

# Dyslexia – here and there

a basic guide for parents



Dyslexia International –  
Tools and Technologies ASBL  
*building learning abilities*

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## Facing up to dyslexia

If children with dyslexia are properly assessed and taught in a sympathetic environment, they will escape the demoralising process of continual failure and having to contend with a school system that does not understand or address their true learning needs.

But, as things are, parents often find themselves waiting anxiously to be told whether their child has coped with his or her school-work, or should be moved.

Some parents panic and make hasty, unwise decisions. Others ignore what is happening and simply hope for the best. Either way it is too easy to slip into a negative spiral by focusing on the child's learning difficulties and losing sight of his or her strengths and abilities. But this is to lose sight of the solutions.

**It is imperative that the child's capabilities are encouraged and developed. They are the basis for raising morale and developing the coping skills that will eventually lead to a proper level of independence.**

- To nurture the child's natural abilities, small-group clubs or classes in art, sports or music may prove to be ideal. In such a setting, the child is away from the pressures of large numbers and away from academic settings where success depends mainly on literacy and numeracy skills.

But what about the parents? However disappointed or frustrated they may feel at first, once the initial emotional reactions are over, there is no substitute for following a plan of action. This provides the framework for a systematic and balanced look at the child and the school, and a proper evaluation of the choices available. Parents regain control and are back in a position to make informed, considered decisions.

But first, the facts...

## Definitions and facts

The terms **dyslexia** and **specific learning difficulties** are often used synonymously. Dyslexia comes from the Greek *dys*, implying 'difficulty' and *lexis*, meaning 'word'. It is a general term applied to a cluster of specific learning difficulties or disabilities in any or all of the following areas:

- spelling
- reading
- writing
- arithmetic
- speech
- memory
- organisation
- behaviour.

Often dyslexia is allied with other conditions, such as dyspraxia, disgraphia and problems with attention deficit or processing information at speed.

There are many definitions of dyslexia. But only some of them are officially recognised by governments.

At the 1994 'Action for Dyslexia' conference, delegates from the EU Ministries agreed on the following working definition, which D·I·T·T has adopted:

'the student with specific learning difficulties shows

- some learning skills developed to an above-average or average standard, but also shows
- organising or learning difficulties which impair fine motor skills, organisation of laterality and information skills in working memory,

so limiting the development of curriculum skills in some or all of speech, reading, spelling, writing and behaviour.'

(See [www.ditt-online.org](http://www.ditt-online.org) for **French** and **German** translations)

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What is the legal definition that is used by your local education authority?

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It is important not to confuse the child with dyslexia with the young, immature child who may overcome errors in the normal course of development. The symptoms will vary from one child to the next.

Common signs of dyslexia are listed in the guide: *Language Shock - Dyslexia across Cultures* that is part of a multimedia pack published by D·I·T·T. E-book versions of the Guide are available in [English](#), [French](#), [German](#), [Italian](#), [Spanish](#) and [Portuguese](#) on the D·I·T·T Web site.

Some researchers believe that dyslexia, which occurs irrespective of intelligence or background, and arises from differences in the physiology of the brain, is more prevalent in males; others disagree.

According to the European Dyslexia Association's recent statistics, specific learning difficulties affect up to 10% of the population to some degree, of whom 40% are affected severely – that is more than 37 million in 15 of the Member States of the European Union alone.

In his Concluding Report on the *Action for Dyslexia* conference, the Co-ordinator, Dr Harry Chasty, stated that the special educational needs of some 90% of dyslexic children could be met in an ordinary school. However, this would depend on teachers being trained to be able to recognise learning difficulties and adapt their teaching methods to different learning styles.

There is extensive evidence to show that children with dyslexia who are not recognised and treated at an early age are likely to suffer severe personal and social consequences.



## **Other learning difficulties and disabilities**

There is evidence that other learning difficulties may appear very similar to dyslexia.

Sometimes dyslexia may be present as only one of a number of handicapping conditions.

Accurate assessment is essential.

Once a child has had a professional assessment, parents may want to contact the official organisation or informal groups concerned.

- Remember to ask about: leaflets and newsletters, local support groups, meetings, educational videos, helplines, counselling, training and library resources, lending equipment and any other facilities.

# A plan of action

In three steps:

1 Find out about the **child**



2 Find out about the **schools**



3 Find the **best fit**

- Keep a current, well ordered file with:
  - assessments of your child and relevant samples of work
  - photocopied checklists for your final analysis and decision-making.

## Step 1 – Find out about the child



Parents who are looking for the right teaching for their child must first have a clear idea of the child's learning needs.

Prepare full and accurate lists of:

- the **abilities** to be developed
- the **learning difficulties** to be addressed.

The child's special needs must be carefully highlighted for final matching when it comes to using the D-I-T-T checklist.

- **Listen regularly with undivided attention to your child.** Many psychologists consider the process of 'active listening' vital to the child's proper development. **Be Patient!** Often a child cannot find the words to express underlying feelings of fear and anxiety. Allow time for these to be expressed and encourage communication. You can dispel worries that, if allowed to build up, leave a child 'locked up' and miserable.



- Build self-confidence and positive thoughts. Your child could make a list – ‘I’m good at...!’
- Praise good behaviour.  
Do not accept bad behaviour.

## Medical examinations

These are especially important for the overall assessment of a child with learning difficulties.

If you are moving abroad, it is worth having hearing, sight or other medical check-ups done before moving, in a familiar medical system and in the mother tongue.

- Remember! Dietary and environmental factors such as too much sugar, cola drinks, food additives and too little sleep can also affect a child’s behaviour.

## Assessment by an educational psychologist

To find the best possible choice of school, parents will need a specialist’s objective view of their child’s abilities and difficulties, with specific recommendations for remedial help.

The educational psychologist should always be asked for a short summary statement written in layman’s language besides the detailed analysis. Such a statement is important for ensuring the best possible communication with the school.

Many schools will insist on a recent assessment before offering a place, even if they go on to make further tests themselves.

Educational psychologists can take several hours to run their tests.

- It is useful to take recent school reports and samples of work and a list of points to raise concerning the child and the family. It is all too easy to come away feeling the full picture was not properly presented and that some vital points were left out.

## Covering the cost of assessment

What medical or educational cover does the employer provide? Is there a sliding scale or reduced fee for parents who have to pay privately?

Parents who cannot afford the fee should say so when they set up an appointment and request a concessionary fee before the visit.

- Beware! In some cases, in order to have access to educational funding for children with learning difficulties, a **medical doctor's report** rather than a psychologist's is essential. The medical route to funding is often more accessible than the educational one.
- Medical insurance may not cover psychological help if this is not first prescribed by a doctor.

## Where to go for an assessment

International consultants, experts in dyslexia, may occasionally visit. Find out through a Dyslexia Support Group.

Specialists can also be consulted at local hospitals, although they may not necessarily provide back-up psychological services or written assessments in your language. The telephone directory may give a full list, though not all educational psychologists will recognise the condition. Beware!

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Where can you go for an assessment near you?

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## Step 2 – Find out about the school

Schools differ widely in their approach, facilities and staffing.

Living abroad? Then you can expect cultural differences to come into play. Parents coming from abroad should put aside their own preconceived ideas and expectations.

Take the role of teachers and parents – in a Belgian school, parental involvement in classroom activities is not the usual practice, nor is regular face-to-face parent-teacher communication. The 'agenda', a child's school diary, is used as the main tool of communication.

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**What cultural differences have you found between where you live now and where you used to live?**

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To ensure understanding on both sides and establish satisfactory communication, parents need to keep an open mind and find out about these differences from the start. The D·I·T·T checklist in this kit should be useful here.

- For any meeting at a school consider:
  - arranging the appointment in advance, stating the purpose and setting a time limit
  - preparing a list of the main points you want to raise
  - giving the teachers a half-page of information on your child (with name, age, recent assessment, and your aims) to have in front of them during the meeting, and
  - sending a brief summary of agreements and any points to be followed up.

## Contacting a school for the first time: using a checklist

The sample checklist at the end of this handbook gives a systematic list of questions for building up a bank of information on how the school works and what it can offer.

The checklist should not be seen as a threat but as a joint exercise to establish how the particular learning needs of the child with learning difficulties may or may not be met.

### ■ Communicating with schools:

- Parents may feel intimidated and subconsciously act as they did when they were school-children themselves...
- **But do not forget!**  
Teachers may also feel threatened. Their professional skills are being questioned and they may already feel overwhelmed by the number of children in their charge and the demands on their time.



For a first-time visit to any school, it is useful to have:

- a fresh copy of a checklist
- a recent assessment with the summary statement from the educational psychologist, and
- examples of the child's work.



When visiting schools you might like to take the child with you, certainly when it comes to the final selection, so as to ensure he or she is part of the decision-making process.

- Do boost self-confidence!
- Do mention the child's abilities!
- Do listen to your child's views!
- Don't talk loudly and enthusiastically about your child's learning difficulties in front of him or her!
- Beware of accepting a place in a school just because of the ready welcome! Keeping a child occupied and happy is not always the same as developing his or her learning potential and abilities.

## The national educational system

How are your child's rights to an education being met? It is vital to understand what the system can offer: assessment, extra help and other resources.

See the D-I-T-T Web site - '[State Provision](#)' for a useful format.

## Finding specialist schools

For up-to-date information and lists of state and other schools and facilities, contact the Ministry of Education.

When abroad the local Embassy can provide this information.

## Private schools

Some schools restrict entry – phone to ask about their admissions policy.

A useful publication (in English) is the *International Schools Directory* (updated annually) published by the European Council of International Schools.

Some international schools publish a prospectus, and have counselling services too.

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Are there any international or foreign national schools in your area? A complete lists of schools is available through the local Ministry of Education.

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## Grants and financial aid

Where parents of the child concerned are of mixed nationality, it is not always clear which way to turn. What is your legal status? Do you have rights as a resident?

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Does your child qualify for any grant or sponsorship?

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Up-to-date sources may be found through the Ministry of Education or, if abroad, the Embassy Cultural or Educational Information Services.

School heads should be able to advise on scholarships and grants available, sometimes through the school itself, or through the local education authority.

## Step 3 – Find the best fit

### **The tiredness factor**

If there is a choice, it is a good idea to live within easy reach of a child's school. Drawing a circle on the map and looking for a home within it can help. It is also worth finding out about the length of the journey by school bus, the most direct routes by car or on foot, and the possibility of sharing the journey to school with another family.

For parents hoping to arrange extra tuition outside school, it is even more important to calculate the travel time involved, so that schedules are not too tiring and leave time for the child to unwind and relax.

- Be aware of the learning curve! Some learn better in the mornings, others later in the day. Do not set up extra lessons when you know your child will be tired!



## Moving abroad – the options



Expatriate parents can expect to find themselves confronted by a multitude of theories, rumours, statistics and recommendations. Everyone is looking for that unique best-fit for their child's particular abilities, learning difficulties and temperament.

Respecting well-founded properly-researched solutions rather than going for quick 'cures' and treatments can be difficult, and often goes against instincts and emotions.

The choices families make are obviously conditioned by personal circumstances and practical considerations too, such as how long they plan to stay in a particular place and their financial situation.

- List your priorities and essential needs before you weigh up the options.

Families who are *considering* a move to another country should consider carefully in advance, in consultation with professionals and other members of the family, whether it is better to:

- move and integrate the child into the local education system (likely to involve having to learn a new language)
- move and find a private school where special education is available in the mother-tongue (likely to be expensive)
- move and put together what assistance they can find
- reconsider the need to move at all.

Families who have *already* moved may want to consider:

- finding appropriate education in the local system
- finding additional private tutors and/or therapists
- teaching at home, with local authority approval
- considering a boarding school with appropriate teaching
- splitting up the family, so that the job-holder remains and the rest of the family returns home.

It is well worth sharing ideas with others at a local support group, or setting up your own group. This way a lot of useful information is exchanged informally, besides seeking professional advice.



For the expatriate family two hard facts remain:

- the range of provision – schooling, therapists and back-up in your native language – is likely to be less than that at home, and
- the cost of paying for educational provision, in a setting where the native language is not your own, is almost always much higher.

## How moving affects the child

Some children adjust to the new environment quickly and without apparent problems. Others find it difficult, showing such symptoms as loss of self-confidence, depression and even despair.

For the child with dyslexia, removed from the security of a home base, these symptoms can be magnified. Behavioural problems sometimes emerge, and school and family life can suffer as a result.

Winning a child over to liking and eventually adapting to a new setting may not be easy for parents, especially if they too are experiencing some form of culture shock. The problem is not uncommon, but professional help may well be available.

There are many articles and books on the subject of culture shock and mobility.



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[See the article 'Children on the Move – Culture Shock' in the DITT e-book Guides.](#)

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## Bilingualism

Dr Ludo Beheydt, Professor of Psycholinguistics at the Université Catholique de Louvain in Belgium, specialist in multi-lingualism, writes:

‘Learning to understand and speak a second language, especially in a bilingual home setting and where there is no undue pressure, can boost a child’s self-confidence.’

However, Dr Beheydt cautions that ‘for children with dyslexia, having to read and write in a second language can “overload” the learning capacity, and even upset the processes of coping in the first language, especially if the *input* and/or the *motivation* for one of the languages is past.’

## A word of warning about costs

The expense of educating a child and securing support services in a foreign language can be high, even prohibitive, when an employer does not cover costs or insurance.

School fees for local private schools, and hourly rates for private tuition, may be significantly higher than the equivalent costs in the home country.

# Health

## Contacts

Good contacts and an understanding of how the medical system works are essential when parents need to organise important regular assessments and check-ups as the child develops.

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Ask in local pharmacies for a list of local doctors. Ask your local support group for recommendations.

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## Payment for medical care

It is advisable to check first with the employer to find out what terms and conditions apply to you and you child, depending on your status (e.g. resident or non-resident).

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Check your rights under your national or private health-insurance programme.

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# Legal rights

## Equal opportunities in education for children with learning difficulties

At national level, the child's rights may be clearly set out in an Education Act. But for the child of mixed nationality or whose family moves between one country and other, the picture can be blurred. These children cannot always exercise their rights to extra help, such as resources in the classroom or additional time when sitting exams.

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### What are your child's legal rights?

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The United Nations Convention, signed and ratified by 159 countries, remains the main instrument for children's rights.

Articles 12 and 13 state that:

Children have the right to say what they think about anything that affects them. They have the right to express how they think and feel so long as by doing so they do not break the law or affect other people's rights. What they say must be listened to carefully.

Article 28 states the need to:

- make primary education compulsory and free to all;
- encourage the development of different forms of secondary education;
- make educational and vocational information available and accessible to all children;
- take measures to encourage regular school attendance and reduce drop-out rates.

Article 29 describes the need to:

- develop the child's personality, talents, mental and physical abilities to his fullest potential;
- prepare the child for a responsible life in a free society;
- develop respect for the child's parents, his or her cultural identity, language and values, as well as for the culture and value of others.

Wherever these rights are not being respected, the appropriate Ministries, Member of Parliament, local councillors or children's organisations should be contacted.

**D·I·T·T will continue to lobby for the rights of children with learning difficulties at national and international level.**

D·I·T·T will campaign for all children to have:

- access to education that matches their needs
- classroom assistance available where they are capable of integrating into the local system
- access to counselling and advocacy at all times
- whatever facilities are needed to ensure their equality of opportunity.

D·I·T·T will also lobby for:

- teachers, professionals and parents to have access to training programmes and forums for the exchange of ideas on methods, materials and good practice
- teachers and health-care professionals to be trained in recognising and assessing children with learning difficulties
- teachers to be trained in how to adapt their methods to the needs of the child who learns differently
- information on rights and facilities for families with children with learning difficulties to be readily available
- the promotion of on-going research
- the creation and promotion of tools and technologies that enable the dyslexic learner to succeed in a competitive world.

## Support groups

Such groups have been established at international, European, national, regional and local levels.

A list of international and European-level organisations, through which local support groups can be found, is on the D-I-T-T Web site – see [‘Contacts’](#).

## National, regional and local groups

Further inquiries may also be made through these groups about

- others in your area
- new associations starting up, or
- setting one up yourself.

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Details of national organisations in Europe can also be found on the D-I-T-T Web site – see [‘Member State Provision.’](#) Many of these can tell you about what local groups there are.

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## General resources

The D·I·T·T Web site contains a regularly-updated [list of organisations](#), plus [information on reading and teaching materials](#).

## Teacher-training

General information on local courses for teachers is available through the local ministry of education.

D·I·T·T has information on on-line and distance-learning teacher training.

For group use we highly recommend 'How difficult can this be?' – a teacher training video by [Richard Lavoie](#) that demonstrates the experience of being dyslexic.

## Information technology

Information technology can help dyslexic people of all ages with:

- basic skills, such as structural practice of phonics, word recognition, spelling and fluency
- applying basic skills and learning the meaning of what is read
- writing skills, allowing him or her to focus on one process of writing at a time
- easy correction of mistakes and the opportunity to edit, so as to produce an attractive piece of work without pressure

all of which increase motivation.

It is widely acknowledged that the best application of the technology is as part of a structural teaching programme, with the computer being used to give regular practice and reinforcement.

The [British Dyslexia Association](#) Computer Committee, for example, produces a wide range of booklets giving details of recommended software.

## Once your child has started school...

- Keep to a daily schedule:
  - establish a routine and be consistent
  - do not change the time-table for eating, play and homework
- Colour-code all books, bags, etc. – so your child recognises them instantly. It works!
- Teach your child:
  - how to pack and unpack his or her school-bag
  - how to organise his or her pencil-case





# D·I·T·T checklist –

for parents seeking the right school for a dyslexic child

## Basic information about the school

### Contact details

Name of school

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Address

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Telephone

---

E-mail address

---

Web site address

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Name and position of staff consulted

---

Date of visit / phone call

---

Name of special education staff consulted

---

Date of visit / phone call

---

### School curriculum

This is important where a future move is likely.

Is the school curriculum:

British / American?

Yes  No

Other country

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### Geographical location

Is there a school bus service?

Yes  No  N/a

Estimated travel time home – school

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## Teaching provision

The purpose of this section is to ensure that the child's abilities and learning style are well understood and that parents, from the outset, have a clear picture of how the child's needs may be addressed.

Has the school staff seen the educational psychologist's summary report with recommendations?

Yes  No

Do they have the facilities to meet the educational needs of the child:

trained staff?

Yes  No

equipment (eg computers)?

## Special needs programmes

Does the school cater for children with various disabilities?

Yes  No

Details

Are all the children with different learning disabilities taught in one group?

Yes  No

Does the school have an established special needs programme or learning support unit?

Yes  No

Details

Are there teachers qualified in dealing with specific learning difficulties / dyslexia?

Yes  No

Details

Are other members of staff professionally qualified?

Yes  No

Details

**Regular / mainstream classes**

Remember the child with learning difficulties may be easily distracted in large classes.

If the child is to be integrated, how big are the classes?

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How do members of staff handle mixed ability teaching?

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Will there be one class teacher?

Yes  No

If not, how many different members of staff will teach the child

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Are pupils ever taught

in small groups

Yes  No

individually

Yes  No

If a child is taken out of class for individual tuition, what arrangements are made for catching up on classes missed?

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**Classroom aids / assistants**

Is there a possibility of a classroom assistant alongside the child if this would be useful for both the teacher and the child integrating into a mainstream class?

Yes  No

For some or all subjects?

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Are assistants

qualified?

Yes  No

experienced?

Yes  No

**Monitoring progress / the need for on-going assessment**

How, and how often, does the school measure the child's

social progress?

---

educational progress?

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Are parents informed about testing?

Yes  No

Are parents consulted before final conclusions are drawn and decisions made concerning the child?

Yes  No

**Flexibility**

How is the School willing to adapt its teaching programme as the child develops?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Learning a second language**

Would the child have to take a second language?

Yes  No

What is the School's policy?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Exams, tests, marking**

Continual low grades can have a devastating effect on the child's self esteem.

Is the child with specific learning difficulties graded with or without concessions?

\_\_\_\_\_

Is the child with specific learning difficulties given extra time for

internal tests and exams?

Yes  No

external tests and exams?

Yes  No

What exam syllabus does the school follow that would be best suited to the child with specific learning difficulties?

\_\_\_\_\_

Can the child with specific learning difficulties use any of the following

computer

in the classroom?

Yes  No

during exams?

Yes  No

reader / writer

Yes  No

Yes  No

spell-check

Yes  No

Yes  No

any other aid

Yes  No

Yes  No

details

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Educational support services

Support services available through the school:

Educational psychologists	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Speech therapists	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Counselling	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Parent groups	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Extra help for the child outside school hours	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

For what reasons does the school recommend extra tuition in addition to normal school hours?

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Is extra tuition available at all stages? Yes  No

When?

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Where?

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Does the school prefer a private tutor outside school hours to work in cooperation with the child's class teacher?

Yes  No

Would progress with extra tuition be monitored?

Yes  No

If yes, by

meeting Yes  No

correspondence Yes  No

## Extra-curricula activities – sport, art, music, social groups, etc.

When and where do these take place?

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## Communications between parents and school

How often can parents meet the teacher(s)? \_\_\_\_\_

What are the arrangements for doing so? \_\_\_\_\_

What parental involvement does the School

welcome \_\_\_\_\_

encourage \_\_\_\_\_

expect \_\_\_\_\_

discourage \_\_\_\_\_

## Overall impressions of the school

Does it seem to

be open-minded? Yes  No

be up-to-date with staff training and appropriate equipment? Yes  No

have a friendly atmosphere? Yes  No

Your reactions \_\_\_\_\_

Your child's reactions \_\_\_\_\_

## Finances

You may need to find out whether there can be any company / employer payment towards your children's school fees and, if so, how to apply for it.

Basic tuition fees

School bursaries / grants / concessions

Additional costs:

educational psychologist

extra tuition

classroom assistant alongside child

speech therapist

extra-curricular activities

books

equipment

uniform

school bus

other

## Follow-up

Queries

With whom

When

By when

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## **Dyslexia International – Tools and Technologies**

DITT volunteers work with leading experts, to create and promote tools that enable dyslexic learners to succeed in a competitive world.

Go to the DITT Web site to find out about our latest projects and resources:

[www.ditt-online.org](http://www.ditt-online.org)

## **Background**

The idea for making this e-book came from the 'Action for Dyslexia' conference held in 1994 at the European Parliament.

We have adapted the original text to produce this *basic guide for parents*.

### **Dyslexia here and there**

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