

How Parents Can Improve Reading at Home

Not all children develop the ability to read at the same rate. In order to read competently, one must be able to decode (sound out or recognize) words and comprehend the meaning of the material being read. The emphasis in this handout will be on decoding. Some of the strategies suggested have been successfully used in the classroom, while others are basic hints that will help you foster a positive attitude toward reading in your home.

It is important to keep in mind that not every strategy will work for every child. Success will depend upon the child's motivation, particular learning style and willingness to accept parental guidance. Your relationship with your child is of primary importance-- it should be relaxed and stress free. If implementation of any of these ideas creates anxiety or resentment (on the part of either parent or child), it is advisable to discontinue immediately.

Introduce one strategy at a time, either as a helpful hint or in a game format. Some of these suggestions may be used on a trial-and-error basis. If a suggestion works, that's great! If not, abandon it. Be flexible in following them. If you can expand a successful idea, or find a better way to use it, that's wonderful.

Finally, the purpose of these strategies is to help mild reading problems and promote positive reading attitudes. Although many of the following suggestions may be applicable, this handout is not intended as a solution for children who have severe learning problems.

IMPROVING WORD RECOGNITION

A technique that has been very successful with many children who have difficulty reading certain words (and who possess some phonic skills e.g. knowing the sounds letters make), is to enlarge those words on 3 x 5 index cards in dark pen or marker. The words can be taken from textbooks, directions, workbooks etc.

Show the child the card, say the word and/or sound it out and say the word again. (If the word cannot be sounded out, just say the word while pointing to it.) Then have the child do it. Provide help if necessary. After several tries, put the cards away in an envelope or a small box. Mark them, "WORDS TO BE LEARNED".

You are now ready to construct a game format with the child. Every day, you will show him/her each card. If he/she knows the word, a check is earned (right on the card). If not, repeat the introductory steps again. When three checks have been earned for three consecutive responses on different days, the card goes into another group marked "MASTERED WORDS". Set up a reward system for every set number of mastered words (i.e. a sticker for every five new words). A larger reward may be set for mastery of every group of 25 or 50 words, at which time the mastered words would be reviewed. Of course, the real reward will be the satisfaction the child feels when the number of cards representing learned words grows larger and larger. Do not introduce more than 3 or 4 new words at a time. There should be no more than 10 words in the "learning" pack at one time. (You can keep your own list of difficult words and add them as the child progresses.) Remember to praise the child when he/she is successful and avoid showing disappointment when he is not.

For children who need additional help with word recognition, use a picture clue, when it is possible to do so. **Have the child draw the picture if he wants to.**

house

Give word clues:

" not smooth, but"

Use the word in a sentence. Encourage the child to make up the sentence.

My steak is tough.
tough

When the child has learned the word, give him credit and transfer the word to another card without the clue.

You will be surprised at the number of words learned in a school year with only 5 or 10 minutes of daily practice.

VARIATIONS ON IMPROVING WORD RECOGNITION

If your child is meeting with success using these strategies, you may wish to try the following variations. Some are more suitable with younger children, while others are geared toward use with older children.

FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN

1) Word "families" can be placed on a single card.

Examples:

at
hat
bat
cat

new
few
drew
grew

Pointing to "at", pronounce it carefully. Then say to the child, "What does this say?" Then pointing to each word, pronounce it and have the child repeat it.

2) Another variation is to write a “root” or “base “word and the same word with suffixes or endings.

Examples:

_____	_____
walk	fast
walks	faster
walked	fastest
_____	_____

Take care to line up all the root words. You may even wish to write the root words in black and the suffixes in another color. This will help the child to see more clearly how new words are formed. It is also beneficial for children who consistently omit word endings when reading.

FOR OLDER CHILDREN

1) If the word is multi-syllabic, use dots to separate the syllables.

un•der•stand

This will allow the child to view each syllable as a smaller unit and make reading the word easier. Of course, explain the strategy to the child. Pronounce each syllable while pointing to it. Have the child repeat the syllable after you. Then say the whole word and let the child repeat it. If the word is particularly difficult, you may have to do this each time you review the word for several days.

2) If the dots don't do the trick, draw a loop under each syllable. This will increase the child's ability to visually separate the word into syllables and make it more manageable.

un der stand

Use the same procedure as above. For both variations give the child credit after he/she has mastered the word. Then write the word on another card, without clues, to include in the learning pack.

USE CONTEXT CLUES

When a child comes across a word he/she can't read, encourage him/her to read the entire sentence. Often the meaning or context of the sentence, in combination with the first letter of the word, will provide a good clue.

Example: I saw my friend riding a h---- when we went to the ranch. (horse)

Also, thinking about the meaning of the sentence may give the child a clue about which word has been read incorrectly.

Example: I took a slip of milk.

Since "slip" doesn't make sense, the child will go back and look at the word again.

HOW TO KEEP YOUR PLACE

If your child loses his place, skips lines or mixes up words from different lines, use a marker. If a finger or pencil tip is not sufficient, try using an unlined 3 X 5 index card as a marker. The index card can also be effectively used on a page of questions, to expose one question at a time. By doing this, the child can focus on each question, without becoming confused or overwhelmed by all the writing on the page.

USE A BOOKSTAND

Using a bookstand is helpful to many children when reading or when copying from a textbook. The angle the bookstand provides makes it easier to read the material on it. Having the bookstand directly above the writing paper also makes for easier copying.

MAKE READING AN IMPORTANT ACTIVITY IN YOUR HOME

Children tend to model adult behavior. If your child observes family members reading during leisure time (books, newspapers, magazines), he/she will learn to imitate that behavior. Conversely, if little or no reading takes place, (with television occupying much leisure time), there will be little reading initiative derived from the home environment.

VISIT THE LIBRARY

Your child should visit the library regularly and become a cardholder when permitted. The more familiar he/she is with the library, the more comfortable he/she will feel there. In addition to books, libraries offer records, magazines, videotapes, reference material and more.

You may wish to ask the librarian to recommend "high interest " books for the reluctant reader. "High interest/easy reading" books may also be available for the youngster whose chronological interests do not correspond with his/her reading level.

ABOUT RECREATIONAL READING LEVELS

When your child is selecting books for recreational reading, he/she may select material that appears to be too simple. It may be easier than the instructional material being used in the classroom. That is perfectly alright (as long as the discrepancy is not too great), since the object of this type of reading is to relax and develop an appreciation of books. On the other hand, if a child has a very strong interest in a particular subject or hobby, he/she may select books that are rather difficult, but his/her high level of motivation will act as a compensating factor.

RULE OF "5" IN SELECTING BOOKS FOR ENJOYMENT

In the absence of a particularly motivating topic (see above), how can a parent judge if a book is too difficult for a child? A general rule that may be helpful is:

- a) Open the book to any page.
- b) Have the child read the page out loud.
- c) Count the number of words missed.
- d) If there are more than 5 words that the child had difficulty with, the book is probably too hard. Once you've explained it, the child can use this method independently to make appropriate selections.

WRITE TO READ

A creative and motivating way to stimulate reading is to actually write a personalized book. The book should be about the child, a family pet, the child's hobby, a vacation or any special topic. Once a blank book is purchased, there are several ways to go about this. For example, following a vacation, snapshots can be pasted in the book and accompanying "text" written by the child and/or parent describing the pictures. Action shots are great for this purpose. The text can vary from several words per page for a young child to several sentences or paragraphs for the older child. An alternative to snapshots is having the child illustrate the story. He/she can even make up a story and illustrate it. If the child has difficulty writing or spelling, he/she can dictate and the adult can write, or the adult can provide the text, using words geared toward the child's reading level. When completed, read the book aloud several times. The child will probably pick up any new reading words from the context. In any case, the child is usually thrilled and the most reluctant reader will want to read and share his/her unique book.

READING IS ALL AROUND US

There are many opportunities for your child to read every day in addition to reading books.

- Write notes to your children. Try slipping one into a lunch box or leaving a note in their room.
- During vacations or camp time, write more often and call fewer times.
- When you go marketing, have your youngster read the shopping list to you and help you check the ingredients on labels. Point out sizes on food containers and signs in the store.
- Reading a television schedule has its own built-in reward.
- Have your child read road signs, license plates and maps, when traveling.
- Have your child read directions to games, model making kits and other activities.
- Have him/her read recipes when baking or cooking together.
- Encourage your child to read the menu in order to make selections, when eating in restaurants.
- Buy word games as gifts.
- Give a subscription to a children's magazine as a gift. (Check with the librarian for suggestions.)

This is a partial list of ideas. I'm sure you will think of other ways to extend it. By taking advantage of these opportunities, you will provide your child with many valuable learning and reading experiences.

Please keep in mind that your praise, encouragement and support are integral components of all the suggestions herein.

For more information visit The National Association of Parents with Children in Special Education at: www.napcse.org