



The Impact of Covid on the Dyslexic Community

Report on Findings from BDA Surveys 7th March – 3rd April 2021

Objectives

The aim of this report is to:

- Highlight the key findings from the two BDA surveys carried out in April 2021 which looked at the experiences of dyslexic adults working from home during Covid, and dyslexic children accessing home schooling during the periods of lockdown.
- Draw a conclusion as to whether the findings support the view that dyslexic individuals were more likely to be adversely affected by Covid restrictions than their non-dyslexic peers.
- Make recommendations for the focus of the Covid recovery plan for BDA

Introduction

This report looks at the experiences of the dyslexic community throughout the periods of lockdown during the Covid 19 pandemic, which forced the sudden closure of schools and the directive to work from home.

The findings are taken from two surveys carried out by the BDA between 7 March and 3 April 2021 to explore the experiences of parents' home-schooling dyslexic children, and dyslexic adults working from home.

227 sets of parents contributed to the survey about home schooling, and 171 adults with dyslexia contributed to the survey about home working.

The questions in the two surveys were derived from anecdotal evidence collected from enquiries to the BDA helpline during the periods of lockdown. This suggested that the dyslexic community might be more adversely affected by Covid restrictions which forced the sudden and dramatic changes to working and schooling patterns, than others in the population.

Local Dyslexia Helplines around the country reported similar calls emerged during this time.

Parent Survey

Comments received via our helpline during the periods of lockdown, suggested that dyslexic children and those with other Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) were:

- more badly affected by on-line learning than their non-dyslexic peers
- found it more difficult to access the curriculum than they did at school
- may not have received their usual level of support upon which they rely
- may have fallen further behind in their studies or disengaged from learning altogether during lockdowns.

Our survey asked parents a series of questions to explore these themes in more detail.

About the sample

Parents of dyslexic children were asked about their experiences of home schooling during the periods of school closure. 227 sets of parents of dyslexic children chose to share their experiences. The focus of the survey was to look at the impact on dyslexic learners and those with other SpLD to understand whether they had specific challenges accessing the curriculum from home, because of their dyslexia.

- All children in the survey had a Specific Learning Difficulty
- 98% were dyslexic
- A third had a co-occurring difficulty most commonly dyscalculia or dyspraxia
- 90% were being educated in a mainstream school
- There was a broadly even split of primary and secondary pupils
- 55% were set work by their school
- 20% had some online lessons but only 5% had all their lessons taught online.

Home learning was more challenging for many than lessons at school

Parents reported that there were specific challenges with online lessons and set work, and most children found this more challenging than being at school.

These included:

- A heavy reliance on reading and following detailed written instructions to access the work.
- A pace of learning and volume of work that was too much for slower paced children, with the added pressure for some of uploading completed work by the end of day.
- Many children lacked the level of independence to work on their own from home because they were over reliant on 1:1 and small group support at school.
- Many lacked the strategies required for self-directed learning.
- A lack of differentiation in the work made it inaccessible for some children without the support from a parent to help answer questions or find an alternative way to explain something.

Home schooling was easier for some than being at school

20% of parents reported that home schooling during lockdown was a positive experience for their child. There were several reasons for this which included:

- Home was often quieter with less distractions
- Home learning suited those with anxiety about school. It was a safe place and enabled some to re-engage with learning.
- Timetable and rest breaks could often be tailored to a child's needs.
- Children could often work at their own pace.
- Parents differentiated the work or set their own work.
- Parents provided 1:1 support or found new ways to explain things.
- Parents acted as readers and scribes.

The one thing that all these children had in common was parents who had the skills and the time to support them. Parents who could differentiate work to meet their needs, or support them 1:1, or explain things in different ways until they understood. Parents who facilitated the work by

acting as scribes and readers. Parents reported that generally, schools appeared to be unable to provide the level of support that was needed for individual children, support which they normally had at school and were reliant on. Some parents felt unsupported by their child's school; all felt that it was a steep learning curve to get to the position of providing the support their child needed.

Lockdown learning was a lesson for parents

For many parents, home schooling was an opportunity to see first-hand the specific challenges their child faced in accessing the curriculum, and how much support their child needed to engage with the work.

- 80% said that lockdown had made them realise how much their child struggles with learning.
- 65% had discovered how much support their child needs to access the curriculum.
- 67% learnt a lot more about supporting their child's learning during lockdown.

Catching up from lost learning

Three quarters of parents in the survey were worried about lost learning and believe that the attainment gap has widened for dyslexic children compared to their peers.

Most parents believed that it will take their child a school year or more to catch up on the learning that was lost during this time.

78% of parents would choose 1:1 tutoring as their preferred method of catch up for their child but felt that this needs to be carried out face to face in school with a person the child knows or could have time to build a relationship with. There were also suggestions that this needs to be with a teacher who understands how dyslexic children learn, and that catch up was not simply a matter of filling gaps in knowledge, but helping their children build strategies to increase their independence.

Most parents were also in support of well-being policies but thought that these should take place during school time, not just as optional after school clubs.

Conclusions from the parent's survey

It is evident from the survey findings that dyslexic children were disadvantaged by the periods of lockdown which prevented them from being taught face to face in a classroom. They found it more difficult to access the curriculum from home than their non-dyslexic peers.

Accessing the curriculum remotely placed a heavy burden on skills which are often associated as dyslexic challenges – i.e., reading, maintaining focus and organisational skills. There was also limited contact with a classroom teacher which prevented information and instructions being given in a dyslexia friendly way, or additional time provided for asking questions to aid their understanding.

It was clear from the survey that a lack of specialist teaching in many schools is leading to a focus on 1:1 support by a Teaching Assistant which is creating learners who have an over reliance on asking for help. This is not encouraging the independence that was needed to access remote learning and will be needed for children to progress.

Those children who had parents with the time and skills to support them fared better, but parents were having to provide 1:1 support throughout the day, which was simply replacing the support that their child had at school.

Many parents said that their child could not work without this support.

Recovery recommendations - Children

- To help the recovery from lost learning due to Covid, a programme of face-to-face tutoring from specialist teachers will be required. The focus should be on teaching children strategies which encourage self-directed learning rather than a focus on catching up to fill gaps in knowledge and understanding.
- Dyslexia Awareness training needs to be included as an essential part of all Initial Teacher Training, to ensure that classroom teachers can spot and support those children with dyslexia and other SpLD.
- Dyslexia friendly teaching techniques need to be included as an essential element of all teaching staff Continuous Professional Development (cpd). A dyslexia friendly classroom works for all children and would reduce the need for 1:1 support with a TA for many children.
- Access to assistive technology in schools needs to be improved and encouraged. Microsoft 365 has built in dictation and screen reading functionality which would benefit many and encourage children to work independently rather than being so reliant on help to read text to enable them to access the curriculum.

- Ring-fenced funding for specialist teacher support in all schools is required to replace over-reliance on 1:1 support and small group working with a TA.

Adults Survey

Comments received via our helpline during the periods of lockdown, suggested that dyslexic adults working from home:

- were more badly affected by working from home than their non-dyslexic colleagues
- found it more difficult to carry out their job remotely than in the office
- were working without some of the reasonable adjustments including assistive technology they had in the office
- needed to develop new coping strategies to work at home
- found home working impacted their dyslexia more than working in the office

Our survey asked dyslexic adults a series of questions to explore these themes in more detail.

About the Sample

The survey was completed anonymously by 171 adults, who were normally office-based and said they had worked from home during Covid.

- 94% of adults who took part in the survey had a Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD)
- 83% said that they were dyslexic
- 91% were in employment at the start of the pandemic. This dropped to 82% by the time of the survey with some furloughed and a small increase in the number of those not working
- 59% had never worked from home prior to Lockdown
- 93% were working from home at the time of the survey (Apr 21)
- Opinion was split equally between those who preferred to work at home, those who preferred the office, and those who liked a mix of both.
- 75% of respondents used assistive technology, mostly likely to be screen reading, text to speech and dictation software. Many also used two monitors and screen tinting software or overlays.

Benefits of Working from Home

Adults in the survey agreed that working from home provided many benefits:

- A more flexible approach to working hours
- Often easier to concentrate at home than in an open plan office
- Many who felt self-conscious using Assistive Technology in the office were more comfortable using it at home
- Better work/life balance
- Good not to have to travel to work

Challenges of Working from home

As well as the benefits there were also challenges of working from home that were not present in the office.

Adults in the survey identified the following as challenges:

- Virtual environment for meetings was more difficult, with some saying they found it harder to remain focused on the conversation.
- Noisy neighbours were difficult for dyslexic individuals who find it difficult to concentrate in a noisy environment.
- Family distractions made it difficult to pick up where they left off, so tasks took longer to complete.
- Most did not have access to printers, which presented difficulties for those who were used to printing hard copies of information as a reasonable adjustment due to difficulties reading information on screen.
- Interaction with colleagues was more difficult virtually; 74% said that they preferred to discuss things face to face.
- An increase in the volume of written communication by email and “chats” put a heavier burden on reading and writing.

- There was not sufficient time in the working day to read all the additional communications that were generated from remote working. Many worked in their own time to keep up to date.
- 72% said that it was harder to informally ask colleagues for support with explaining/proof reading than it was in the office.

Working from home required new coping strategies

Many of the challenges identified above, were experienced by all employees working from home, but what was evident from the survey was:

- Many dyslexics who were confident in their role in the office, initially struggled to do their job from home.
- Working remotely put a heavy emphasis on skills such as reading and writing which are not usually dyslexic strengths.
- Some existing coping strategies did not translate into working from home and/or working virtually so for example documents and emails could not be printed and marked up by hand and had to be read on screen.
- Many strategies such as asking colleagues to help with proof reading or repeating instructions, are informally agreed, and harder to access remotely.
- Asking for help from a colleague in the office is less formal and easier than it is in a remote environment.
- Dyslexia is not openly understood, discussed, or accepted in many organisations and employees often do not disclose that they are dyslexic.

- Coping strategies may be “hidden” to employers. Strategies are often self-instigated or rely on ad-hoc help from colleagues and are not formally identified or agreed.
- It was difficult for some to ask for reasonable adjustments at home when these had not been previously required in the office

Workplace support needs to be requested by the employee

Based upon the responses given by the adults in the survey, it is evident that many employers are not aware of hidden disabilities such as dyslexia and the onus is on individuals to disclose this and ask for reasonable adjustments if they need them. Many are reluctant to do this as they do not feel confident that their request will receive a positive response.

The survey found that:

- Only 7% of respondents said that their employer had offered a workplace needs assessment.
- Support for working from home focused on the provision of standard office equipment such as desks, chairs and monitors, or on mental health and well-being schemes.
- Access to Work provision was impacted during Covid with comments about long delays in the supply of equipment and difficulty in accessing assessments.

Analysis of the figures using the Government's Access to Work scheme, shows that in 2019/20 only 4,180 adults

were in receipt of access to work for dyslexia.¹ Based upon 10% of the population being dyslexic, the BDA estimate that 3.2m working adults in the UK have dyslexia.² Not all will need support in the workplace, but the above figures suggest that there are a large number who are entitled to support but are not currently receiving any.

¹ Source DWP 2019/20 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/access-to-work-statistics-april-2007-to-march-2020>

² BDA estimate 10% of adult working population of 32.9 m working adults ONS Employment estimates 2019

Conclusions

We have all faced challenges with the sudden unplanned switch to working from home. Our survey indicates that many dyslexic individuals have faced additional challenges working in a remote or virtual environment because the skills required do not play to dyslexic strengths.

Most dyslexic adults have had to develop new coping strategies to adjust to working from home as many of their existing strategies which had worked well in the office for many years could not be used at home. This has taken time, but our survey showed that most have adapted, and are now confident and able to work at home or in the office.

During Covid, there were reported difficulties with accessing support through the Government's Access to work scheme at a time when more individuals needed access to assessments or equipment because they were adapting to a new working environment. This increased the challenges faced by some during the pandemic.

Dyslexia is still misunderstood or seen as a negative or problem in many organisations, so there is a reluctance for employees to disclose it. As a result, many are forced

to implement their own coping strategies rather than access professional advice and support.

There is a heavy reliance upon informal support from colleagues and the use of hidden coping strategies. Many of these strategies which worked well in the office environment did not translate into a home working or remote working environment.

Many of the difficulties experienced at the start of Covid and the sudden move to working from home, are as a result of lack of awareness and understanding of dyslexia by employers. This has led to a reluctance by many to disclose their dyslexia which in turn means that they are unable to access reasonable adjustments and have therefore implemented their own informal coping strategies in order to perform their job.

Recommendations – Adults

- BDA should continue to focus on increasing awareness and changing the perception of dyslexia in the workplace through its communications, commercial training, employee support services and policy work.
- Dyslexia needs to be understood and accepted as a different way of thinking, part of diversity within the workforce. Organisations need access to awareness and training programmes so that they understand the benefits that dyslexic employees bring to their workplace, and that simple adjustments to working practices could remove many of the challenges.
- Dyslexic employees need access to professional advice and support services to ensure best support in the workplace. Awareness and promotion of the Government's Access to Work scheme is an essential part of this provision, together with services from the BDA and other Dyslexia organisations. Together, these services provide access to workplace needs assessments, technology, and strategy coaching to enable employees to understand how to develop

and apply effective coping strategies to support them in their specific job roles.