

# Reading Skills: Helping Handout for Home

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## INTRODUCTION

Literacy is an umbrella term that includes all the skills children use to read, write, speak, and listen. Families and caregivers can help children build literacy at home. Talking and reading with your child at home builds oral language and emergent literacy skills that translate into later success with reading comprehension. Reading skills develop in a fairly predictable order, and knowing a bit about that order can be helpful at home. At first, children recognize sounds in spoken words, noticing that words rhyme and then that different words can start with the same sounds. Teachers call those sounds *phonemes*. Next, children learn letter names and sounds and use them to identify words by sounding them out. This skill is called *decoding*. When children can read regular text aloud at a reasonable pace, they are considered fluent readers. The trick to helping children achieve fluency is providing enough practice so each component skill becomes automatic. Once children can read fluently, they can focus more on the meaning of what they are reading, which is referred to as *reading comprehension*. Comprehension, the most complicated of these processes, requires that children are able to recognize words easily and access word meanings during reading. Comprehension also includes connecting, understanding, and interpreting main ideas; making inferences; and monitoring understanding. Luckily, what families do to encourage language development helps in all these areas.

Writing skills follow a similar developmental progression, but they require a very different skill set. Writing development includes handwriting, spelling, and composition skills, plus planning and revising. Handwriting requires fine motor skills to produce letters, numbers, and punctuation marks

easily, quickly, and legibly. Spelling development progresses from understanding that marks on a page represent letters, then that specific letters and patterns represent sounds, and eventually progresses to understanding more complex spelling patterns. Writing involves the combination of handwriting, spelling, and thinking. Planning and reviewing are also important mental skills that help children improve their writing. Again, purposeful practice allows children to attain each of these skill sets and then to coordinate them.

Early literacy skills are important for later academic success. Around third or fourth grade, children are expected to read independently in all their classes. If they struggle with literacy skills, then learning science, math, and social studies becomes even more difficult. You may hear teachers refer to this time as the fourth-grade slump, especially if children who had been doing reasonably well in their reading and writing development begin to struggle. Luckily, there is much that parents and other caregivers can do to help children avoid, or move through the slump by providing opportunities at home.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are intended for parents to review and consider using at home. Parents can positively influence the development of literacy skills even as their children are learning to speak, but it is never too late to start. The recommendations are divided into three categories: general recommendations to support literacy skills, recommendations to support reading skills, and recommendations to support writing skills. These recommendations are all evidence-based strategies that help parents support literacy skill development,

prevent future difficulties with literacy, and respond when children struggle with literacy.

### General Recommendations to Support Literacy Skills

1. **Talk with your child, using increasingly more complex words.** The more word meanings children know, the stronger their reading comprehension will be over time. For example, parents might do the following:
  - *Ask open-ended questions.* Open-ended questions don't have yes or no answers. Instead of asking "Did you have a good day at school?" you can ask questions such as "How did you help someone today?" or "Describe something that made you laugh today."
  - *Play word games like rhyming or swapping out sounds to make new words.* Children who are comfortable playing with the sounds in words can use that comfort to begin to understand the spelling system. Invite language play during regular activities. "Let's get in the car. If I changed the /c/ in car to /f/, what word would I have?"
2. **Respond to your child's interests as you practice literacy skills.** Babies learn words better when we name objects that they look at or point to. Likewise, older children are more engaged when we respond to their interests. Children also appreciate choice and variety. Allow your child to choose books in the library or topics to write about. If your child needs help choosing, suggest two to three appropriate options. Offer variety by providing opportunities for your older child to read newspapers, magazines, blog posts, social media, and Internet sites related to his or her interests.
3. **Encourage language learning through play.** Free play supports literacy by giving children opportunities to use their imagination and to build language skills. Talking to your child during play, such as describing what is happening and asking questions, fosters language development (e.g., "I notice that you are cooperating. Cooperating means working together. When you cooperate, playing can be more fun. How else could you two cooperate?").
4. **Model frequent use of literacy in your own life.** Children are more likely to read when they see others reading often and reading different things, such as books, magazines, and the newspaper. Likewise, it encourages them to write when they see others writing in daily life, such as making

lists, writing letters—making writing seem normal. Talk to your child while you write to describe how writing is important and helpful to you (e.g., "We are going to the store later. It will help me if I make a list of what we need."). Although any time is a good time for your child to watch you reading and writing, doing so while your child is working on homework is highly recommended. Also, try replacing electronic time with literacy time for both of you. Turn off the television and other technological devices and establish a protected time to read or write.

5. **Use television and other electronic media wisely to promote language.** When programs are selected wisely, television and other electronic media, particularly public television programming and Internet sites such as [www.pbskids.org](http://www.pbskids.org), help promote early literacy skills. Such programs would include *Sesame Street*, *Electric Company*, *Between the Lions*, and *Reading Rainbow*. Watching these programs together, and talking about them, is especially helpful for increasing engagement and fostering language development.
6. **Find opportunities in the community to foster literacy.** Look for reading moments in your daily life. For example, take trips to the local library to get a library card, check out books, or attend a special event. While you are out with your child, play an alphabet game by looking for letters or reading signs. Use transportation time for conversation. Whether walking, driving, or taking public transportation, keep electronics off and use the time to talk with your child.
7. **Keep reading and writing fun!** When children are asked to write sentences for punishment, or are required to sit and read because they are in trouble, they develop negative associations with these important literacy activities.

### Recommendations to Support Reading Skills

8. **Read to your child early and often.** Even babies can benefit from listening to the language of books read aloud by their parents. If your child is older, it is never too late to start. Find several times to read together throughout the day, both at home and away from home. Do not leave home without something to read, especially if you know you and your child may have to wait in a line at the store, at the doctor's office, or in any other family activity.

Respond positively to your child's requests to read the same book over and over. Rereading

a favorite book helps children learn new words. If your child is in your lap, you can point to the words so he or she can follow along. When your child is older and can read alone, rereading books also helps independent readers develop confidence, speed, and accuracy.

9. **Use an interactive reading style when reading with your child.** Stopping to talk about what you are reading is an excellent practice to maintain your child's interest, and it shows that readers think during reading, as in the following examples:
  - Ask questions, especially open-ended questions, about the plot, the characters, or why something is happening in the story.
  - Encourage your child to connect the story to his or her own life. You might ask: "When have you felt the way the main character is feeling?" "Do you have a similar toy, object, or friend?" "Have you been to a similar place?"
  - Make predictions about what will happen next. Predictions are best when they combine information from the book with information that the child knows from other books and experiences.
  - Discuss difficult vocabulary words. Encourage your child to try to figure out word meanings. Show how you can use a dictionary to look up a word meaning.
10. **Recognize that children benefit from the physical and emotional bonding that occurs when reading a book together.** Find ways to sit close together during daily reading times, with your child looking at the book while you are reading rather than waiting for you to show pictures after reading.
11. **Make reading a special and fun activity in your child's life.** Create a fun reading spot with a cozy corner, special chair, or comfortable pillow. Give books as gifts to show that they are special.
12. **Help your child develop alphabetic knowledge.** For example, put magnetic letters on your refrigerator for regular play during meal preparation. Learning to sing the alphabet song, touch letters while singing, and then identify the names and sounds of individual letters takes practice. Short bursts of practice every day ensure that children get the extra boost they need.
13. **Help your child choose a variety of appropriate books.** "Just right" books are books that are interesting, and neither too easy nor too hard. To help choose a book at the appropriate reading level, simply have your child open to a page in the middle

of the book and read that page. Not knowing four to five words on the page means the book is too hard for the child to read alone. You also might use the Scholastic Book Wizard website to help find books at the appropriate level for your child (see Recommended Resources). Choose the more difficult books for you to read aloud, reserving easier ones for your child to read independently. When your child is reading independently, ask questions to make sure he or she can retell the story. This questioning is a good indicator that the book is at the appropriate reading level.

Be sure to allow for variety in home reading. Reading not only storybooks but also graphic novels, information texts, mysteries, biographies, and picture books encourages interest in reading many types of texts. Graphic novels are stories written and illustrated in the style of a comic strip. They help support readers by using shorter written segments, rich pictures, and easy-to-follow plots. Information texts engage children who enjoy science or social studies topics. Mysteries allow children to learn about character development and plot building. Biographies allow children to see how individuals they admire worked to reach goals. Picture books sometimes have more complicated vocabulary than early chapter books. Use picture books to read aloud, even when your child can move to chapter books for independent reading.

14. **If your child is a beginning reader, have patience and praise effort.** When children believe that effort or hard work, rather than inherent smarts, helps people learn to read, they are more likely to keep trying to read something that seems difficult. Children who are praised for being smart instead of for trying their best may avoid difficult tasks, and they are more likely to quit when the work gets hard because they do not want to fail. Be patient when your child is sounding out an unfamiliar word, to allow plenty of time to figure it out independently. Treat mistakes not as failure but as an opportunity for improvement. For example, if your child misreads the word "listen" as "list," reread the sentence together and ask which word makes more sense. Point out the similarities between the two words and the importance of noticing the final part. Your patience can help mistakes become learning experiences, not reasons to give up.
15. **As your child develops reading skills, spend time reading together.** Reading out loud with children helps them practice in a safe environment. Echo

reading, in which you read a page and then your child rereads that same page with you, is the most supportive format. Choral reading, in which you both read at the same time, still allows your child the support of your voice. Either of these supportive reading strategies is preferable to having your child struggle alone.

### Recommendations to Support Writing Skills

16. **Support the development of handwriting skills.** By keeping markers, pencils, crayons, and a variety of paper available in your home, and finding reasons to use them yourself, you can encourage your child to write. Use other materials for writing: write in the sand, write in the air, write in shaving cream sprayed on a plate. You can find practical ways for your child to write around the home, such as rewriting your grocery list, writing thank you notes, or helping to write a list of chores.
17. **Support the development of spelling skills.** When your child is first learning to spell, encourage stretching out sounds in the word and matching the sounds to letters. A young speller may only figure out the first and last letter at first, and that's great! For example, to spell "house" your child might hear "huh, huh, h" and "ous, sss, s" and then write down "hs." This invented spelling practice will eventually help your child hear more letter sounds to include in the word. Writing in invented spelling does not prevent a child from developing conventional spelling. In fact, it stretches important muscles needed for spelling and allows a child to compose more complicated text.
18. **Support the development of composition skills.** Share storytelling by telling a story together, alternating sentences. As you form the plot and setting together, ask your child questions such as "Who is the main character?" and "Where are they?" Write down your child's story word-for-word, and then read it back, pointing to each word as you read to your child. Also, encourage your child to write in a journal.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### Websites

<http://www.readingrockets.org/>

Reading Rockets is a national multimedia literacy initiative that offers information and resources on how young children learn to read, why so many struggle, and how caring adults can help.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/>

This website provides educators, parents, and after-school professionals with access to high-quality, free materials for reading and language arts instruction.

<https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/bookwizard/>

The Scholastic Book Wizard website helps find books at the appropriate level for your child.

### Books

Kropp, P. (2000). *How to make your child a reader for life*. New York, NY: Broadway Books.

This book weaves together the how with the why for encouraging reading. The author sets the stage for making reading fun across your child's life.

Willingham, D. (2015). *Raising kids who read: What parents and teachers can do*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

This book is written by a well-known psychologist who is very skillful at helping people outside of schools understand the research behind the importance of reading.

### Related Helping Handouts

Math Skills: Helping Handout for Home

School Readiness and School Entry: Helping Handout for Home

Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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