

Ten Things to Help Your Struggling Reader

By Joshua Jenkins

As a special education teacher who teaches struggling readers with different disabilities, I'm often crafting mental lists of things I wish parents knew about their dyslexic children. Most important, I am eager for the parents of my students to understand that their children can and will learn to read, but it will take time. In the process, it is important to recognize their many strengths and accomplishments in spite of their weaknesses in decoding, spelling or handwriting. I want parents to know that preparing their children to deal with their disability can inspire confidence and enable them to look forward to a proud future in which they understand their disability as well as their strengths, self-advocating for their unique learning style.

1. Notice Your Child's Strengths

Your child has many abilities and strengths. Maybe he can draw beautifully or has an amazing vocabulary. Maybe she has great listening skills or is an incredible athlete and team player. Be sure to notice those talents and tell them you see them excelling at something.

Often, I feel like my students' parents are so consumed by their kids' deficits in reading that they forget the things their children can do well. (Teachers are guilty of this, too.) If your child is artistic, use that talent at home as a way for your child to show understanding of a story you read aloud; draw a picture of the problem in the story or draw the main character. Just because your child has a word decoding weakness or messy handwriting or poor spelling doesn't mean you can't push him or her to achieve their best through a variety of venues. Allowing, and encouraging, your children to use their strengths will boost their confidence.

2. Celebrate Every Success

Celebrate every success with a good job or a high five. Every single one. Don't rely on report card grades to be the judge of your student's progress. Celebrate his or her reading a singular word correctly. Meet your child on his/her reading level and celebrate the successes at that level. If your child is a beginning or practically a non-reader, celebrate decoding the word "at" or using a picture to solve an unknown word. If your child is beginning to read more fluently, celebrate when they self-correct an error. In my daily small group reading class, I find myself giving praise constantly; it's because I want them to know that I notice their progress and the things they do well. If what we're reading is challenging, a smile and a "good job" can turn the whole lesson around. When I hear parents of my kids fussing at them about grades, I immediately find myself telling the parent about a small, but wonderful, success his/her child had reading or writing that school day. Harassing the students over report card grades isn't going to boost their confidence. Struggling readers need to know what they're doing right, not just their mistakes.

3. Be Honest with Yourself: Set Realistic Goals

A child who is struggling with reading will not get on grade level overnight. You need to be honest with yourself and your child about his or her progress while setting realistic goals.

An easy way to deal with the very, very long road (did I mention it's long?) to on-level reading is to set some very short-term concrete goals. As a teacher who uses a reading-assessment system and leveled books, my goal for students often is to move up a single reading level. At home, you might set a goal even to just practice reading every day. For example, you might suggest that your child read a certain number of leveled, independent books in a month (leveled books are books that your child can read independently or with only a little help), or you might set a goal of reading an interesting chapter book with your child. Make a countdown and cross out each book or chapter, respectively, until you reach your goal.

Remember: you're setting a goal that is achievable for you and your student that will positively affect his/her reading. **What the goal really does is allow them to see that they're capable of reaching a goal, that they can be successful. You're giving them a chance to develop another strength.**

4. Don't Let Poor Spelling Stop Your Child

If your child has a learning disability, there is a real possibility that he may really struggle with spelling and remembering even very basic word patterns. Here's the secret: *That's okay*. Teach your child to cope. Even if your children can't spell, they still have thoughts and creativity that they need to express. Don't let poor spelling make your child mute. Be sure to acknowledge their good ideas. Encourage them to use a dictionary, spell-check or text-prediction software. Have your children start their very own personal word dictionary as a tool to use when they write. Talk to your student's teacher. Look into what technology or other strategies there might be to help your child become more successful. There's a lot out there, but you won't find much if you're too busy pointing out that your kid can't spell.

5. Share Your Own Difficulties with Your Kids

Show your child that you still work at things that are hard for you, too. Admitting that you also have things you wrestle with can provide support and help your struggling reader understand that people have different strengths and weaknesses. An anecdote I often share with my frustrated readers is how I have always had terrible hand-to-eye coordination. And as an adult, I even maintain a joke with the people I interact regularly: "Do not throw anything to me or expect me to throw something to you." That's right; I am terrible at nearly every sport. However, I'll always give it a shot, and I try. When I'm on family vacation and it's time for some beach volleyball, you'll find me flailing beside the net or nose-diving into the sand. The moral: kids (and adults) should try things they're not great at, and it is helpful to see role models working on things that don't come easily to them.

When it comes to reading, bear in mind that when something is difficult and doesn't come easy, you generally just flat out don't want to do it! What makes struggling readers even more anxious about reading is the pressure they're getting both at school and at home to learn to read. (This is yet another reason why setting goals and celebrating every small success are so important.) So when they know that you are working on things that are hard for you, it helps take the pressure off them and makes their struggle less lonely.

6. Read Aloud to Your Child. It's Fun and Helpful

Your dyslexic reader can do more . . . if you help. Read to your child every single day. Hearing someone else read has the amazing possibility of sparking creativity and interest and also offers a chance to work on comprehension without the battle of decoding the text. A struggling reader may only be able to read short, short books with scant interest or depth, which offer little motivation to continue to work on reading. When you read aloud or have a program such as an iPad app that reads books aloud (call it old-fashioned, but a real human reading to children is better), your child has the opportunity to focus on the meaning of the words and content. They develop background knowledge and it allows them to use their imagination. Reading books to your child (or listening to audio books) allows him or her to get into books that his peers are reading and holds interest because they are age-appropriate. The additional bonus to reading with your child? You can offer explanations and further detail when needed.

7. Kids Feel Supported When They See Parents and Teachers Working Together to Help Them

Your child's education is not a private matter that excludes your child. It's the child's education! He or she needs to know what's going on; otherwise, it's a lost opportunity for learning self-advocacy. She's not going to learn anything when you tell her to go somewhere else while you and the teacher tell each other secrets about her. Do your kids a favor and tell them where they stand academically, what their talents are, what they need help with and the plan for helping them learn. Remember: you, the parents, will have a plan and a goal in mind! Also remember that your child's teacher will have a plan as well. Kids feel supported when they see parents and teachers working together to help them instead of being shuffled off into a corner. Read more in Education Editor Kyle Redford's piece, ***The Privacy Dilemma***.

8. Small Steps Can Bring Big Improvements

The list of enrichment activities for boosting language and reading skills could go on and on, but there is one more important thing to remember: *It doesn't need to be complicated*. If your child is just beginning to read or is a very slow reader, go over the alphabet and letter sounds. Break apart short CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words (sit, hat, log and so on), and blend these sounds together (/j/ /o/ /b/; job). For more ideas, see ***Good Practices: Developing a Foundation for Reading***.

If your child is a little more independent, sit with her, help her with hard words as she reads, maybe read aloud a chapter of a fun book to her every night before bed. Talk about what happened in the story, the characters and the setting; what's the problem in the story? Read a nonfiction book and talk about what you all learned from the text.

If your struggling child is older, let her be the teacher and read her books to siblings. Or, in our tech-obsessed culture, teach your child to grab a camera or recorder and record videos or audio notes of herself reading, then follow along with them to check for errors. For more ideas to share with your child, see [Tips from Dyslexic Students for Dyslexic Students](#).

9. It's Okay to Read Slowly

Most dyslexics will be slow readers for life, and that's okay. They have many more talents to offer, and their reading will improve in other ways with proper interventions. If your child is reading below a mid-second grade level, don't worry about fluency or speed. Focus on accuracy, or reading the words correctly, and don't pressure him to read faster. Instead, give him strategies to help him remember what he read, such as writing a sentence or two or drawing a picture of what happened on each page (or in each chapter). Your child is going to live with a learning disability as an adult. Teach him how to deal with it now, so he'll be better able to navigate the world later. And for inspiration for both parent and child, see our [success stories](#).

10. Teach Them How to Help Themselves

If your child has been diagnosed with dyslexia, he or she will not outgrow it, but that doesn't mean your child won't learn how to read or be successful. If you teach your child how to cope and deal with his/her disability now, you're doing your child an incredible favor. Teach your children to advocate for themselves. Teach them how to ask for help. Teach them how to understand their strengths and weaknesses. Teach them about available resources and how to ensure they receive the accommodations they need for success. If you teach your children to do this at school, they're going to go into the world feeling confident and expecting success; they'll know how they fit in and what they need to do to keep up. And that's worth more than being able to read 180 words per minute.

Joshua Jenkins is a Literacy Specialist in Newton, Massachusetts. A Teach for America alum, Jenkins spent five years as a special education teacher in New Orleans.