



About Reading

About Reading: An Introduction

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It's not an easy thing, learning to read. This article provides a brief overview of what is involved and what parents, teachers, and everyone else who touches the life of a child can do to help those who struggle.

How do children learn to read?

Learning to read is complex. Children don't learn one reading-related skill and then move on to the next in a step-by-step process. Instead, they must develop competency in four areas simultaneously: word identification, comprehension, fluency, and motivation.

They begin to develop these competencies by listening to books read aloud. That's one reason why it's so important for children to have experiences with books before they enter kindergarten. However, most children don't learn to read independently until they receive formal instruction in school, which is why good reading instruction is so important.



What does good beginning reading instruction look like?

Good beginning reading instruction teaches children how to identify words, comprehend text, achieve fluency, and develop the motivation to read. Whole language approaches focus on comprehension and meaning, while phonics approaches focus on word identification and decoding □ or sounding out □ words.

Good reading programs balance or integrate both comprehension and decoding instruction in order to provide all children with the experiences they need to learn to read. Most importantly, good reading instruction is tailored to the individual needs of students.



Why is reading so difficult for some children and not others?

Researchers are studying this by looking at the influence of early literacy experiences, by comparing the effects of different approaches to instruction with different groups of children, and by mapping out brain development and behavior in beginning readers.

About fifty percent of children (see Lyon, 1997) seem to learn to read through meaningful experiences with engaging books — they are able to decode words without direct instruction in sounds and the letters that correspond to them, and they seem to use the strategies that good readers use to comprehend text without being taught these strategies.

The other fifty percent of children struggle to learn their sounds and the letters that represent them when they aren't taught them explicitly, and they struggle to achieve fluency and comprehend what they are reading without guided practice (Lyon, 1997).

That's why most research now calls for a balanced or integrated approach to instruction, and for teachers to tailor their instruction to the changing needs of their students.



What are some risk factors for reading problems?

Children may struggle to learn to read because of their experience, biology, or instruction.

Experiential risk factors include being raised in a high poverty environment, a second language home, or having limited exposure to oral or written language. This does not mean that these children come to school without literacy experiences — it means that their literacy experiences do not sufficiently correspond with the literacy experiences that are expected of them in school.

Children may also struggle to learn to read because of biological factors. Speech, language, or hearing impairments, cognitive difficulties, or related disabilities can all play a role in making reading difficult to learn. Finally, some children struggle with reading because they receive poor or inadequate reading instruction.



How can we prevent reading problems?

- **Parents** can do a lot to prevent a child from experiencing reading problems. The single most important thing they can do is read to their child. Also, parents must watch their child's development closely and share any questions or concerns with their pediatrician or their child's school.
- **Teachers** are in a position to identify reading problems before they develop. Teachers can become well-versed in reading development and assessment, so they can identify when a

child's development is slow or erratic. The best prevention for reading problems is comprehensive beginning reading instruction. In particular, children who learn how to manipulate the sounds in words — called phonemic awareness — are more likely to achieve success in reading.

- **Community members** can get involved in preventing reading problems by working with at risk populations or donating books or materials to organizations that work with these children. In fact, many different community members may interact with a child on a given day — a pediatrician, a child care provider, an after school program coordinator, a volunteer tutor, etc. Each of these people is in a position to keep a watchful eye on a child's development and make reading an important part of a child's life.



How can we help struggling readers?

Parents can make reading an enjoyable, motivating, and risk-free experience at home. When children are struggling readers at school, they are likely to want to avoid reading at home. Parents should help their children choose books that are not too difficult and are about topics of interest, and they should continue to read aloud to their children, even into the upper elementary grades. Parents may also work with their children on fun activities to improve children's reading skills. Finally, parents should communicate with their children's teachers to establish a mutually supportive home/school relationship.

Teachers can adopt the stance that every single child in their classroom is their responsibility — even if that child is receiving special services from special education professionals, reading specialists, or ESL teachers. Teachers can commit themselves to assessing and meeting children's changing needs, and organize their classrooms to allow for individualized attention. Teachers can seek professional development experiences to help them develop the skills they need to teach all children well. Finally, teachers should communicate with their students' families to establish a mutually supportive home/school relationship.

- **Community members** can contribute to the success of all children by volunteering their time, talent, or resources to kids who are struggling. A well-intentioned and trained tutor can make a world of difference to a child who is struggling.

References

Lyon, G. R. (July 10, 1997). Report on Learning Disabilities Research, Congressional testimony.

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