

No Longer Just a Hope: Children With Disabilities Can Be Successful Readers

Author: Laura J. Colker, Ed.D.

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According to G. Reid Lyon, former Chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch of the National Institutes of Health, "If you do not learn to read and you live in America, you are not likely to make it in life." As unsettling as this quote may be, it is all too often the outcome awaiting children with disabilities who cannot read. Reading supports all other academic skills. Without being able to read, children are not able to write or spell. Science, social studies, math, and technology will likewise prove elusive.

Most young children approach formal schooling with eagerness and heightened anticipation. Not being able to read, however, is anything but fun for a child. It is embarrassing to stumble across words when called on by the teacher. To have this happen day after day humiliates a child and removes all of the joy from learning. Most children in this situation see themselves as failures. At a very young age, a downward spiral can begin. Rather than being motivated to read, they are motivated to expend effort getting out of the task. And without practice and positive motivation, we all know that reading skills will not develop further.

Reid Lyon expounds on this phenomenon in testimony given before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce (July 10, 1997):

It is clear from our NICHD [National Institute of Child Health and Human Development]-supported longitudinal studies that follow good and poor readers from kindergarten into young adulthood that our young poor readers are largely doomed to failure from the beginning. By the end of the first grade, we begin to notice substantial decreases in the children's self-esteem, self-concept, and motivation to learn to read if they have not been able to master reading skills and keep up with their classmates. As we follow the children through elementary and middle school grades, these problems compound. By high school, these children's potential for entering college has decreased to almost nil, with few choices available to them with respect to occupational and vocational opportunities. These individuals constantly tell us that they hate to read, primarily because it is such hard work, and their reading so slow and laborious. As an adolescent in one of our longitudinal studies remarked, "I would rather have a root canal than read."

Writing in the NICHD publication "Why Children Succeed or Fail at Reading," Robert Bock observes that this sense of failure runs over into everyday life: "Even what, to the rest of us, are everyday conveniences—a roadmap, the instructions for a microwave pizza—become daunting tasks for those with reading difficulties. And as more information becomes available on the Internet, those who can't read will be left behind by an information revolution that is largely text based. Even people with a mild reading impairment do not read for fun. For them, reading requires so much effort that they have little energy left for understanding what they have just read."

The impact of not being able to read is obviously far deeper than just depriving one of the inherent pleasures of reading. There are serious social and economic repercussions as well. For children and adolescents who already have a disability, being a nonreader is a double whammy.

The good news, though, is that most children can learn to read—even those with significant disabilities. Cherie Takemoto, Executive Director of the Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center in Springfield, Virginia, writes that it is a "myth that people with mental retardation and other cognitive disabilities cannot learn to read."

Indeed, Reid Lyon reported that for "85 to 90 percent of poor readers, prevention and early intervention programs that combine instruction in phoneme awareness, phonics, spelling, reading fluency, and reading comprehension strategies provided by well-trained teachers can increase reading skills to average reading levels."

There is thus very real evidence exists that children with disabilities can become readers and enjoy all of the accompanying rewards that go with this skill. As with most things in education, though, the earlier a problem is identified, the sooner appropriate corrective action can be taken. When it comes to reading, this appears to be especially true. As noted earlier, Lyon predicts that 85 to 95 percent of poor readers can obtain the skills to read at an average level. This figure, however, only applies to children who are identified at a young age, i.e., in preschool, kindergarten, or first grade. If a child is not identified until third or fourth grade (typically children with reading problems are not identified until age 9), the outlook is less promising. In fact, the reality is that only 25 percent of children identified at age 9 as having a reading disability are able to become competent readers.

It should be noted that not all children with reading problems have a disability. Nor do all children with disabilities have reading problems. There is, however, a great deal of overlap between the two. Here are the related statistics, as reported by the Council for Exceptional Children. Of all children with disabilities, 50 percent are identified as having learning disabilities. And approximately 80 percent of these children are categorized as learning disabled because of reading-related problems.

Developmental reading disorders involve 2 to 8 percent of all elementary school children. Children with reading disorders typically have a difficult time distinguishing the sounds in spoken words, or phonological awareness, which is a prerequisite to learning to read. Early intervention can be of enormous help to these and all children, as reading specialists have developed techniques that can help most every child acquire prerequisite skills that underlie reading.

Intervention is also vital when children have reading problems due to more severe cognitive disabilities. According to Foorman, Francis, Fletcher, Schatsneider, and Mehta (1998), "New studies show that the earlier intervention begins, the more quickly children with more profound disabilities can learn to read and write. In addition, if the disability is addressed early, the student may avoid the social, emotional, and educational problems created by repeated failure."

With some types of disabilities, though, intervention may never correct the deficiencies that

interfere with the reading process. A blind child will never be able to see print and a deaf child may never develop phonemic awareness, yet both can be taught to be competent readers.

Intervention and appropriate instruction make a monumental difference in the quality of a life for a disabled child. Those who work with young children have a unique opportunity to facilitate this process. We know from the literature that girls are just as likely as boys to have reading disorders. Yet, boys are identified in far greater numbers than girls. This is most likely because boys tend to take out their frustrations by acting out and behaving willfully. Misbehaving children get noticed. Insightful teachers and RIF coordinators will understand the connection between poor reading skills and poor behavior and have such children evaluated. Girls who have reading disabilities, however, are more likely to withdraw, and slip through the cracks. Educators thus need to be keen observers to look for the signs of a reading disability in both boys and girls.

Having a disability is enough of a challenge. We can make school and life more rewarding and enjoyable for all children by helping them become effective readers.

References:

Bock, R. Why children succeed or fail at reading: Research from NICHD's program in learning disabilities. Rockville, Md.: NICHD, 1998.

Foorman, B., Fletcher, J., Francis, D., Schatsneider, C., & Mehta, P. The role of instruction in learning to read: preventing reading failure in at-risk children. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90:37-55, 1998.

Takemoto, C. Personal communication. October 2002.

White House Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development. Address by G. Reid Lyon, Chief, Child Development and Behavior Branch, National Institutes of Health. Summary Comments, July 27, 2001.

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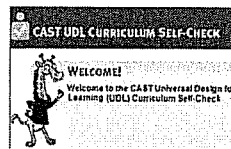
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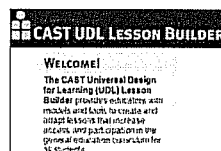
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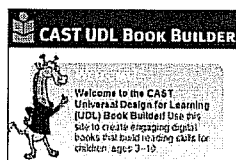


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Strong reading skills form the base for productive learning in all subjects, therefore it is critically important to identify students who struggle with reading and may have a learning disability as early as possible. Effective reading instruction has become a key focus for research and education initiatives in recent years, and NCLD has been at the forefront of these efforts. On this page, NCLD provides you with a wealth of resources on reading, including important research findings, helpful guidelines for parents, beneficial early literacy interventions, and teacher-training for the successful instruction of learners at all ages.

Get Ready to Read!

Get Ready to Read (*GRTR!*) is NCLD's national initiative to build

Get Ready to Read!

the early literacy skills of preschool-age children. This program provides an easy-to-administer, research-based screening tool to early childhood educators, child care providers, and parents in order to help them prepare all children to learn to read and write.

Parent Center - Emergent Literacy: Early Reading and Writing Development

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)

LD Talk: Reading for Meaning: Helping Students Become Successful Readers

Featured expert **Nancy Hennessy** discusses the importance of building skills such as decoding, the development of fluency, knowledge of word meaning, and the ability to make connections and think strategically when reading in this February 23, 2006 LD Chat.

LD News: Early Reading & Intervention

Learn the keys to early reading success and get practical advice for parents on how to help your child each step of the way in this January 2005 newsletter. [Click here](#) to access the *LD News* archive.

Preventing Early Reading Failure

Dr. Joseph Torgesen discusses why it is important to identify students struggling to learn to read as early as possible, and offers advice to parents and teachers on promoting reading success.

Grades K-8: Reading Resources for Parents and Educators

This resource suggests ways that parents and teachers can help children learn to read, outlines potential steps at school for struggling readers, and discusses what dyslexia is and what can be done to help.

Reading Comprehension: Reading for Meaning

NCLD's Director of Professional Services, **Dr. Sheldon Horowitz**, offers suggestions for helping students overcome reading barriers and provides effective techniques for building vocabulary and comprehension skills in his January 2006 Research Roundup column.

Read the May 2006 Research Roundup column, **Don't Give Up on Me! Teaching Reading to Secondary Students with LD** to learn about key strategies to assist students at the secondary school level in acquiring essential literacy skills and becoming successful, independent learners. To browse through the full archive of columns, [click here](#).

The NICHD Research Program in Reading Development, Reading Disorders and Reading Instruction

A summary from the NCLD national summit, "Keys to Successful Learning."

NCLD's Forum on Early Literacy Screening to Promote School Success

Over 100 participants attended the forum in February 2005, which focused on key questions regarding challenges, opportunities, available resources, and future needs and directions concerning early literacy screening and policy. Click on the link above to read transcripts from the event, hear speaker presentations, and browse through forum papers.

General Information:

The Literacy Gateway

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

International Dyslexia Association (IDA)

A non-profit organization dedicated to helping individuals with dyslexia, their families and the communities that support them.

Reading First

U.S. Department of Education

This program provides states, districts, and schools with funding to implement scientifically based reading instruction for students in grades K-3.

National Institute for Literacy (NIL)

The NIL provides leadership on literacy issues, including the improvement of reading instruction for children, youth, and adults.

Focus on Struggling Learners: IRA Programs and Resources

International Reading Association

Reading Research: From Research to Practice

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)

Adolescent Literacy

Alliance for Excellent Education (NEE) offers news articles, research reports, and other recent information on adolescent literacy.

Briefing Paper: Reading and LD

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities.

Resources for Educators:

Boosting Reading Comprehension: Improving Literary Understanding Through Classroom Conversation

Center on English Learning and Achievement

Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read

This 58-page teacher's guide from the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement provides a framework for using the findings of the National Reading Panel (NRP) in the classroom.

Teacher Reading Academies

Vaughn Gross Center for Reading and Language Arts

Collections of Scientifically-based Practices: Early Reading & Literacy

Monarch Center, University of Illinois at Chicago

The Partnership for Reading

The National Institute for Literacy offers information about the effective teaching of reading for children, adolescents, and adults, based on the evidence from quality research.

Reading Strategies and Activities Resource Book for Students at Risk for Reading Difficulties, Including Dyslexia

This University of Texas classroom resource for teachers presents sets of instructional strategies for beginning reading.

Resources for Parents:

Strategies for Parents to Help Kids Who Struggle with Reading

Reading Rockets