



OPINION

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DYSLEXIA AND DYSCALCULIA ASSESSOR

# Parents can pay £900 for a SEND diagnosis - they are desperate

An official condition has become a label of privilege

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The real problem with SEND provision is inconsistency

*The UK's special educational needs system is in crisis. With record waiting lists, chronic underfunding and a failure to properly support children in mainstream schools, SEND provision is clearly inadequate, something the Government has long-promised to fix.*

*Yet, in recent months “middle-class parents” have been increasingly accused of exploiting the SEND system for their children’s gain, and placing further pressure on the system. Indeed, Reform UK’s deputy leader, Richard Tice, described provision as “hijacked by parents who are abusing the system” for children “who don’t need it”. Parents say that the failing SEND system has left them with no choice but to push for more support.*

*So, is the SEND system being manipulated by the middle class to ensure their children get priority? Parent **George Lewis**, assessor **Dr Vana Avgerinou** and consultant **Amber Windsor** offer their perspective.*

In recent years, public awareness of specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyscalculia, the two conditions I assess for, has grown significantly.

Thanks to the recognition of specific learning difficulties under the Equality Act and also celebrities like Jamie Oliver and Theo Paphitis speaking openly about their experiences, these conditions have been normalised. They are now widely seen as learning differences rather than deficits.

While understanding and awareness can only be seen as a positive step, it has meant that schools and local authorities are struggling to keep up with demand. More and more families are seeking understanding and support for their children, yet due to chronic underfunding many are still not getting the educational help they need.

Many of the parents I meet feel frustrated and exhausted by the complexity of the SEND system or the delays in securing appropriate support for their children. While some appreciate the commitment of individual teachers and schools, most describe the wider SEND provision as inconsistent, under-resourced and difficult to navigate. Many feel they must constantly fight for their child’s needs to be recognised, leaving them anxious and disillusioned with the process.

A child does not need a dyslexia or dyscalculia diagnosis to be granted access arrangements, but many parents turn to practitioners like me for an official assessment to understand their child’s learning needs better and strengthen their case when seeking extra school support.

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Middle class parents aren't exploiting the

Another reason is that school access arrangements do not extend beyond secondary education. To receive support at university or in the workplace, a formal diagnosis is required, which current legislation recognises as valid for life.

Unlike ADHD and autism, dyslexia and dyscalculia cannot be assessed through the NHS. ADHD and autism, which can also affect learning, are classed as medical conditions, whereas dyslexia and dyscalculia are defined purely as learning difficulties.

SEND system,  
they're surviving it

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At present, a private assessment is the only route to a formal diagnosis for either condition. These assessments are costly, typically between £500 and £900, and are subject to 20 per cent VAT for assessors whose business exceeds the registration threshold.

As with healthcare, this means middle class families tend to have better access to assessments. Indeed, research suggests that children from higher-income households are far more likely to have a formal diagnosis of a specific learning difficulty.

That matches my experience, too, though I do not believe it points to exploitation. Rather, it reflects a wider inequity: a system that favours those who can afford to pay. VAT on assessments, for example, adds a further burden to what should be considered an essential educational service. So as with many areas of health and education, social and financial capital influence who benefits.

Do parents try to game the system? A small number may seem overly eager for a diagnosis, but most are simply looking for clarity and direction. In my experience, parents' motivations across all socio-economic backgrounds are overwhelmingly constructive.

The purpose of an assessment is not to produce a simple yes or no answer but to build a detailed picture of a child's strengths and weaknesses and guide tailored support. Assessors combine test results with evidence from school reports, parental input and background information. When carried out properly, it is near impossible to manipulate the outcome of an assessment.

The real problem with SEND provision is inconsistency. Support varies widely between local authorities and schools. Some act quickly on reports and recommendations, while others lack the resources to follow them through. The result is a postcode lottery in both assessment and intervention.

The SEND system remains underfunded, leading to rationing of support in poorer areas. Children in those communities are more likely to have special educational needs yet often receive less help because resources are limited. Parents frequently have to fight for their child's rights. Those with higher levels of education are usually better equipped to navigate the system, while lower-income parents may lack the same knowledge and confidence in addition to resources.

What would help is consistent national guidance requiring schools to act on diagnostic recommendations. Universal screening in primary schools would identify learning needs early, particularly in deprived areas.

These are some ways to make sure that a diagnosis of a learning difficulty is not a label of privilege but a framework for understanding and support.

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