanding of more complex ideas, the language learning/vocabulary acquisition of children with EAL may not keep pace with the demands of the text. Lower levels of vocabulary knowledge and comprehension ability can impact on the attainment of children with EAL as they move up through school (Hutchinson et al., 2003).For all children, the following strategies aid comprehension:

- Use pictures, illustrations and roleplay to support children's understanding.

- Model using vocabulary and phrases in a variety of contexts.

- Ask questions that encourage children to give explanations, opinions and to make predictions.

- Use a think-aloud, modelling strategy.

- Support children to relate stories to their own experiences and knowledge.

- Use the narrative technique to support children's understanding by thinking and asking questions about who, what, where, when and why.

As the language of text becomes more advanced and requires understanding of more complex ideas, pupils with EAL are likely to continue needing the approaches described above, but at a more advanced level. Strategies to support the acquisition of cognitive/academic language proficiency for pupils at the more advanced stages of learning EAL are also likely to be needed to ensure pupils achieve to their full potential (Haslam et al. 2006).

### Good book availability

- Change and update books in the classroom regularly.

- Ensure books link with children's prior knowledge and interests, where possible.

- Provide books in a range of different formats (e.g. picture, text, newspapers, comics, audio books).

- Provide both fiction and non-fiction books, and dual language story texts suitable for the languages in your school.

- Regular library opportunities so children can take books home to share with families.

### Supporting children to enjoy reading

- Reading with children to support their understanding use of language for thinking.

- Use props, change voice and expression to help convey tone and feeling.

- Use questions/prompts to draw children in; monitoring their levels of engagement.

- Support children to choose books appropriate for their level. Model using strategies such as looking at the cover, the amount of text, reading the blurb and reviews of the book.

- Praise children for effort rather than performance.

- Provide children with commentary and specific feedback as they are reading (e.g. "I liked the way you worked that word out for yourself, you looked at the picture to see what word would go there").

- Provide opportunities for co-operative reading with other children.

- Encourage the child's home language as this provides the foundation for early vocabulary learning and oral language experience.

# School approaches to assessment

There is clear evidence that early identification of reading difficulties is key to providing effective interventions and preventing difficulties becoming worse (Everatt and Reid, 2009; Samuelsson et al., 2008). Therefore the focus in schools needs to be on the identification of needs and the best way to respond.

Effective assessments highlight areas of strength and difficulties, should consider a child's reading skills in different areas and should take place over time (Knight, Day and Patton-Terry, 2009).

The materials below are used to assess the progress of all children in mainstream school and can be used to identify children with reading difficulties:

- Early Years Foundation Stage Profile progress.

- Hearing the child read.

- Letters and sounds phases.

- Phonics Screening check – year 1.

In addition, the following are used by some primary and secondary schools:

- Standardised reading and spelling tests.

- Universal screening in Year 7 and 9 (Cognitive Ability Tests (CAT), Reading and spelling standardised tests).

- Miscue analysis.

# What if a child needs additional support?

Good classroom teaching is the bedrock of effective practice – research demonstrates that the key elements of an effective programme for children who are experience reading difficulties, are the same for all readers (Snowling and Hulme, 2011). However, those children who are falling behind their peers may need more help than the classroom normally provides. Children's progress will be monitored by their class teacher and additional support provided as soon as children fail to make expected progress.

Any intervention that is put in place should be staged and reflect the strengths and difficulties identified through assessment (Gyorfi and Smythe, 2010; Reason and Stothard, 2013).

For example, in the first instance, interventions may take once or twice a week and be time-limited with the expectation that the child will make progress and meet age related expectations (Wave 2). Some children will require small group or increasingly individualised evidence based interventions (Wave 3) over a period of years.

If the child requires additional support there are many evidence based interventions that can be carried out in school. Any intervention should be carried out alongside (and not instead of) the universal support that schools put in place within the classroom.

Reading Interventions for pupils with EAL should reflect their particular needs, which may not necessarily be adequately met by means of intense phonological approaches (an increase in oral language experience will be an important component of any effective intervention for listening and reading comprehension difficulties). Since comprehension of text is essential for vocabulary learning and expanding knowledge, children's 'decoding' of text that goes beyond their level of language comprehension will not result in new learning or vocabulary growth.

# Tried-and-tested interventions

Effective support should always be personalised, taking into account a child's specific reading needs, their strengths, motivation and language skills. However, as part of the support offered to a child it may be helpful and practical to put in place a structured intervention programme. There are many different interventions available and we have developed a comprehensive guide to existing interventions, summarising what age group they target, how long they are designed to take and what the research says. This document is called 'Evidence Based Literacy Interventions for Primary and Secondary Pupils' and can be found within the *SENCo network group on Portsmouth services network*

Any intervention should be based on an assessment of children's reading skills and should be reviewed on a regular basis, following an 'Assess, Plan, Do, Review' cycle (as outlined in the SEND Code of Practice, 2015). The purpose of this is to find the most effective way to support a pupil's learning.

A clear date for monitoring and reviewing progress should be agreed, and the parent, pupil and teaching staff should each be clear about outcomes. If a child fails to make progress then the intervention needs to be adjusted, reflecting the increased understanding of how that child learns best. If concerns continue, schools must seek advice as outlined in the SEND Code of Practice.

# It's not what you do, it's the way that you do it…

Schools can decide to use an 'off-the-shelf' (commercial) intervention or may want to put in place their own intervention (e.g. based on activities that the teacher plans). However, whatever schools choose to do to support a child with their reading, there are some key principles that can be considered in order to ensure that this support is as effective as possible. Therefore, it is instead of working 'harder' (putting in more and more time to support a child) it is about working in a 'smarter' way, making informed decisions about how to tailor this support based on key evidence-based principles. The following section outlines four key principles about how children learn best which it may be helpful to consider:

## Spaced learning: 'little and often'

Research shows that spaced practice (where learning is spread out over time) helps us to learn effectively. This means we are more likely to learn a new skill if it

we practice it 3 times a day for 5 minutes instead of having one 15 minute block (Rohrer, 2012).

**An example:** this could mean that a child practices reading high frequency words at the beginning of the school day, just before lunch and once in the afternoon. Parents can support this by working on the same skill with their child at home.

## Mixing old learning with new learning

Research also shows that we learn best when we learn two different things at the same time, which may seem strange! It may feel like hard work for a child to begin with, but they are less likely to make mistakes in the longer term (Rohrer, 2012). It can be particularly helpful to mix new learning with old learning in order give them opportunities to practice their

existing skills and to ensure they feel successful.

**An example:** this could mean that a child practices the sounds 'ch' and 'sh' (which they already know), alongside learning 'ee', which is a new sound.

## Reading for meaning and enjoyment

Phonics should be embedded within a broad approach to teaching reading and should not be prioritised over other skills. If we want children to become successful readers, a strong emphasis should be placed on teaching children to read for meaning. For example, if we use phonics knowledge to read the word 'blow', it could be read different ways – blow (like "cow") or blow (like "slow"). The only way we can work out what the word is, is by having a good vocabulary which allows us to realise that blow ("cow") is a non-word or

by reading the word in a sentence in order to work out what makes sense. Research clearly shows that vocabulary knowledge helps us to decode (read) (Hulme et al., 2005; Nation & Snowling, 2004).

Supporting children's motivation for reading is also crucial – however, research suggests that students in England have a poorer attitude towards reading when compared to students in other countries and are less likely to read for fun (Ofsted, 2004, 2012; Progress in International Reading Literacy Studies, 2003, 2007, 2012). However, research repeatedly shows us just how important motivation is. A large numbers of studies have found that motivation is one of the strongest predictors of good reading skills, and is possibly more important than IQ and study skills (e.g. Jenkins, 2015; Morgan & Fuchs, 2007).

One of the reasons reading for pleasure is so important is that it has been found to lead to a 'snowballing' effect – the more we enjoy reading, the more we get from it in terms of improving our reading skills, the more likely we are likely to persist when reading something difficult, the more

successful we feel and more time we want to spend reading again in the future (Schaffner, Philipp & Schiefele, 2016). Research has also found that reading for enjoyment is an effective intervention, where lower achieving readers made accelerated progress (9 months progress in 6 months) when they were taught to read using enjoyable, 'real' books (instead of phonically regular books from a reading scheme) (Darnell, Solity & Wall, in publication).

## Support and feedback is personalised

Adults must have a good understanding of the needs of the learner, their strengths and difficulties, motivation and language needs.

Research suggests that educators need to be 'attuned' to any regular errors they are making and help support the child in identifying effective strategies to help them overcome them. Questions that promote higher-order thinking supports better learning so that the pupil then knows what to do next time (Russell, Webster and Blatchford, 2013):

*Skilful questioning to aid learning is at the heart of teaching and a two way transaction attempting to lift the lid on the workings of the pupils mind to reveal what is known, understood and where any barriers to learning may be.*

Possible questions could include:

- What do you know already that could help you?
- What do you think you need to do next?
- How could your reading be improved?
- What is working well/not working well?
- How could you work this out differently?

# Frequently asked questions

## As a service, do you diagnose dyslexia?

Portsmouth EP Team have chosen not to diagnose dyslexia or to describe a child's needs in this way as we feel this label means different things to different people and can cause confusion. Instead, when identifying a child with reading (or literacy) difficulties we want to focus on helping you to understand what their specific difficulties and strengths are as a reader so that we can agree upon the most effective way of ensuring that a child receives support and makes good progress with their reading. Our priority is to ensure that that all children with reading difficulties receive appropriate and tailored support regardless as to whether they have been given a label of dyslexia or not.

## Schools

## As a SENCo what could I say to a parent who has had a private assessment which concludes that their child is dyslexic?

Firstly, acknowledge the parents views and concerns. The following information may be helpful in discussion:

■ Parents should be reassured that appropriate support is available dependent on need and not dependent on any label.

■ There is no single assessment for persistent reading difficulties and dyslexia, but any assessment can contribute to the overall picture of a child's strengths and weaknesses and it is therefore advisable to read through and discuss the content of the report with parents.

■ Professionals outside the Local Authority may be using a different definition or description of dyslexia, for example, the discrepancy model. If this is the case and the child appears to have average reading ability, reassure the parent, discuss their concerns and use the information provided in the assessment to help you support the child (for example, do they need to be stretched in some areas of the curriculum?)

■ There are likely to be a number of recommendations made, and school should discuss these with parents, which are evidence based, appropriate and feasible given the available resources.

# Parents

## If my child has reading difficulties, do they need the involvement of a specialist teacher or an Educational Psychologist?

Reading difficulties can be identified by following the SEND Code of Practice (2015), using the Assess, Plan, Do, and Review approach. This can be carried out by the class teacher (with support from the SENCO), where a child's needs and the support they need can be reviewed on a regular basis, which school staff will involve you with. If schools have carefully assessed a child's needs, have a good understanding of their strengths and difficulties in relation to reading and have put appropriate support in place, it may not be necessary to involve an external specialist to provide additional support and guidance around a child's reading difficulties. However, staff in schools sometimes like to discuss the difficulties with a specialist such as an Educational Psychologist if a child's difficulties appear to be significant and persistent and when

they gathered information about how a child has responded to the interventions that have already been put into place. A diagnosis of dyslexia should is not necessary in order for a child's literacy difficulties to be identified and addressed in schools.

## Will my child be eligible for support with exams?

Support is based on the pupil's presenting needs and is not dependent on the pupil having a dyslexia diagnosis. If your child has a history of requiring additional support, and meets the criteria, they will be eligible for extra support. This can be extra time, a reader or a scribe. Equally, access to additional resources in school is not contingent on a formal identification or diagnosis of dyslexia but on a needs-led basis.

More information is available at the links below:

### Primary school age:

https://www.gov.uk/guidance/key-stage-2-tests-how-to-use-access-arrangements

### Secondary/ Further Education:

For children undertaking KS4 exams (e.g. GCSEs) and A Levels, an assessment is required by a specialist assessor with post graduate qualifications in individual specialist assessments, equivalent of an OCR Level 7 qualification or by a registered psychologist.

http://www.jcq.org.uk/exams-office/access-arrangements-and-special-consideration/regulations-and-guidance

## What can I do if I am unhappy with the support my child is receiving?

Pupils make most progress when schools and parents work together. If you are unhappy with the support your child is receiving request a meeting with their teacher and SENCo/Head Teacher at which you can express concerns and ask questions. If you remain concerned you could contact the SEND Governor of the school.

Parent Information, Advice and Support Service (PIASS) can provide advice and support with regard to meetings in school.

## I have had a private assessment carried out, what can I now expect from school?

You can expect the school to read the report and discuss its contents with you. It is important to note that a diagnosis by a specialist who does not have access to information about the learning context and response to interventions over time will only provide a 'snap shot' of the pupil's difficulties.

The main focus for discussion should be to acknowledge your concerns and any recommendations made in the report and for school to discuss with you how these may fit with existing support in school.

You should be assured that appropriate support is put into place to support your child, dependent on their needs.

## Colleges

### How do colleges support young people with reading difficulties?

All colleges in Portsmouth have support available for young people with reading difficulties and they do not need a diagnosis of Dyslexia to receive this. The support on offer may look different depending on which College a young person attends but they have staff that have the skills needed to support students with reading and literacy difficulties.

Colleges can provide support in lessons as well as offering additional drop-in sessions which focus specifically on supporting students with their reading and writing skills. Colleges may also provide ICT support by using a programme like 'Read and Write Gold' which supports individuals with their reading and writing via a range of helpful tools such as a picture dictionary, word prediction, spell checking and being able to read out pieces of text. Programmes like this can also be helpful for students with EAL as it can translate texts into other languages.

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