

# Target The Problem!

Understand the problems a child may be having with reading, and target what you can do to help!

Look inside for practical, research-based information for parents and teachers about:

- **Phonological and Phonemic Awareness**
- **Word Decoding and Phonics**
- **Vocabulary**
- **Fluency**
- **Comprehension**
- **Other sources of reading difficulty**



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## Things to be aware of

**T**here are many reasons why reading can be hard. This handout describes the five components of reading and difficulties that kids experience within each area. We hope this tool helps you become aware of specific areas in which a child is having trouble and begin targeting ways to help.

It's important to note that struggling readers will often have problems in multiple areas. For example, children who have problems with phonemic awareness almost always have problems in word decoding and phonics.

The key thing is, don't hesitate when you suspect a child has a reading difficulty. Trust your judgment and consider how a child does in comparison with other students. Parents play a huge role in making sure that their child's needs are being addressed by the school. Some kids end up being diagnosed with a learning disability. There is an even larger group of students, though, who never receive a diagnosis but who nonetheless need targeted assistance to learn and read well. Because you care the most about your child, you need to understand your child's needs and advocate for him or her. A thorough reading evaluation can help determine a child's reading difficulties. Talk to the school about getting an assessment done for your child.

We hope you'll use this information as a starting point! The best thing that can happen is for parents, teachers, and other professionals to begin working together to help a child strengthen the skills that are so crucial to learning to read.

### The Fine Print

Please note that "Target the Problem!" is not intended to replace the expertise of trained professionals such as educational diagnosticians, school psychologists, special educators, or general educators in either diagnosing or instructing children who may have reading disabilities. "Target the Problem!" is also not intended to be exhaustive in scope. Please use the information provided in conjunction with information you may glean from other resources and people.

### For more information:

<http://www.readingrockets.org/target>

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# Target The Problem!

## A kid's perspective

## A parent's perspective

## A teacher's perspective

### Phonological and Phonemic Awareness

*Phonological awareness* is a broad skill that includes identifying and manipulating larger units of oral language—parts such as words, syllables, onsets and rimes, and individual sounds (phonemes).

*Phonemic awareness* refers to the ability to focus on and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words. Acquiring phonemic awareness is important because it is the foundation for spelling and word recognition skills. Phonemic awareness is one of the best predictors of how well children will learn to read during the first two years of instruction.

#### What this feels like to me

- "I don't know any words that rhyme with *cat*."
- "What do you mean when you say what sounds are in the word *brush*?"
- "I'm not sure how many syllables are in my name."

#### What I can do to help myself

- Be willing to play word and sounds games with parents or teachers.
- Be patient with learning new information related to words and sounds. Giving the ears a workout is difficult!
- Practice hearing the individual sounds in words. It may help to use plastic chips to represent each sound you hear in a word.

#### What I see at home

- She has difficulty thinking of rhyming words for a simple word like *cat* (such as *rat* or *bat*).
- He doesn't show interest in language play, word games, or rhyming.

#### What I can do to help

- Do sound-related activities, such as helping your child think of a number of words that start with the /m/ or /ch/ sound, or other beginning sounds.
- Make up silly sentences with words that begin with the same sound, such as "Nobody was nice to Nancy's neighbor."
- Use computer games designed to build your child's phonemic skills.
- Read books with rhymes. Teach your child rhymes, short poems, and songs.

#### What I see in the classroom

- She doesn't correctly complete blending activities; for example, putting together the sounds /k/ /i/ /ck/ to make the word *kick*.
- He doesn't correctly complete phoneme substitution activities; for example, changing the /m/ in *mate* to /cr/ in order to make *crate*.
- She has a hard time telling how many syllables there are in the word *paper*.

#### What I can do to help

- Consider teaching phonological and phonemic skills in small groups since students will likely be at different levels of expertise.
- Make sure your school's reading program and other materials include skill building on phonemes, especially in kindergarten and first grade, and systematic instruction in phonics.

### Word Decoding and Phonics

*Decoding* is the ability to apply your knowledge of letter-sound relationships, including knowledge of letter patterns, to correctly pronounce written words. Understanding these relationships gives children the ability to recognize familiar words quickly and to figure out words they haven't seen before.

*Phonics* is one approach to reading instruction that teaches students the principles of letter-sound relationships, how to sound out words, and exceptions to the rules.

#### What this feels like to me

- "I just seem to get stuck when I try to read a lot of the words in this chapter."
- "Figuring out the words takes so much of my energy, I can't even think about what it means."
- "I don't know how to sound out these words."

#### What I can do to help myself

- Play with magnetic letters. See how quickly you can put them in order while singing the alphabet song.
- Look at written materials around your house and at road signs to see if you can spot familiar words and letter patterns.
- Write notes, e-mails, and letters to your friends and family. Represent each sound you hear as you write.

#### What I see at home

- She often gets stuck on words when reading. I end up telling her many of the words.
- His reading is very slow because he spends so much time figuring out words.
- She's not able to understand much about what she's read because she is so busy trying to sound out the words.

#### What I can do to help

- For a younger reader, help your child learn the letters and sounds of the alphabet. Occasionally point to letters and ask your child to name them.
- Encourage your child to write and spell notes, e-mails and letters using what he knows about sounds and letters.
- Talk with your child about the "irregular" words such as *said*, *are*, and *was* that he needs to recognize "at sight."

#### What I see in the classroom

- She has difficulty matching sounds and letters, which can affect reading and spelling.
- He has trouble reading and spelling phonetically.
- She decodes in a very labored manner.

#### What I can do to help

- Have students sort pictures and objects by the sound you're teaching. Have children say the letter-sound over and over again.
- Teach phonics in a systematic and explicit way, preferably in first grade.
- Use manipulatives to help teach letter-sound relationships. These can include counters, sound boxes, and magnetic letters.

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### Vocabulary

*Vocabulary* refers to the words we must understand to communicate effectively. Vocabulary plays a fundamental role in the reading process, and contributes greatly to a reader's comprehension. A reader cannot understand a text without knowing what most of the words mean. Students learn the meaning of most words indirectly, through everyday experiences with oral and written language. Other words are learned through carefully designed instruction that teaches important words.

#### What this feels like to me

- "I heard my friend tell what happened in the movie but I didn't really understand it."
- "I feel like I just use the same words over and over again in my writing."
- "I don't like to read on my own because I don't understand lots of the words in the book."

#### What I can do to help myself

- Find books to read on your own. The more you read, the more new words you'll see, and the more you'll learn about the words.
- Look ahead in textbooks to learn new vocabulary and concepts before your teacher goes over the the section in class.
- Keep a list of key vocabulary and transition words such as *first*, *then*, and *finally* for reference.

#### What I see at home

- She's unable to tell about her day in a way that makes sense.
- He doesn't link words from a book to similar words from another book or real life.
- She misuses common words.

#### What I can do to help

- Engage your child in conversations every day. If possible, include new and interesting words in your conversation.
- Read to your child each day. When the book contains a new or interesting word, pause and define the word for your child.
- Help build word knowledge by classifying and grouping objects or pictures while naming them.
- Play verbal games and tell jokes and stories.

#### What I see in the classroom

- She has questions about a lot of word meanings in a grade appropriate text.
- He seems to have a weak vocabulary.
- She is not able to make connections among words in various texts.

#### What I can do to help

- Help build language skills through oral and written word exercises and games.
- Provide instruction about the important, useful, and difficult words before students read a text.
- Offer students many opportunities to encounter target words beyond the context in which they are taught.
- Explicitly teach the meanings of common prefixes, roots, and suffixes.

### Fluency

*Fluency* is defined as the ability to read with speed, accuracy, and proper expression. In order to understand what they read, children must be able to *read fluently* whether they are reading aloud or silently. When reading aloud, fluent readers read in phrases and add intonation appropriately. Their reading is smooth and has expression.

Children who do not read with fluency sound choppy and awkward. Those students may have difficulty with decoding skills or they may just need more practice with speed and smoothness in reading.

#### What this feels like to me

- "I just seem to get stuck when I try to read a lot of the words in this chapter."
- "It takes me so long to read something."
- "Reading through this book takes so much of my energy, I can't even think about what it means."

#### What I can do to help myself

- Track the words with your finger as a parent or teacher reads a passage aloud. Then you read it.
- Have a parent or teacher read aloud to you. Then, match your voice to theirs.
- Read your favorite books and poems over and over again. Practice getting smoother and reading with expression.

#### What I see at home

- He knows how to read words but seems to take a long time to read a short book or passage silently.
- She reads a book with no expression; every word and sentence sounds the same.
- He stumbles a lot and loses his place when reading something aloud.
- She moves her mouth when reading silently (subvocalizing).

#### What I can do to help

- Support and encourage your child. Realize that he or she is likely frustrated by reading.
- Check with your child's teachers to find out their assessment of your child's decoding skills.
- Read aloud to your child to provide an example of how fluent reading sounds.

#### What I see in the classroom

- Her results on words-correct-per-minute assessments are below grade level or target.
- He has difficulty and grows frustrated when reading aloud, either because of speed or accuracy.
- She does not read aloud with expression, changing her tone where appropriate.
- He does not chunk words into meaningful units.

#### What I can do to help

- Assess the student to make sure that word decoding or word recognition is not the source of the difficulty.
- Give the student independent level texts that he can practice with again and again. Regularly time the student and calculate words-correct-per-minute.
- Read a short passage and then have the student immediately read it back to you.

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### Comprehension

*Comprehension* is the understanding and interpretation of what is read. To be able to accurately understand written material, children need to be able to 1) decode what they read; 2) make connections between what they read and what they already know; and 3) think deeply about what they have read. One big part of comprehension is having a sufficient vocabulary, or knowing enough word meanings.

Readers who have strong comprehension are able to make decisions about what they read—what is important, what is a fact, what caused an event to happen, which characters are funny. Thus comprehension involves combining reading with thinking and reasoning.

#### What this feels like to me

- "It takes me so long to read something. It's hard to follow along with everything going on."
- "I didn't really get what that book was about."
- "Why did that character do that? I just don't get it!"
- "I'm not sure what the most important parts of the book were."

#### What I can do to help myself

- Use outlines, maps, and notes when you read.
- Read things in short sections and make sure you know what happened before you continue reading.
- Ask yourself, "Does this make sense?" If it doesn't, reread the part that didn't make sense.
- As you read, try to form mental pictures or images that match the story.

#### What I see at home

- She's not able to summarize a passage or a book.
- He might be able to tell you what happened in a story, but can't explain why events went the way they did.
- She can't explain what a character's thoughts or feelings might have been.

#### What I can do to help

- Hold a conversation and discuss what your child has read. Ask your child probing questions about the book and connect the events to his or her own life.
- Help your child go back to the text to support his or her answers.
- Discuss the meanings of unknown words, both those he reads and those he hears.

#### What I see in the classroom

- He seems to focus on the "wrong" aspect of a passage; for example, he concentrates so much on the details that the main idea is lost.
- She cannot tell the clear, logical sequence of events in a story.
- He does not pick out the key facts from informational text.

#### What I can do to help

- Teach students the structure of different types of reading material (narrative text versus information text).
- Use graphic organizers that help students break information down and keep track of what they read.
- Teach students to monitor their own understanding.
- Teach note-taking skills and summarizing strategies.

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## Other sources of reading difficulty

Many of the reading problems students encounter are related to the five components of reading covered on the previous pages. For some students, however, the problem may be the result of a combination of factors—weakness in one or more of the five components and difficulty with some form of processing. For other students, there may be or a secondary complicating problem, such as attention, memory, or learning English as a second language. Some of the more common sources of reading difficulties are defined here.

### Processing

Successful reading and writing requires that a student is able to process several types of information. Some students may have difficulty with auditory, phonological, and/or language processing. Processing difficulties may co-exist with other difficulties, such as dyslexia and attention deficit disorders.

#### • Auditory processing

*Auditory processing* refers to a set of skills related to how the brain recognizes and interprets information presented in an auditory way. This includes not just speech, but also music and environmental noise. Some children (approximately 2–3 percent) are diagnosed with an auditory processing disorder (APD), sometimes called Central Auditory Processing Disorder. It means that something is affecting the processing or interpretation of the information a child hears. Children with APD can have difficulty reading. They often find it difficult to pay attention, listen to, and remember information presented orally. They may need more time to process information. They often do not recognize subtle differences between sounds in words, even though the sounds themselves are loud and clear. Some reading experts believe that APD is closely related to disorders of attention, general phonological processing, and language-based difficulties, and does not reflect a separate disorder.

#### • Phonological processing

*Phonological processing* refers specifically to the processing of speech sounds (phonemes). Many poor readers have a specific weakness

in phonological processing even through their other processing skills (auditory and language processing) are strong. This is often the case for kids with reading disabilities. Readers with phonological processing difficulties usually have problems decoding words.

#### • Language processing

*Language processing* is a broader term than phonological processing that includes a variety of language abilities including reading and writing. The research on language processing clearly shows us how important it is for parents and early caregivers to provide stimulating environments full of interesting experiences and new vocabulary words. Children with fewer language-based experiences are typically behind their classmates when they start school in terms of vocabulary and ability to process language. Children with a broad language processing deficit will generally also have problems with comprehension even when they can decode words accurately. Children with severe language disorders will almost certainly have difficulty reading and writing.

### Memory

In order to read, children must be able to place information into their memories and retrieve it when needed. What helps children understand vocabulary and comprehend what they read is being able to efficiently move back and forth

between what they see in print and what is stored in their memories. There are different types of memory, including *short-term memory*, *working memory*, and *long-term memory*.

### Attention

Children must be able to *focus their attention* in order to decode words, maintain reading fluency, and understand what they read. Children's attention problems can range from mild trouble focusing to severe difficulty maintaining or focusing attention (called ADD, or Attention Deficit Disorder). Some attention problems may involve a high degree of activity or impulsivity (called ADHD, or Attention Deficit with Hyperactivity Disorder). Characteristics most common for students with ADD and difficulty with reading are: often fails to give close attention to details, often does not seem to listen when spoken to directly, often has difficulty organizing tasks and activities, and often is easily distracted by extraneous stimuli.

### English language learners

Currently there are at least 5.1 million students who are *English language learners* (ELLs) in U.S. public K–12 schools. The number of ELLs continues to increase, in particular for the Spanish-speaking portion of this population. In terms of literacy instruction, ELLs appear to benefit from the same quality of instruction as do most students—clear instructions, well-designed lessons, opportunities to practice new skills, and guidance and feedback from teachers. Opportunities for repeated practice and oral language activities are particularly important.