

Children With Reading Problems (What to do When Things Go Wrong)

Here are ten helpful hints from Hunter Calder for parents who think their child may have a reading problem.

1. *Don't Panic, Stay Calm and Think!* Your child feels badly enough without you running around tearing your hair out. Never point an accusing finger at the child. No child elects to come into this world with a reading problem, so don't make things worse by laying the blame on an innocent party. Confront the reading difficulty the same way you would any other problem. Be systematic and thorough. Take things step-by-step until you feel sure you have found the best help available.

2. *Find Out What is Wrong.* Approach the school, ask for detailed information on your child's lack of progress and what it proposes to do about it. Do not be put off with vague promises and assurances. You know something is wrong. Trust your judgment. If the school cannot or will not help, you had better look for professional help elsewhere.

3. *Find Out About Phonics.* A majority of children with reading problems need phonics instruction. The phonics method has a long history of helping children master basic reading skills. Phonics teaches children to read by placing sound value on letters - 'b' as in 'bat'. It then teaches children how to blend the sounds of letters into words - 'b' - 'a' - 't' becomes 'bat'. After this first stage, children learn some simple rules and more complex sounds - all of which make reading easier for them. Research shows that phonics is the single most important element in developing independent reading skills.

4. *Find Out About Remedial Help.* If you have no option but to find help outside the school system, be a careful consumer. Look before you leap – do not risk having your child fail again. Good remedial teachers find out what is wrong (diagnose the problem) and then recommend ways of correcting it. Most remedial teachers use the phonics method of teaching. Make sure the teacher's program takes your child systematically from the simple to the complex, and from the easy to the difficult. A good phonics program develops comprehension ability at the same time it teaches basic word attack skills.

5. *There is Usually More than One Cause of a Reading Problem.* Wise parents have their children assessed for problems in areas related to reading difficulties. There is rarely a single cause involved. There may be a family history of reading and spelling problems. There may have been broken schooling in the formative years. The child's vision or hearing may be faulty. The child may be unable to concentrate and stay on task at school or at home. Any number of things can make learning to read difficult.

6. *Have you checked Your Child's Vision?* Make sure your child's vision functions properly. Be warned that 20/20 vision does not necessarily mean all is well. Some children have inadequate visual perception. They see perfectly well from the eye to the page, but something seems to go wrong between the eye and the brain. Some children are unable to organise the messages they receive in a way that makes

sense to them. Their visual perception skills are not sufficiently developed. Eye-care practitioners who train children in visual perception skills are known as Behavioural Optometrists. Ask around, find the most reputable practitioners in your community and make an appointment. If nothing is wrong, you have eliminated faulty vision as a cause of your child's reading difficulty.

7. Is Your Child's Hearing Adequate? Most children are able to hear perfectly well things they shouldn't hear! And yet these same children are stone deaf when asked to do a simple chore, especially if they are watching TV. By all means have your child's hearing checked, but you should be aware that children with adequate hearing can have poor auditory perception. Auditory perception is the ability of a child to isolate individual sounds and sequence or blend them together to make words (blend 'c', 'a' and 't' together to read 'cat'). Many children, especially younger children, have not developed this skill and, consequently, do not learn to read effectively. Specially trained remedial teachers and speech pathologists are trained to teach children these skills. Track down a skilled teacher of auditory perception skills and see if this is part of the problem.

8. Does Your Child Concentrate Well? Often children fail to learn at school because they are unable to concentrate efficiently. There is more to poor concentration than simply being bored. Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) is a medically identifiable condition that affects many children. Children with ADD fall into three main categories - they can be inattentive, impulsive or hyperactive. There are many symptoms of ADD. A paediatrician or paediatric neurologist can diagnose the problem for you. If you want further information about this disorder get in touch with your local ADD support organisation. Remember, if your child cannot concentrate school, he or she will not be a receptive learner.

9. Direct Instruction is Essential. Children need the kind of instruction that will help them overcome their reading problem - a carefully structured phonics program. Direct remedial instruction is best given in small groups of no more than eight children. It should occur on a regular basis – four or five times a week. Phonics instruction thrives on practice and the daily routine of drill and reinforcement. Good teachers make reading lessons entertaining and enjoyable. Phonics is fun because, for the first time in their lives, children discover the pleasure of reading stories and books. Children with reading problems cannot be left to fend for themselves, and they need more than encouraging words. Poor readers tend to have low self-esteem. Many have given up and no longer believe in themselves. Direct instruction offers a golden opportunity to prove to them that they can learn to read.

10. Parents are not to Blame. It is not your fault your child has not learned to read. Don't take on the burden of guilt. It will not help you or your child. If you use these helpful hints and honestly follow up every lead, you have done your best. Many children, especially older children, have become so dispirited at repeated failure that they are unwilling to try any more. Don't damage them or yourself by leading them to water when they don't want to drink. Do not let anyone try to tell you that your child's poor self-esteem, unacceptable behaviour or reading difficulty is the result of poor parenting. Not true. Trust yourself, trust your own instincts about your child. If you have done your best, then win, lose or draw, there is no room for blame or guilt.

General Symptoms of Reading Problems

If your child displays four or more of these symptoms, you should obtain an assessment from a specialist reading instructor.

- ❖ Bright and mentally alert, lots of interests and hobbies but performs below potential, unhappy at school.
- ❖ Poor self-image and self- confidence with school-related tasks, is anxious and insecure about them.
- ❖ Negative attitude to school, unhappy and reluctant to attend.
- ❖ Reading ability does not reflect generally good spoken vocabulary.
- ❖ Negative attitude to reading, unwilling to read, does so only when asked, makes excuses to avoid having to read.
- ❖ Difficulty organising homework, slow to finish, assignments often incomplete.
- ❖ Poor concentration, easily distractible - impulsive and fidgety, tendency to daydream.
- ❖ Difficulty with physical activities, poor co-ordination, dislikes sport and games.
- ❖ Poor understanding of simple instructions and requests.
- ❖ Chooses small books and leafs through them quickly, looks mostly at the pictures.
- ❖ Shows good recall of events and comprehension of stories when they are read aloud but not when the child reads silently.
- ❖ Signs of visual discomfort when reading, rubs eyes, poor posture, squints or frowns, complains of headaches, book held too close or too far away, points at words with finger.

Specific Symptoms of Reading Problems

If your child displays four or more of these symptoms, you should obtain an assessment from a specialist reading instructor.

- ❖ Has difficulty recognising basic sight words ('and', 'are', 'can', 'come' and so on).
- ❖ Does not know sounds of letters ('a' as in 'apple', 'ow' as in 'cow' and so on).
- ❖ Guesses at unknown words.
- ❖ Has difficulty blending sounds together to make words (cannot blend 'b' - 'a' - 't' to make 'bat').

- ❖ Unable to read words of two or more syllables.
- ❖ Rate of reading is slow and laborious - delays of 3 to 5 seconds, very hesitant, refusals are common.
- ❖ Regularly sub vocalises (moves lips) when reading.
- ❖ Unable to isolate and sequence sounds in words (does not know where the sound 't' comes in 'bat').
- ❖ Repeats words and phrases, includes words.
- ❖ Often skips or omits words, or loses place.
- ❖ Substitutes one word for another ('kitten' becomes 'cat', 'stamp' becomes 'stump' and so on).
- ❖ Ignores punctuation, words run together.
- ❖ Reverses and rotates letters in words ('dab' becomes 'dad', 'cab' becomes 'cap' and so on).
- ❖ Reverses whole words ('no' becomes 'on', 'was' becomes 'saw' and so on).
- ❖ Partial pronunciation of words ('expectation' becomes 'exception').