



Tips for Parents of Struggling Readers

November 24, 2020

#DYSLEXIA AND ORTON-GILLINGHAM

#EXPERT INSIGHT #FEATURED



As caregivers of young children, we use our imaginations to build forts from bed sheets and bring characters from picture and chapter books to life with our voices.

With the goal of inviting them into a world we care for and about, we model spending time doing things to build character, wisdom, and an array of knowledge.

These efforts show care and thoughtfulness in trying to connect and engage with them. Our experiences give us ideas and perspectives, and we want to share our love of what made us happy, strong, and secure. As adults, we also have a perspective on how words have power. Word choice and tone of voice change meaning and may vary by situation. This is true in life and literature.

When readers struggle, at least one of two main pieces responsible for reading to understand may be the reason. Readers must be able to translate the printed words into meaning (decoding) by sounding out words, recognizing words, or having someone tell them the words. Then, readers must understand what those words mean. The latter skill is often in place first. Consider young children who understand and follow directions when they're said aloud, but they wouldn't be able to read the instructions on their own. These two pieces, the decoding and the meaning of spoken language work together to result in reading comprehension.

As readers lift words from a page, they must figure out how to paint a picture or create a movie to understand the meaning, and the author's words and punctuation give readers needed clues. Some books are illustrated to help put the clues together, like puzzles falling into place to reveal the complete landscape of a story. This isn't reserved for picture books, but, instead, this strategy is extremely helpful throughout many texts, in science and history textbooks, for example. Outside of academic studies, readers often appreciate the illustrations or photographs in how-to assembly instructions to new recipes. This is especially true for struggling readers. The illustrations, whether found on every page or only on occasional pages, help test our understanding of the author's intentions.

When supporting struggling readers with the goal to help them develop, it's important to think about each step along the way. In reading, model sounding out words, mention the meanings of interesting words, ask questions while reading and thinking about the story, and focus on making reading enjoyable.

Select a book

When choosing a book, keep these questions in mind. Is the child reading the story or listening to someone read aloud? Can the child read the words based on letter-sound knowledge? Why are we reading: to learn about something or to relax and enjoy a story? Some books are appropriate for children's expanding vocabulary even if they don't have the ability to read all the words yet. Other books, referred to as decodable books, follow the child's learning about how letters represent sounds and, therefore, allow the child to read a story on their own. Both, reading aloud to children and listening to children read, are important steps in the child's learning journey.

Read Aloud to Children

Now, with a book in hand, readers are ready to dive in! Listening to good reading helps children learn what their own reading should sound like. This partnership between the strategies good readers use must be practiced. Listening to reading is extremely important, and the discussion about interesting words and how the story is unfolding is valuable in comprehension. As struggling readers listen, they hear and mimic changes in tone of voice – whether unique to different characters or to reflect emotion. In suspenseful situations, the reader may slow down and whisper, whereas, in a moment of excitement, a reader's voice may become louder and joyous. Listeners might even notice how the facial expressions of the reader change alongside cues in the text. Thinking back to childhood memories of listening to good reading at home and in school, motivation to feel and share a book with others is empowering. This access to enjoyable reading is pivotal in a struggling reader's journey.

Talk about words

Interesting words help readers understand more specifics about characters, settings, and how a story unfolds. As if readers are tuning into a radio station, colorful words add clarity to how we understand what's happening. While reading aloud or listening to a child read, pause to talk about new words. Sometimes, words we already know are used in a new way. Ask why the writer might have chosen the word and what it helps the reader understand about the story. Sometimes, it's the *asking* and the *noticing* which are most helpful to struggling readers. It signals, "This is what strong readers do as they read: pause, ask, think."

Listen to Children Read

To support struggling readers, decodable books provide the chance to practice reading, as well as partner skills, like voice-based on punctuation marks and word choice, grouping words together into phrases that support understanding, and new and interesting vocabulary. Therefore, even when reading decodable books, all readers benefit from reading aloud to others. Reading to family members, friends, younger children, or even a pet is beneficial. Oral reading allows one to recognize and correct errors. Over time, reading words helps the brain develop and learn to recognize patterns which, in turn, helps the reader grow. There are many resources available for [decodable books](#), and it's most important to understand your child's letter/sound skills when selecting these books.

Word, Phrase, Sentence, Story

When reading with children, talking about words and interesting phrases quickly becomes too abstract, especially without illustrations. So, add them. Have readers or listeners reflect on a word or phrase by drawing it. What would it look like? Even important sentences could be illustrated or acted out to demonstrate understanding. Once the readers finish the story, illustrations can support summarizing, such as drawings of the main characters, the setting, and the beginning, middle, and end of a story. Children who are interested in writing might rewrite the ending of the story or create a parallel story with a different character in a different setting dealing with a similar problem or situation. These activities help children connect to the story they've read or heard.

When struggling readers have a safe space to listen to reading and try reading aloud, they're likely to continue to practice reading. The practice provides opportunities to grow. On your next movie & popcorn family night, maybe build the fort and make it a book & popcorn night instead?

About The Author

Ginny Simank is a Level 4 IMSE OG Master Instructor living in Dallas, Texas. She has a master's degree (M.Ed.) with a Reading Specialist certificate and holds certifications in special education, English as a Second Language, and generalists for Early Childhood through 6th grade & ELA 4th-8th grades. She is an IDA-certified Structured Literacy Teacher and full-time instructor for the Institute for Multi-Sensory Education (IMSE), whose mission is to train others across the country (teachers, administrators, tutors, education professionals & parents) in the Orton Gillingham methodology of multi-sensory language instruction. Ms. Simank previously served on the national board of directors for the Learning Disabilities Association and was a member of the LDA's Education & Nominating Committees.



Sign up for our [LIVE virtual Orton-Gillingham training!](#) We are now offering half-day, evening, and weekend options to best fit your schedule.

The IMSE approach allows teachers to incorporate the five components essential to an effective reading program into their daily lessons: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

The approach is based on the Orton-Gillingham methodology and focuses on explicit, direct instruction that is sequential, structured, and multi-sensory.

It is IMSE's mission that all children must have the ability to read to fully realize their potential. We are committed to providing teachers with the knowledge and tools to prepare future minds.

Please connect with us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Pinterest](#) to get tips and tricks from your peers and us. Read the [IMSE Journal](#) to hear success stories from other schools and districts, and be sure to read the OG Weekly email series for refreshers and tips.