

Reading struggles? Don't wait to advocate for your child

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Reading is an important predictor of future academic performance in all subjects and through all levels of school. The World Literacy Organization notes that weak reading skills [predict lower income levels](#)

as an adult, increased health care costs, decreased productivity and increased involvement with the criminal justice system.

Approximately 42 percent of Canadians have literacy skills below those "typically required for high school completion," or what literacy researchers call level three literacy. At this level, someone's reading and comprehension skills are advanced enough to follow multi-step directions and interpret and evaluate texts.

Researchers estimate that three to five percent of Canadians have a learning disability that could negatively affect reading, and 80 percent of those with a learning disability have a reading disability.

Lack of access to quality reading instruction and early diagnoses and intervention of reading disorders can have significant, long-lasting effects, as Colleen Smereka, a Canadian invisible disability and literacy advocate, describes in the documentary *Searching for Words: A Woman's Fight to Learn.*

It is much more difficult to remediate reading difficulties in older students than in young ones, a fact that highlights the importance of early intervention.

Reading and mental health

In my practice as a school psychologist, I have seen evidence of the research finding that academic performance and mental health can have a two-way relationship. Students who do not develop strong reading skills are at greater risk for developing symptoms of anxiety, depression, behavior problems and thoughts of suicide.

Longitudinal research has provided evidence that there is not just a relationship between reading difficulty and depression in boys but that

[poor reading skills actually predict later symptoms of depression.](#)
Students who report [low levels of well-being also say that they are below-average readers.](#)

Even when poor reading does not lead to [mental health](#) diagnoses, it can [increase students' feelings of shame, failure and exclude them from access to knowledge through print.](#)

Most of us avoid tasks that we are not good at, especially if we cannot find support to improve. But [children](#) are regularly required to read for all academic areas, and to gain knowledge in other areas of life. We cannot expect children to read if we don't help them learn to read.

Reading instruction and early intervention

Twenty years ago, a group of U.S. researchers [tasked with reviewing over 100,000 studies on reading by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development](#) summarized decades of research about how to best teach children how to read.

Recent research [continues to support their findings](#) that the best results in [teaching children](#) to read are found through systemic, direct instruction and intervention [focusing on five areas](#):

1. **phonemic awareness** (knowing that words are made up of sounds: cat = /c/ /a/ /t/);
2. **decoding** (connecting letters with sounds to sound out words);
3. **fluency** (reading quickly, accurately and with expression);
4. **vocabulary** (knowing what lots of words mean);
5. and **comprehension** (understanding both simple direct information and less direct inferences of text).

Unfortunately, students do not always receive such systemic instruction. For example, the Ontario Human Rights Commission is currently investigating whether students who have reading difficulties [experience human rights violations as a result of schools not screening and providing early interventions](#).

In Canada, [no province has specific requirements for training or necessary competencies necessary for teachers to be prepared to teach reading](#), and many elementary school teachers report feeling inadequately prepared to teach reading and even less prepared to support children who struggle.

A 2019 survey by the International Literacy Association of 1,443 literacy experts (including teachers) from 65 countries showed that [60 percent don't think teacher training programs are "equipping educators with the skills they need for effective reading instruction."](#)

If your child is struggling with reading

[Here are some supports](#) you can provide:

- **Play with words:** Teaching children to rhyme and to pull apart the sounds of words and add new sounds develops phonemic awareness, which is foundational to developing decoding skills.
- **Read to your children and with your children:** This helps children associate reading with positive feelings of spending time with caring adults.
- **Spend time reading yourself:** Set an example that reading is valuable and enjoyable.
- **Talk with your children:** Talking with your children about the world around them, science and literature helps them to develop strong vocabulary skills.
- **Play word games with your children:** There are free [online](#)

[word games](#) that can support reading development, but it is much better to engage in these with your children rather than have your children use them alone.

If your child still struggles

Sometimes children [struggle to learn to read even when they have good supports in place](#). For example, children in dual language programs or children whose schooling is not in their first language often have a normal delay in reading.

If your child appears to struggle to progress through their age-appropriate school curriculum, first [consider if you notice common areas that suggest reading difficulty](#):

- **Early language difficulty:** A large number of children with language delays also have difficulty learning to read.
- **Difficulty with phonological awareness:** Difficulty with rhyming, hearing the syllables in words, pulling apart the sounds in letters and putting sounds together to make a word suggest that your child may have difficulty learning to read.
- **Difficulty with decoding:** If your children have difficulty sounding out words or learning the connection between letters and their sounds in grade one, then they may be at risk for learning to read.

If you think your child has difficulty with several of these areas, discuss your concerns with your child's teacher. If you have continued concerns, consider:

- **Assessment:** You can seek out an assessment through your school board or a private provider. Many university training clinics and some non-profit organizations offer lower-cost

assessments.

- **Intervention:** Look for reading interventions provided by your school or seek out private tutoring.
- **Advocate:** Do not wait until your child is failing and falling behind to advocate for intervention and/or assessment. Early intervention has very high success rates for supporting reading development, but it is much more difficult to improve reading skills in older students.

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