

Helping Children with Significant Reading Problems



By Sharon Vaughn and Jack M. Fletcher

Helping children learn to read is big business. From expensive literacy curricula and remedial programs to one-day workshops and brain-training fads, there are too many claims of guaranteed success and too little focus on trustworthy findings. As researchers studying mechanisms for improving literacy outcomes for more than 30 years, we are aware that parents and caregivers of youngsters with reading difficulties are often provided either inadequate information or ineffective solutions. We offer families a research-based set of practices for what they can do to support their child with reading difficulties.*

Lupita Sanchez, a mother, explained it this way: “I am completely frustrated. I just don’t understand why Manuel is having

so much difficulty learning to read. His sister did not have this trouble. I know he is embarrassed about being in third grade and not really knowing how to read.” Many caregivers, like Ms. Sanchez, are concerned about the reading development of their children and puzzled about what to do.

For the vast majority of children, the key to better reading is enhanced instruction within the general education classroom. If your child is struggling, remain hopeful: most children with reading challenges improve considerably with effective instruction. As you think about how to support your child’s reading development, the most important consideration is that *they need as much time in reading and language arts instruction as possible*. This time includes classroom instruction and any type of supplemental instruction or intervention, which should not subtract time from classroom instruction.

As a parent or caregiver, knowing the quality and nature of the reading instruction provided to your child is essential; your youngster’s success as a reader is dependent on a teacher who knows and can implement effective reading practices. Many teachers have been taught to use programs and practices that are not based on the science of reading. Because so few teacher preparation programs, school districts, and commercially available programs represent well what we have learned from the science of reading, far too many youngsters feel like they are reading failures. In fact, many were never provided the explicit

*For a longer version of this article written for educators, see go.aft.org/c2u.

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instruction they need to succeed.¹ Many children with low reading achievement have preventable problems; with explicit, evidence-based instruction, they will learn to read. However, this does not mean there is no such thing as dyslexia (a learning disorder in reading). A relatively small percentage of students (less than 10 percent) have dyslexia, and most of these students learn to read.

Why Do Some Children Learn to Read Easily, While Others Do Not?

Ms. Sanchez's two children are a good example of what parents often experience. One of their children learns to read readily whereas another has considerable difficulty. Learning to read is a process that occurs so readily for some youngsters that it seems to develop almost naturally. But easily learning to read does not occur for many youngsters. Learning to read is not a natural process. There are no brain systems that are designed for reading. (If there were, learning to read would be as easy as learning to walk or talk.) Rather, for all children, parts of the brain designed to support language and visual processing must be reorganized to support reading.² For many children, learning the relationships between sounds and letters (often called the *alphabetic principle*) requires systematic and purposeful instruction; otherwise, reading becomes an effortful, unenjoyable process. While adequately addressing all the issues related to reading disabilities and dyslexia is beyond the scope of this article, we highlight "16 Common Misunderstandings of Dyslexia" on page 37.

What Can Families Look for to Support Children with Reading Difficulties or Dyslexia?

The most important things are reading programs that are explicit (i.e., teacher-directed) and organized. These programs should

teach how letters represent sounds (known as *phonics*) and provide lots of time to practice reading individual words and connected text (e.g., sentences and paragraphs) to make reading an automatic and effortless process (known as *fluent* reading). They should also teach vocabulary and background knowledge to help build comprehension (so that once your child has sounded out a word like *senator*, they also know what a senator is and how senators get elected, etc.). In addition to reading and writing words, programs that are effective include systematic spelling instruction.

Here are six practices that you can check for in your child's classroom:

1. Checking with your child's teacher about how much time is spent on each of the critical elements of effective reading instruction.

Ask, "Could you tell me about how much time you spend each week on phonics (sounding out words), fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and spelling instruction?" The main reason to ask this question is to determine whether the teacher integrates instruction in each of those components into their routine. If the teacher says, "I do not believe in teaching phonics," or "I think students will become more fluent as they get older," or any response that makes you think they don't value instruction in each of those areas, you might want to engage further with the school principal or the school district's reading specialists.

2. Providing time each day for extra practice and feedback.

If your child is having a hard time learning to read, they will benefit from mini-lessons in which they are provided a review



of a challenging task, an opportunity to practice word reading with feedback, or a chance to demonstrate what they know with feedback. Mini-lessons that support your child's learning are essential for success. Ask the teacher to give you mini-lessons that you can do at home with your child.

3. Tailoring instruction to meet your child's learning needs.

In addition to mini-lessons, your child may need more instruction that is better matched to their needs. Ask the teacher if they have screened or assessed your child's reading difficulties. For example, you could ask: "Can you share the results from the reading tests you have conducted?" and "Can you help me understand how you are using this information to meet my child's reading needs?"

4. Providing reading instruction in small groups, in pairs, or one on one.

Whole-class instruction is necessary but unlikely to be adequate to fully meet your child's reading needs. Check to see if your child receives small-group, paired, and one-on-one instruction so that teachers can tailor instruction with appropriate practice and targeted feedback. And, ask for activities you can do at home to provide extra practice on the skills and knowledge being taught to both the whole group and your child.

5. Creating many opportunities to read a range of text types and a range of text levels.

It is not uncommon for youngsters with reading difficulties to be assigned a reading level and restricted to reading opportu-

nities only on that level. Your child will benefit from reading across many levels with teacher support (and your support at home) for the upper levels. Your child will also benefit from reading many types of texts, including digital texts, informational texts, and stories.

6. Providing explicit instruction that incorporates clear feedback.

What should you be looking for in the types of reading instruction provided? Teachers who offer evidence-based instruction do the following:

- Say what they expect the students to do, such as blend word sounds (known as *phonemes*), read a word, or read a text silently.
- State clearly and in as few words as possible what they need students to know.
- Model what they expect students to say or do.
- Ask children to demonstrate what is expected.
- Provide prompt feedback that is specific and clear. For example, the teacher may say, "I heard several of you blending the sounds /r/, /a/, and /t/ and then saying the word *rat*. That is what I expect. I also heard several of you *only* saying the word *rat* and not blending the sounds. I will give you three more sounds, and I want everyone to both blend the sounds and say the word."
- Control the difficulty—and help students experience success—by gradually increasing the task difficulty as their performance improves.
- Maintain high levels of success, engagement, and response.



Conclusion

There is much that parents and caregivers can do to help their struggling readers, beginning with understanding how reading is taught in the classroom.* Special programs can help, but these programs are not a substitute for effective classroom instruction. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2023/vaughn_fletcher.

*For more support in talking with your child's teacher, see the questions you can ask about reading improvement at go.aft.org/t5y and the questions about dyslexia at go.aft.org/uth.