



☰ Menu

Home › News › Publications › American Educator › Fall 2023

# Helping Children with Significant Reading Problems

By Sharon Vaughn, Jack M. Fletcher



**H**elping 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 instruction they need to succeed.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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" in the box on the right.



## 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 opportunities 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.

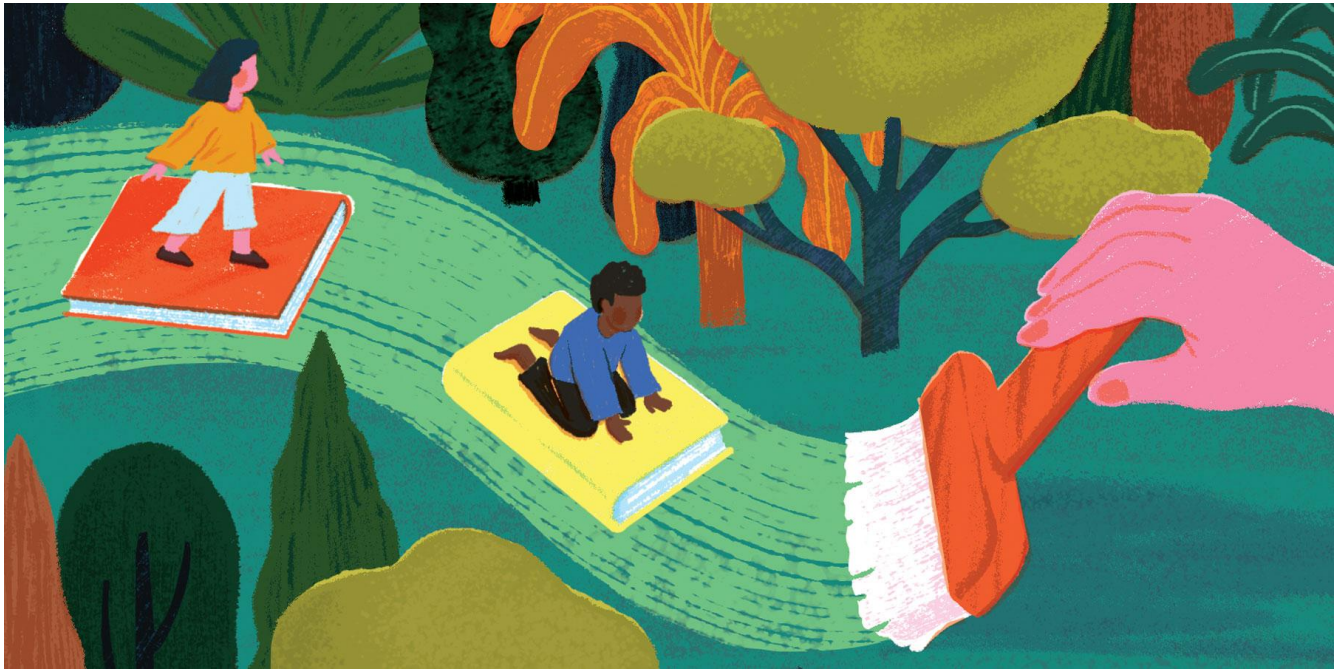
Ask children to demonstrate what is expected.

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.<sup>†</sup> Special programs can help, but these programs are not a substitute for effective classroom instruction.

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*Sharon Vaughn is the executive director of the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk at the University of Texas at Austin, where she is also a professor in the Learning Disabilities and Behavioral Disorders program. Jack M. Fletcher is a research professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Houston. This work was supported in part by grant P50 HD052117 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (the authors are solely responsible for the content).*

\* For a longer of this article written for educators, see [here](#). (return to article)

† For more support in talking with your child's teacher, see the questions you can ask about reading improvement [here](#) and the questions about dyslexia [here](#). (return to article)



## Endnotes

1. To learn more about how preparation programs, professional development, and other key supports could be improved, see “Teaching Reading *Is Rocket Science*” in the Summer 2020 issue of *American Educator*.
2. S. Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain: The New Science of How We Read* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2009).
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4. J. Fletcher and D. Currie, “Vision Efficiency Interventions and Reading Disability,” *Perspectives on Language and Literacy* 37, no. 1 (2011): 21–24.
5. J. Fletcher et al., *Learning Disabilities: From Identification to Intervention*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2019).
6. R. Peterson and B. Pennington, “Developmental Dyslexia,” *The Lancet* 379, no. 9830 (2012): 1997–2007.
7. S. Shaywitz et al., “Persistence of Dyslexia: The Connecticut Longitudinal Study at Adolescence,” *Pediatrics* 104, no. 6 (1999): 1351–59.
8. A. Ellis, *Reading, Writing and Dyslexia: A Cognitive Analysis* (Hove, UK: Psychology Press, 1993).
9. M. Snowling and M. Melby-Lervåg, “Oral Language Deficits in Familial Dyslexia: A Meta-Analysis and Review,” *Psychological Bulletin* 142, no. 5 (2016): 498–545.
10. See, for example, M. Melby-Lervåg, T. Redick, and C. Hulme, “Working Memory Training Does Not Improve Performance on Measures of Intelligence or Other Measures of ‘Far Transfer’: Evidence from a Meta-Analytic Review,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 11 (2016): 512–34.

11. M. Scheiman et al., “Effect of Vergence/Accommodative Therapy on Reading in Children with Convergence Insufficiency: A Randomized Clinical Trial,” *Optometry and Vision Science* 96, no. 11 (2019): 836–49.

12. L. Tamm et al., “Comparing Treatments for Children with ADHD and Word Reading Difficulties: A Randomized Clinical Trial,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 85, no. 5 (2017): 434–46.

[illustrations: Jia Liu]

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## 16 Common Misunderstandings of Dyslexia



1. *Children benefit from waiting until after second grade to provide reading intervention (False).* If your child is having difficulty learning to read, encourage the school to provide instructional supports immediately. Early instructional reading support provides opportunities for targeting reading needs and reduces the likelihood of long-term reading difficulties.
2. *Dyslexia requires specific and unique screening and identification approaches (False).* If you suspect your child has a reading problem, there are readily available approaches to screening and identifying your child that do not require expensive evaluations.<sup>3</sup>
3. *Providing more opportunities to read books will resolve their reading problem (False).* Others may make you feel guilty about your child’s reading difficulties with false statements such as, “If you had read more to your child or if your child just tried harder to read, they would be successful.” This is not true; children who have a hard time learning to read need lots of explicit instruction.

4. *Colored lenses or overlays help improve reading for children with dyslexia (False).* There is no evidence to support using colored lenses or overlays.<sup>4</sup>
5. *Children with dyslexia primarily have reading comprehension problems (False).* Children with dyslexia have word-level difficulties that are manifested in difficulty reading text accurately and proficiently. They also have difficulty with spelling.<sup>5</sup>
6. *Dyslexia is rare and most individuals grow out of it (False).* Dyslexia occurs around the world.<sup>6</sup> Most individuals with dyslexia read slowly and with difficulty throughout their lives.<sup>7</sup> But explicit instruction will help them read more easily.
7. *Dyslexia operates on a continuum; it can be mild to severe (True).* Dyslexia does not look precisely the same for all learners, and the range of reading difficulties because of dyslexia also vary.<sup>8</sup>
8. *Many individuals with dyslexia have difficulties with spelling and handwriting (True).* Effective instructional approaches target word reading, spelling, and writing.
9. *Dyslexia has a familial and genetic association (True).* There is a much higher rate of dyslexia in children with a family history of dyslexia—as high as 45 percent in most studies.<sup>9</sup>
10. *Improving home literacy will resolve dyslexia (False).* It is not useful to consider the home environment as the cause of your child's dyslexia. While opportunities to read are beneficial to all learners, improving home literacy will not resolve reading challenges.
11. *Brain training can improve reading outcomes (False).* Cognitive training does not generalize to improved reading outcomes.<sup>10</sup> Your child needs intentional teaching in reading, writing, and spelling skills.
12. *Only certified language therapists can provide effective reading interventions for individuals with dyslexia (False).* You may be told that your child will only benefit from reading instruction provided by a certified language therapist. This is not true. Many educators have extensive knowledge of how to effectively teach youngsters with reading difficulties.
13. *Children with dyslexia see letters and words backwards (False).* Many young children reverse letters when beginning reading and writing—that does not mean they have dyslexia. Most children will learn to write letters correctly over time with practice and feedback.
14. *Vision therapy is an effective approach for children with dyslexia (False).* You may wonder if your child's reading difficulty is because of some type of vision disorder. Many vision training approaches exist, but they have not resulted in improvements in reading.<sup>11</sup>
15. *Dyslexia can be addressed with medications (False).* There is no medication that will remedy word reading difficulties. Some medications may be appropriate if your child has other issues, such as attention problems, but the medications alone do not lead to improved word reading.<sup>12</sup>
16. *Classroom teachers can be a valuable asset to remedying difficulties for individuals with dyslexia (True).* Classroom teachers may be the most valuable resource for children with dyslexia. Classroom teachers are their primary reading teachers as well as the educators who have the most influence on children's self-worth. You can partner with your child's teacher to provide extra practice at home in the reading, writing, and spelling skills being taught in the classroom.

—S. V. and J. M. F.





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