

Dyslexia Week aims to raise awareness

The shutters have gone up on a problem which has long been ignored in official educational circles.

From June 16 to 20, the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand will be holding its second annual awareness week, to bring to the notice of parents and educators the huge issue of severe language difficulties in at least 10 per cent of the population.

The issue of learning disabilities, of which dyslexia is probably the most easily recognised manifestation, has always been there, but it wasn't until April, 2007, that dyslexia was finally officially recognised by the New Zealand Ministry of Education.

The foundation can be attributed with no small part in this breakthrough. It was formed in November, 2006, with the express aim of having dyslexia recognised by the education system so funding and remediation could be put in place within the education system for the estimated 70,000 New Zealand children suffering to some degree from it, and a further 100,000 adults.

The ministry describes dyslexia as a spectrum of specific learning difficulties which give rise to failure to develop fluent reading and writing skills, and particularly phonological awareness. These difficulties are persistent despite access to learning opportunities that are effective and appropriate for most children.

Secondary problems in auditory or visual perception, planning and organising, short term memory, motor skills and social interactions can accompany the syndrome.

Mahurangi West resident Ann Cook has this year started teaching a programme, called the Davis Dyslexia Correction Programme,

aimed at helping dyslexic children and adults. This is one of a number of programmes and organisations, which include the nationwide organisation SPELD, which have been working in the field.

"There's a lot of people out there that need help, and the more information we can get out there the better," Ann says.

Ann first became aware of the enormity of the problem of dyslexia when she was owner of Books and More in Warkworth.

"I have always believed every person should have access to literature," she says. "When my son, who needed support in the education system, was first at school, my eyes were opened to the lack of help for some children."

She was also appalled by the number of adults who would struggle to read pamphlets or fill in forms at the postal counter at the book shop.

"It was heart breaking. I was astounded how many people came in for advice about reading for themselves and for their children, who were in the school system."

However, things have changed rapidly since official recognition of the syndrome. Ann says schools are far more open to investigating different ways to teach children who, for neurological reasons, learn differently.

"Teachers' attitudes have changed hugely in local schools," she says. "Teachers are now going out of their way to find information to help children in their classes. One factor that dyslexia is now recognised by the ministry but another is that there is better diagnosis. They are testing children earlier and more and this has shown the size of the problem. It's not just a few children."



Ann Cook