

When reading and math are both a struggle:

Understanding dyslexia and dyscalculia together

Many Wyoming families learn about dyslexia — and then notice their child is also struggling with math in ways that don't quite add up. Here's what you need to know.

1 in 5

children have dyslexia or a related language-based learning difference

5–8%

of school-age children have dyscalculia — roughly the same rate as dyslexia

~40–50%

of children with dyslexia also show signs of dyscalculia

Two different disabilities — with a significant overlap

Dyslexia is a language-based learning disability affecting how the brain processes the sounds in words — making reading and spelling difficult. Dyscalculia is a number-based learning disability affecting how the brain processes quantity and mathematical relationships — making arithmetic, number sense, and math reasoning difficult.

They are distinct conditions with different neurological profiles. A child can have one without the other. But research consistently shows they co-occur far more often than chance would predict.

Dyslexia affects

- Phonological processing
- Reading decoding and fluency
- Spelling and written expression
- Rapid naming of letters and words

Dyscalculia affects

- Number sense and magnitude
- Math fact retrieval and fluency
- Place value and computation
- Spatial reasoning for math

Why do they overlap so often?

Shared underlying vulnerabilities explain the co-occurrence: both disabilities draw on working memory, processing speed, and sequencing — cognitive resources that many children with learning differences find challenging. When these are strained, both reading *and* math can be affected simultaneously.

Why dyscalculia gets missed

Dyscalculia is sometimes called “the forgotten learning disability.” Even when a child has a formal dyslexia diagnosis and an IEP, their math struggles are often attributed to their reading disability — assumed to be a side effect rather than a separate condition in its own right.

This is a critical error. When a child with dyslexia struggles in math, educators and parents sometimes reason: “Of course math is hard — reading is hard for them, and math has a lot of words.” While reading difficulties can make word problems harder, they do not explain persistent trouble counting, recalling math facts, understanding place value, or grasping number size. Those are dyscalculia’s signatures.

What to watch for:

If your child’s math struggles persist even when word problems are read aloud to them — and their difficulties are with the *numbers themselves*, not the reading — that is a meaningful signal worth pursuing.

Signs of dyscalculia in elementary-age children

These patterns, especially when persistent across time and resistant to typical instruction, warrant a closer look.

Early signs (grades K–2)

- Difficulty counting objects reliably — loses track, skips numbers, recounts the same object
- Cannot easily tell which of two groups has more without counting
- Counts on fingers far longer than same-age peers
- Trouble connecting the numeral “7” to the concept of seven things
- Struggles to learn the sequence of numbers even with repeated practice

Elementary signs (grades 3–5)

- Still cannot retrieve basic addition and subtraction facts automatically despite extensive practice
- Confuses operation signs (+, −, ×) or procedures even on familiar problem types
- Loses track of steps in multi-digit computation; errors are inconsistent

- Cannot estimate whether an answer is reasonable (e.g., doesn't notice that $8 \times 7 = 21$ is wrong)
 - Strong verbal skills and reading growth — but math feels like a completely different brain
 - Significant anxiety or avoidance specific to math, while other subjects feel manageable
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What parents can do: flagging and advocacy

If you see these patterns in your child, you do not have to wait for the school to raise it. Here is how to move forward.

Start by separating the disabilities

Ask the school's special education team: "Has my child been evaluated specifically for a math learning disability — not just a reading disability?" Many psychoeducational evaluations focus heavily on reading and may not have included a thorough math assessment.

Request a formal evaluation in writing

Under federal law (IDEA), you have the right to request a comprehensive evaluation at no cost to you. Put the request in writing — this starts a legal clock and creates a paper trail. Specifically request evaluation of:

- ✓ Mathematics calculation
- ✓ Mathematics problem solving
- ✓ Number sense and quantitative reasoning
- ✓ Working memory as applied to math tasks

At the IEP meeting, ask these questions

"Has my child been evaluated for dyscalculia as a separate disability from their dyslexia?"

Opens the conversation and surfaces whether math has received independent attention.

"What specific evidence-based program is being used for math intervention — and who is delivering it?"

General education curriculum without modification is not Specially Designed Instruction (SDI). The answer should name a specific program.

"What does progress monitoring show? Is my child making progress in math at a rate that will close the gap?"

If progress data doesn't exist or shows flat growth, the intervention isn't working and must be changed.

“Do my child’s math accommodations include a reference chart, calculator access, and text-to-speech for word problems?”

These aren't shortcuts — they are evidence-based supports that remove disability barriers without removing the math challenge.

Know your rights.

If the school declines to evaluate for a math disability, they must provide you with written notice explaining why. This is called Prior Written Notice (PWN). If you believe your child has an unaddressed disability, you can request an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) at the district’s expense. You do not need to accept “we think it’s just the dyslexia” as a complete answer.

What good math instruction looks like for these students

Students with dyscalculia — like students with dyslexia — need explicit, structured, multisensory instruction. The gold-standard framework is called CRA: Concrete → Representational → Abstract.

C — Concrete

Students use physical objects (blocks, counters, fraction tiles) to build real understanding before touching numerals.

R — Representational

Students draw pictures or diagrams to represent concepts. Tallies, number lines, arrays, and bar models bridge physical to abstract.

A — Abstract

Standard numerals and symbols — only after the concept is solidly anchored in C and R. Many students are moved here too soon.

If your child’s teacher is going straight to pencil-and-paper computation without manipulatives or visual representations, that is a concern worth raising — especially if your child has a documented math learning disability.

The bottom line for Wyoming families

Wyoming's SF0059 brought landmark structured literacy protections to K–12 students — a significant win for children with dyslexia. But the law's reach is specific to reading. The parallel obligation for math is no less real: it lives in IDEA's requirement that every student with a disability receive a Free Appropriate Public Education addressing all areas of need.

If your child has dyslexia and is also struggling with math in the ways described here, you have every right to ask for a complete evaluation, explicit math intervention, and an IEP that takes both disabilities seriously. You are not overreaching. You are advocating.

WYO Right to Read is here to help.

If you have questions about requesting evaluations, understanding your child's IEP, or finding the right resources in Wyoming, reach out to us. No family should have to navigate this alone.