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Helping Kids Learn

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Information Sheet 13

Reading

By Mary Mitchell, Special Educator

A great many children who are referred to Learning Links are experiencing difficulties in reading.

Some students experience problems in the mechanics of reading such as phonemic awareness, some experience problems comprehending or understanding what they read, whilst others experience problems in both these areas.

Parents are often concerned about their child's progress at school and despite receiving intervention, the child does not see himself or herself as a 'reader'.

Often students who are referred to Learning Links for reading problems display low self esteem and have experienced a lack of success in literacy. They are often described by their parents as not willing to "have a go" with reading and writing both at home and school.

Many have also developed strategies to cope with their difficulties. These strategies can affect their classroom behaviour with the student becoming less motivated and avoiding tasks they believe are difficult.

The earlier a student's difficulty in reading is noticed and a systematic program implemented, the greater the chance of success.

What is reading?

When we read we are trying to gain meaning from print.

It is a complex process and students need to know how our language is represented in written form.

The printed symbols or the alphabet as we know it represent sounds and sound combinations that can be manipulated to make new words.

With knowledge of these sounds, a child needs to decode accurately and fluently whilst implementing strategies that will allow them to understand what is being read.

The reader needs to know if what they are reading makes sense. If it doesn't make sense, they need to know what strategies they can use to regain meaning such as reread from the beginning of the sentence.

A good reader also needs a bank of sight words so that they can recognise letter combinations that don't conform to phonic rules. Examples are words such as 'through', 'friend' and 'said'. These words need to be learnt as a whole and committed to memory.

Many children who are referred to Learning Links moved through the early school grades learning to read with little difficulty. When they reach the primary grades any reading difficulties often become apparent. These difficulties then impact all areas of learning as the student encounters books with an increasing number of words.

Books in the early grades of school have simple stories and students who find reading difficult do not necessarily experience problems reading and understanding the text at this stage. They get through by relying solely on their sight word vocabulary.

A Year 3 student may only need to memorise approximately 400-500 words to read books in school, but in the following year the word vocabulary in books rises sharply to about 4,000 words making memorising very difficult.

Research has indicated the skills of phonemic awareness are a key indicator of a student's success in reading and spelling.

When a student begins to experience difficulties in the middle to upper primary grades and is subsequently assessed, there often appears to be significant gaps in their phonemic awareness.

What is Phonemic Awareness?

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate sounds that make up words.

It is initially a listening and oral skill, with the child not needing to identify the written letters but must be able to hear and repeat sounds in the correct order.

How can we tell if a child is lacking in phonemic skills?

A child who lacks these skills may not be able to supply a rhyming word. They may know the letter sounds but are unable to blend them into a word and may also be a poor speller. They often rely on how a word looks, rather than listening to the sounds in sequence.

This places a great demand on the child's memory especially once they enter the middle and upper primary grades and the demands on reading and writing increase.

Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.

We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

Early Childhood Services for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without special needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood teaching and therapy.

School Age Services for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group tuition and therapy.
- Occupational and speech therapy programs combining specialist education services and therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and the Reading for Life Program for children falling behind in their reading.

Family Services helping and supporting families and health professionals.

- Centre and home-based family counselling.
- Parenting Programs and groups for families.
- Case Management Services.

Professional Development for teachers and health professionals.

Presentations, workshops and advice on identifying and helping children with learning difficulties, learning disabilities and developmental delays.

Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Dee Why and Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, Victoria and New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.

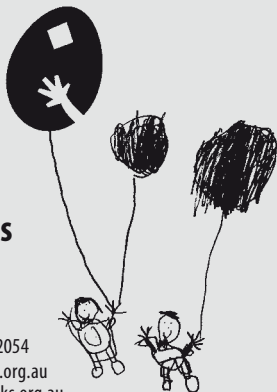
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Can Phonemic Awareness be assessed and the skills taught?

The skills of phonemic awareness do not develop naturally in all students.

The good news is that they can be taught phonemic awareness skills in a systematic and explicit way after undergoing an assessment to determine the level of the ability in this area.

Phonemic awareness skills are basically oral and listening skills. Instead of using letter cards to sequence sounds in words, the skills can be taught using counters or blocks.

There are several phonemic awareness screening tests available. These include the Jenny Whipp Phonological Awareness Screening and the Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test.

While phonemic awareness is crucial to early reading success, it is not sufficient on its own.

What other components are in a successful early reading program?

There are a number of other components important to an early reading program and include the following:

- alphabetic principle – understanding the relationship between visual representations and sounds;
- phonics – understanding letter/sound relationships building on the alphabetic principle;
- sight word vocabulary – automatic word recognition enabling the reader to concentrate on the comprehension of the text rather than laboriously decoding each word;
- concepts about print – ensuring the reader understands the relationship between written and oral language;
- reading texts at an appropriate instructional level with 90-95% accuracy; and
- spelling tasks, which combine phonemic awareness, phonics and the visual shape of the word.

What comprehension strategies can be implemented into a reading program?

Often students who can read most of the material given to them are referred to Learning Links because they are unable to understand the text. Other students will continue to read a passage unaware that a word they have incorrectly inserted changes the meaning of the passage.

What are Phonemic Awareness Skills?

The following skills are phonemic awareness skills with examples of how they can be tested.

- Rhyming – recognising and producing words that end with the same sound. Do cat and bat rhyme? Give a word that rhymes with man.
- Alliteration – recognise words that begin with the same sound. Do Matt, Mary, Mandy start with the same letter? Which is the odd one out – man, fit or fat?
- Isolation – identify beginning, middle and ending sounds in a word. Select the initial, middle, end sound for given word.
- Segmentation – break words up into syllables, stretching words into separate sounds. You can clap for each syllable/sound in word.
- Blending – putting sounds together to make a word. r-ai-n = rain.
- Exchange – changing beginning, ending and middle sounds to make a new word. What word do we get if we change the c in cat to r?
- Deletion – removing a beginning, ending or middle sound to make a new word. What word do we get if we take the p out of play?

A reader needs to develop strategies that will enable them to gain meaning from the text. We can do this through the explicit teaching of comprehension.

When focussing on comprehension skills, strategies need to be taught throughout the reading process – before, during and after reading. Some of these strategies include the following.

Strategies to improve comprehension before reading:

- discuss the story before reading and make predictions about what may happen in the story;
- ask the reader to think of questions that could be answered from reading the story;
- discuss relevant vocabulary from the story and relate it to previous experiences; and

- discuss what the reader can do when an unknown word is met in the story such as ‘have a go’ at guessing the word using the look of the word and the meaning of the sentence, reread or read ahead to see if the guessed word makes sense, or use their knowledge of phonics to decode the word.

Strategies to improve comprehension during reading:

- answer questions that the reader asked before reading as you come across the information in the story;
- encourage the reader to ask and answer other questions as they arise in the story;
- ask the reader – ‘does that sound right?’ or ‘did that make sense?’ at the end of a sentence when a word is read incorrectly or doesn’t make sense;
- for older children ask to read through any questions first, then read the passage;
- rereading and reading ahead if the sentence doesn’t make sense; and

- encourage the reader to make a picture in their head (visualising) about a sentence, paragraph or story.

Strategies to improve comprehension after reading:

- retelling the whole story to ensure the reader understood what was read;

- answering questions asked before and during reading;
- use ‘wh’ questions e.g. who, what, when, where and why;
- identifying the main idea of the story; and
- discussing how the story could be related to previous experiences of the reader.

What is the difference between phonemic awareness and phonological processing?

Phonological processing involves:

- phonemic awareness;
- knowledge of letter-sound correspondences; and
- blending.

It means supporting students in building up word recognition skills in order to gain meaning from print.

Phonemic awareness refers to the conscious awareness of sounds in spoken words and the ability to manipulate them.

Source: K-6 Literacy Interim Support Document, The Board of Studies

Helping your child read – things to do at home

Reading every day

Children value reading through watching their family use reading and writing every day. Encourage your child to read by sharing such activities as:

- making a shopping list
- finding brands at the shops
- reading signs and posters
- following a street directory
- checking a television guide
- writing birthday cards or invitations
- choosing a video
- using a recipe
- writing notes to family members
- reading game rules
- reading the newspaper out loud together
- playing word games or doing crossword puzzles
- reading out instructions
- looking at letterbox leaflets
- reading magazines, comics, poems and rhymes
- looking at store catalogues.

Reading aloud together

Children enjoy reading more if it is shared. Make time away from television and interruptions to read aloud with your child.

Read in your home language if your first language is not English.

Listen to your child read every day. Here are some tips.

- Look at the cover, title, pictures and talk about what the book might be about.
- Discuss the story so far and what might happen next.
- After reading, talk about the story and ask questions.
- Take turns when reading a harder book.
- Remember the three Ps for new words – pause, prompt, praise.

Pause – give your child time to work out the word.

Prompt

- Go back to the beginning of the sentence or read on to the end.
- Look for a clue in the picture or words.
- Look at the first letter and think about what the word could be.
- Ask ‘Does this make sense?’
- Try to sound out the word.
- If necessary tell your child the word.

Praise – even if mistakes are made, praise your child for trying.

Reading is important

Be confident that your child will learn to read. Show that you enjoy reading by having lots of different material at home and by giving books as special presents.

Visit your local library and borrow books for yourself and your child.

Encourage your child to read anytime anywhere.

Talk to your child’s classroom teacher or the principal for further help and advice.

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School Age Services
– contact your local branch

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