

Prevention of Reading Failure: Essential Components for Every Reading Curriculum

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In 2003, the National Assessment of Educational Process (NAEP) fourth grade reading scores showed the percentage of children operating “below basic” achievement level to be at 37%. It has also been shown that 60% of students find learning to read a formidable challenge.

Many of these statistically failing readers, however, are highly intelligent children with reading disabilities. Reading success or failure for these students is directly connected to teaching approaches, and especially to the amount of instructional time devoted to direct teaching. According to the research, children who possess reading disabilities develop into capable readers when taught with an explicit, systematic method.

Current research by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) demonstrates that the main underlying cause of reading disabilities lies in the area of language, specifically in phonological processing. Phonological processing is the act of segmenting syllables and words into corresponding sound units called phonemes. A student with phonological processing difficulties cannot recognize and use segments of sounds; any variation in the number, identity, or order of the segments cannot be noted and represented by the student. Students with this difficulty do not readily acquire the alphabetic code. This shows up in the students’ inability to link a letter name to the correct sound and to remember the sequence of letters in words. Many of these students also have an inability to rhyme, to link speaking to reading and spelling, and to decode words accurately and fluently.

This knowledge makes for an exciting time in education. We can now identify at-risk children in kindergarten and prevent reading failure with educational programming. By mid-year in kindergarten, we can administer tests of phonological awareness, letter naming, and rapid word naming. These tests can identify students who will need an

explicit, systematic method of teaching reading readiness skills and, subsequently, reading skills. At least 20–30 percent of children in kindergarten classrooms will fit the criteria requiring an explicit, systematic approach. These children will fail to acquire literacy if not taught the specific information they need to become readers beginning in kindergarten.

More than 30 years of bringing literacy to countless students with reading difficulties has taught me a great deal. From this, I’ve created ten essential components critical to forming a winning reading and language arts curriculum. Using these ten components on a consistent basis has allowed me to meet the learning needs of this valuable group of students.

The Ten Essential Components to Creating Highly Successful Readers

1. Early identification—learning “best habits” the first time around

Students with reading difficulties must be identified early. It is far easier for these students to learn reading concepts correctly the first time, than it is to erase incorrect concepts and then learn correct concepts. The longer a student fails, the more difficult it is to provide all the skills he or she needs. The emphasis needs to be on intervention and prevention of reading failure—not remediation.

2. Daily training in auditory and oral skills

Specific phonological awareness and phonemic training must take place daily and is best conducted with real words or concepts with which the student is currently working. It is also critical that activities in the general area of phonological awareness (rhyming; discriminating sounds that are different; identifying beginning, middle, and ending sounds; and blending sounds) and in the specific area of phonemic awareness (counting, identifying, deleting, and substituting sounds in words and syllables) be done at an auditory level and that the written word is not used.

3. Teaching kinesthetic speech sounds

Teaching the kinesthetic speech sounds should always be a part of daily instruction. Careful attention should be paid to how the student produces the speech sounds. Clear, correctly articulated sounds are essential to reading and writing success; therefore, it is critical that students be taught to pronounce words correctly.

4. Explicit instruction in decoding and encoding

An explicit, phonetic approach using multi-sensory teaching techniques is important for decoding (reading) and encoding (spelling) words. The students should be taught to hear, see, and write letter sounds, words, and syllables. Practice is important in each of these areas to build upon specific knowledge. For instance, practice in spelling words can help strengthen a student's ability to sound letters out, which—in turn—helps reading.

5. Teaching phonetic concepts in a given order

The order of phonetic-concept introduction is critical in an early intervention program. Kindergarten should begin with single-consonant sounds and short "a." After short vowels and vowel-consonant "e," vowel digraphs should be introduced, beginning with "ay." Young students with reading disabilities should not be taught multi-syllabic words until they can master reading one-syllable words of five phonemes. Also, the words used for decoding should be age-appropriate in meaning. To effectively teach phonetic concepts, it is important that real words be used at all times. This method will keep lessons relevant and memorable. Daily practice in single-word decoding should be provided.

6. Practicing with decodable text that is comprehensible

The goal of decoding is fluency and comprehension; therefore, decodable text (composed of words with phonetic concepts students have already been taught) is essential to provide the fluency practice students need. Few non-phonetic words should be used. Single-word reading in isolation is not sufficient practice with phonics. Many students can fluently decode words in isolation, but then misread the same word in actual text reading. It is also important to give plenty of time to practice with decodable text (fifteen minutes a day of reading orally is required).

Decodable text that is meaning driven allows students to practice word knowledge through actual reading.

It also allows for the teaching of comprehension skills since the student is able to concentrate on meaning because they can read the text. Reading text that is controlled for phonics, but not meaning driven, is not useful in achieving the goal of comprehension in reading.

7. Specific Handwriting Instruction

Specific handwriting training must be conducted to provide the correct visual and kinesthetic reinforcement of reading and spelling concepts. Daily practice in handwriting—be it individual letters or words—allows students to focus on what they are writing. This visual and kinesthetic practice becomes a valuable tool for strengthening concepts and aiding memory.

8. Focusing on spelling as a concept

Spelling should be concept based. Students should learn to link the speech sounds with the correct visual symbol. Spelling must be coordinated with the reading concepts and with plenty of opportunity for reinforcement through writing. Written composition should be taught along with spelling. Grammar concepts should be taught through written language.

9. Staying within the scope of learning

It is important that any independent and supplemental reading and written language materials match the instructional scope and sequence skills that have been taught.

A student should not be given text to read that contains decoding concepts that have not yet taught. A student should not be given spelling words that do not match phonic concepts that have not yet taught. All teachers working with the student must align their materials so that the student is able to read and understand the material with success. If this requirement cannot be accommodated, any materials required for instruction outside of the students instructional scope and sequence must be read to him/her.

I have witnessed as common practice a student receiving appropriate instruction from a specialist only to return to the classroom and be assigned the same reading as the other students in the class. This defeats the specialists' work and is discouraging to the student, because he/she is faced with unfamiliar material. This puts the student on a path to failure.

10. Allowing enough time

The student must be given adequate instructional time to accomplish all the components required. An instructor can follow all of the appropriate steps, but if ample time to comprehend or practice is not provided, the students will still falter. It is important to remember that explicit language learners need many reinforcements to automatically learn language concepts. It may take a child of average abilities one to four exposures to learn a concept. A student with a reading disability requires several times the amount of exposure to learn the same concept. Time on task is just as important as the task itself. Most general language arts programs allow about one to one-and-a-half hours for all the language arts requirements (reading, spelling, handwriting, and written expression). However, it has been my experience that—even when students with reading difficulties are receiving appropriate methodology—they are often shortchanged in the amount of instructional time.

In speaking to teachers from urban, rural, and suburban settings across the United States, I have learned that there is a nearly universal situation with regard to instructional plans developed for students with reading disabilities. These plans generally have an instructional time allotment of thirty minutes a day, three to five times a week. This is inadequate to meet the learning needs of any reader, let alone a student with reading disabilities. We must advocate for two factors—correct methodology and materials, and correct time on task. Only when both are present will these students actually reach their reading potential.

Students without reading disabilities who are progressing at grade level often receive more instructional time in total language arts requirements (reading, spelling, handwriting, and written expression). than students who are lagging behind and receiving support outside the classroom. We must advocate that students who require specialized instruction—as indicated by the guidelines and recommendations from the NICHD studies on reading disabilities—receive equal time in instruction as students without reading disabilities. The minimal daily instruction time should be one hour, five days a week. A more appropriate instructional time would be one-and-a-half to two hours of total language

arts time, matching the average allotted time for language arts in general education.

In general education, we teach reading over the span of several years. This same principle should apply to students in multi-sensory phonetic methodology. Listed below is a recommended lesson plan with time allotments. When this minimum plan is followed, students with reading disabilities are able to learn the skills they need to reach their greatest level of literacy.

The “Daily Lesson” table below lists exercises that follow the philosophy of creating highly successful readers. This plan was developed using a realistic timeframe; if this plan is begun before children fail and explicit and direct instruction is used, our rate of highly successful readers will increase.

DAILY LESSON	
1. Phonogram Drill (Visual)	5 minutes
2. Phonological Awareness	5 mins
3. Word-building Skills	5 mins
4. Single-word Decoding	10 mins
5. Pre-reading Phonological Awareness	2 mins
6. Silent and Oral Reading	15 mins
7. Sound Dictation	5 mins
8. Pre-spelling Phonological Awareness Activity	3 mins
9. Spelling/Sentence Dictation	10 mins
10. Independent Work	—
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60 mins	
Direct Instruction	

When students with reading disabilities are identified early—before they fail—and are provided with teaching approaches and materials that meet all of the above criteria, they experience reading success and positive self-esteem. If students are failing to learn to read, we must adjust our teaching to the way they learn. Early identification and early and continued intervention are the keys to preventing reading failure.

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