

# Target The Problem!

Learn about eight common difficulties children have with reading and target what you can do to help!

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

- Auditory processing
- Language processing
- Visual processing
- Auditory/visual integration
- Memory
- Attention
- Fluency
- Comprehension



*A collaborative project of*



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**The Access Center** | [www.k8accesscenter.org](http://www.k8accesscenter.org)



**LD OnLine** | [www.ldonline.org](http://www.ldonline.org)

## An introduction

The word “dyslexia” is often used to describe a person who struggles with reading. Actually, though, there are many reasons why reading can be hard. This handout describes eight common difficulties so you can pinpoint what specifically a child is having trouble with and target ways to help.

As a parent or teacher, it’s important to trust your judgment, to consider how a child is doing compared to other students, and to act on his or her behalf as early as possible. Some kids who struggle end up being diagnosed with a learning disability. Most never receive a diagnosis but nonetheless need targeted assistance to learn and read well.

We hope you’ll use this information as a starting point! Parents, teachers, and other professionals working together is when children have the best opportunity to succeed at reading.

### How to use this information

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. The topic of reading disabilities is complex and because of the uniqueness of children, families, classrooms, and home settings, there is no one strategy that will work for all children. 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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## Auditory Processing

Being able to recognize, interpret, remember, and manipulate sounds are important foundational skills for reading. Auditory processing refers to a set of skills related to how the brain recognizes and interprets sounds. (Humans hear sounds through the ear and then sounds are changed into electrical information that is interpreted by the brain.) Three terms are commonly used to refer to auditory processing skills: phonological processing, phonemic awareness, and phonics.

### What this feels like to me

- "I can't tell what word rhymes with *toy*."
- "I don't know the first sound in the word *dog*."
- "I can't tell you what sound the letter /m/ makes."

### 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!

### What I see at home

- She has difficulty thinking of rhyming words for a simple word like *cat* (such as *rat* or *bat*).
- He thinks someone said the word *knee* when the person actually said *me*.
- She doesn't show interest in language play or rhyming.

### What I can do to help

- Check with your child's teacher or principal to make sure the school's reading program teaches phonological, phonemic awareness and phonics skills.
- Consider having your child test by an audiologist (a hearing specialist) and/or a speech pathologist.
- Do activities to help your child build sound skills (make sure they are short and fun).

### What I see in the classroom

- She has difficulty distinguishing between similar words and sounds (bow and bowl).
- He has a hard time telling how many syllables there are in the word paper.
- She doesn't correctly complete blending activities; for example, put together sounds /k/ /i/ /ck/ to make the word kick.

### What I can do to help

- In order to teach them, learn all about phonemes.
- Make sure the school's reading program includes skill-building in phonemes, especially in kindergarten and first grade.
- If children are past the age at which phonemic awareness and phonological skill-building are addressed, attend to these skills one-on-one or in a small group.

## Language Processing

In order to comprehend what they read, children must first be able to understand and use language. This is called language processing ability. It includes *receptive language*, which is being able to understand speech; *expressive language*, which is being able to use speech correctly; and *auditory memory*, which is being able to remember what has been heard.

### What this feels like to me

- "I heard my friend tell what happened in the movie but I didn't really understand it."
- "It's difficult to explain to you what happened today at school."
- "I sometimes use the wrong word when I explain something."

### What I can do to help myself

- Ask someone to explain again.
- Think through the steps before doing an activity or telling a story.
- Practice telling stories using the words "First," "Then," "Finally".

### What I see at home

- Although she tries, she doesn't follow directions correctly.
- He's not able to summarize a conversation or a book.
- She's unable to tell about her day in a way that makes sense.

### What I can do to help

- Use pictures and written words in conjunction with speech.
- Give very short instructions and ask your child to repeat them to ensure understanding.
- Help build language understanding through verbal games, jokes, and telling stories.

### What I see in the classroom

- She has poor listening or reading comprehension skills.
- He has difficulty following oral directions.
- He has difficulty sequencing information in a clear, logical manner.

### What I can do to help

- Use visual aids and graphic organizers.
- Provide an outline for oral lessons.
- Have kids practice telling stories with a clear beginning, middle, and end.

## Visual Processing

In order to read and spell, children must be able to discriminate and remember the letters, words, and sentences that they see. This is called *visual processing ability*. It includes *visual discrimination* and *visual memory* skills. With good visual discrimination skills, a child can tell one word or letter from another, see differences in color, distinguish between the foreground and background, and know an object's position in space. With visual memory skills, a child remembers text, terms, and information that are presented in writing.

### What this feels like to me

- "A lot of letters look the same to me."
- "I have problems making sense of what I'm seeing on the page."
- "The words on the page seem to jump around."

### What I can do to help myself

- Track words across a page with your finger or a card.
- Block out the parts of the page you're not looking at with a card.
- Ask for printed pages to be enlarged or simplified.

### What I see at home

- She seems to focus on many different stimuli without processing any one thing.
- He has a hard time learning letters and sight words.
- She isn't able to tell the difference between left and right.

### What I can do to help

- Check with an eye doctor for possible medical issues with your child's eyes.
- Remove any unnecessary distractions from your child's study area at home.
- Reinforce print material with conversations and discussions.

### What I see in the classroom

- He has difficulty seeing differences between letters or words, such as "b" and "p", *saw* and *was*, or *can* and *CAN*.
- She skips over words or lines of a passage.
- He reads the same line twice.

### What I can do to help

- Remove unnecessary distractions from within the classroom and from materials.
- Read instructions out loud for student.
- Experiment with larger print, leaving more space between sentences or paragraphs. Some fonts may be easier to read.

## Auditory/Visual Integration

In order to read, children must be able to link information about sounds with information about letters and words. This is called *auditory/visual integration*. Children need to be able to bring together knowledge and processes from both the auditory and visual domains. Reading requires the ability to use *auditory processing* and *visual processing* skills at the same time.

### What this feels like to me

- "I know my letters and sounds, but I just can't read words on a page."
- "I've seen these words before, but I just don't remember what they are."

### What I can do to help myself

- Look at information and text in small bits and pieces.
- Practice learning in multiple ways (see it, say it, visualize it, write it).
- Ask for information to be repeated or shown in a different way.

### What I see at home

- He reads slowly.
- She moves her mouth when reading silently (subvocalizing).
- He needs to be given directions over and over again.

### What I can do to help

- Talk to a qualified doctor or therapist (a speech or occupational therapists may help).
- Simplify the way you present information.
- Present information to your child in multiple ways (for example, show, say, and touch letters, numbers, and words).

### What I see in the classroom

- She has difficulty matching sounds and letters, which can affect reading and spelling.
- He is still a non-reader despite having phonemic awareness.
- She decodes in a very labored manner.

### What I can do to help

- Make sure visual and auditory skills have each been adequately and separately addressed.
- Use systematic and explicit instruction for all aspects of reading.
- Practice associating sounds and letters.

## Memory

In order to read, children must be able to place information into their memories and retrieve it when needed. Being able to efficiently move back and forth between what they see in print and what is stored in their memories is what helps children understand vocabulary and comprehend what they read. There are different types of memory, including *short-term memory*, *working memory*, and *long-term memory*.

### What this feels like to me

- "I can't remember the words I just heard or read."
- "I can't figure out what *cat* would be if I changed the first letter to 'h'."
- "I'm not dumb, but I can't remember anything about the book we read last month."

### What I can do to help myself

- Use index cards to record information. Carry these cards around with you and look at them when you get a chance to reinforce your memory.
- Draw pictures or graphics to accompany text.
- Repeat directions and tasks out loud several times.

### What I see at home

- She's unable to recall letters or words that were recently taught.
- He uses disinterest to hide his memory difficulties ("I don't know what that book was about; I hated it.").
- She's reluctant to complete a series of directions or tasks.

### What I can do to help

- Play mimicking games where your child must immediately repeat the verbal directions before completing the task.
- After reading familiar books together, ask your child to recall events in the story.
- Organize information in meaningful ways (such as alphabetizing or outlining).

### What I see in the classroom

- He is unable to recall the sequential order of events in a story or the steps in an explanation.
- Her comprehension or retelling of recent events is inaccurate.
- He has difficulty repeating back strings of words, numbers, or sentences.

### What I can do to help

- Provide opportunities to practice repeatedly what was taught.
- Use rhyming and mnemonics to help the child organize information.
- Use graphics, tables, charts, concept maps, and other visual tools.

## Attention

Children must be able to *focus their attention* in order to decode words, maintain reading fluency, and understand what is 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).

### What this feels like to me

- "I want to read this book...but why is the book cover blue and what's outside the window?"
- "I just hate that I have to stay still in order to read."

### What I can do to help myself

- Keep checklists to track things to bring home and to school.
- Keep a calendar to track when things are due and to break up larger reading assignments and projects.
- Use a timer to keep track of time spent on activities and homework.

### What I see at home

- She doesn't seem to listen or focus.
- He spaces out.
- She shows inconsistency in schoolwork (for example, she receives an A on one reading quiz and a C on the next).

### What I can do to help

- Learn about behavior modification techniques and work with the school to implement them.
- Provide clear communication and rules to your child.
- Speak to knowledgeable doctors and therapists.

### What I see in the classroom

- She seems unable to attend long enough to learn decoding skills or to gain comprehension of what she read.
- He seems unaware of visual detail, resulting in poor knowledge of word patterns, poor writing, and poor spelling.
- She does not follow directions or pay attention.

### What I can do to help

- Provide clear and consistent communication, rules, and transitions to the student.
- Cut assignments down so the student can demonstrate mastery but doesn't have to do as much writing.
- Break up assignments and reading material and provide extra time.

## Fluency

In order to understand what they read, children must be able to *read fluently*. This means they read material accurately and with adequate speed. 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 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 passage 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, and then match your voice to theirs.
- Read lists of words, phrases, or passages again and again. Practice getting faster and smoother.

### 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.

### 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 impression of your child's word decoding skills.
- Read aloud to your child.

### What I see in the classroom

- Her results on words-correct-per-minute assessments are below grade level or targeted benchmark.
- He reads less than 90 percent of words accurately in a grade level passage.
- He does not read aloud with expression, changing his tone where appropriate.

### What I can do to help

- Assess the student to make sure that word decoding or word recognition are not the source of the difficulty.
- Give the student short passages or lists of words that he or she can practice again and again. Regularly time the student and calculate words-correct-per-minute. The student can chart his or her own improvement.

## 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

- "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 passage takes so much of my energy, I can't even think about what it means."

### 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, "What's not making sense?" and go back to find the answer.

### What I see at home

- She's not able to summarize a passage or a book.
- He knows what happened in a story but can't explain why events went the way they did.
- She has questions about a lot of word meanings in a grade appropriate text.

### 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 read and heard.

### 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 different structures of narrative and information texts.
- Use graphic organizers that help students break information down and keep track of what they read.
- Teach students to monitor their own understanding as well as prediction and summarizing skills.