

Concerned about your early reader? Why 'wait and see' isn't advised for reading struggles

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Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

At Western University's [Mary J. Wright Child and Youth Development Clinic](#), I work on a team training future school psychologists. In our

work, we encounter parents concerned about their children's learning on an almost daily basis.

When I started my training almost 15 years ago, I was less confident about how to respond to these concerns. Might caregivers be over-worried and under-informed?

However, my own research and ongoing experience have taught me that caregiver concerns about reading most often point to meaningful learning needs.

For example, in a [study conducted by myself and my colleagues](#), we found that when community parents were concerned about their Grade 2 children's reading, almost half of their children performed substantially below age expectations on a standardized word reading test. An additional number of children showed language problems.

This lines up with my clinical experience, where the majority of parents who seek assessment for suspected learning problems end up with a diagnosis such as a [learning disability](#), [language disorder](#), [ADHD](#) or [intellectual disability](#).

If you have concerns about your child's reading, or want to support your child who is learning to read, here are some suggestions.

Screening tools

While parent concerns should be investigated, this does not necessarily mean that parents have specific and in-depth knowledge of developmental norms for children.

When it comes to reading, even teachers have [difficulty accurately identifying the skill level of low-performing readers](#). Teachers as well as

parents may [miss reading problems or misunderstand](#) what they are seeing.

That's where [rigorous reading screening tools](#) —tests educators or a school psychologist can use to gauge a student's reading level— come in. For screening tools to be effective, they need to be carefully tested to show that they accurately identify struggling readers, with minimal time and effort.

School psychologists are also able to accurately test children's reading skills relative to peers.

How comfortable is grade-level text?

Even without formal testing, it is possible to get some idea of children's reading development by considering their reading accuracy for grade-level text. It is generally accepted that children should be reading grade-level text with [approximately 95% accuracy](#) (by the end of Grade 1).

So, have a child read 50 words of a grade-level book. If they are making two to four mistakes, grade-level text may be challenging. Five or more mistakes is a more likely sign of significant difficulty. (You may want to check out [Reading is Fundamental](#) for free, grade-level printable passages. I suggest choosing "medium" difficulty.)

Helping struggling readers

For severely struggling readers who have difficulty recognizing and sounding out words, [intensive, individualized reading programs](#) with a phonics component are well-established ways to improve reading skills. Phonics means explicitly teaching children [the relationships between written letters and their sounds](#).

Phonics instruction need not be boring, nor dominate instructional time. When teaching phonics skills or common words, games can be an effective strategy. [Research hints that kids may be engaged by personalized games](#) (for example, with a child named Ali, "Ali's sight word hunt"), choices, and games that have an interesting context (for example, "Olympic reading challenge!" versus generic reading exercises).

Phonics teaching needs to be coupled with real reading practice, and teaching children strategies to read text at the appropriate level. Isolated drills, worksheets or computer games will not do the job.

Be wary of generic tutoring for severely struggling readers or non-reading therapies such as [vision therapy](#) or [auditory therapy](#) that may not have rigorous scientific support.

Reading with children at home

For parents who want to read with kids at home, it is important to skip the stress. Struggling readers can [start to feel bad](#) about their reading abilities from the earliest grades. In my experience, the reading process can be stressful when children are struggling.

Try easier, more comfortable reading material. This is actually [more effective at improving kids' reading skills and understanding](#) than having them struggle through more challenging text. Also don't be afraid to reread your favorite books! [Repeated reading](#) (reading the same text over and over again) has some evidence as a strategy for improving reading skills.

When children are struggling to read a certain word, hint at how to sound out the word, by saying something like, "Try covering up the last part" or "The first sound is 'sh.'" If the word is difficult to sound out, don't be

afraid to just say it aloud. Remember, children in late Grade 1 and up should be making very few mistakes per page on a text at their level.

Helping with reading comprehension

Helping children to not only read words accurately, but also understand what they read, is very important. Building this understanding, known as [reading comprehension](#), involves more than asking questions *after* reading. In fact, it may be more helpful to build kids' [background knowledge](#) *before* reading, for example [via hands-on activities or discussing what they already know](#) about a topic.

So, consider connecting book reading with other daily activities, such as nature walks, cooking or discussing relationships. Talking about [how texts are structured](#) may also help kids better understand what they read. For example, when reading a non-fiction book, discuss how it gives information and peek at the table of contents. When reading a story, review the [key elements of characters, setting, problem and solution](#).

Multilingual early readers

Parents of children whose first language is not English [may be more likely to be concerned about their children's reading than parents of English-speaking children](#). However, [most multilingual kids are able to read aloud as accurately as English-only speakers](#) from fairly early in their education.

So, if parents and teachers of multilingual kids notice them having difficulty identifying and sounding out words, this needs to be promptly addressed. Children who are having language [difficulties in their first language should also be evaluated for learning challenges](#).

Learning difficulties often co-occur

Caregivers, teachers and other professionals should also keep in mind that learning difficulties [often co-occur with other issues](#). If children are also struggling in areas such as paying attention, completing daily tasks, following rules, getting along with others or coping with their feelings, speak to a doctor who listens and will carefully explore your concerns.

Free, high-quality screening tools such as the [Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire](#) or [Pediatric Symptom Checklist](#) can help health-care professionals quickly identify potential behavioral or mental health issues.

Don't wait, investigate

Encouraging [parents](#) with concerns about their [children](#)'s reading to "wait and see" flies in the face of evidence that reading difficulties present by the end of first grade [are highly consistent and persistent](#).

It also [contradicts research](#) showing that early intervention (as early as kindergarten and Grade 1) is more effective in preventing and treating reading difficulties than later intervention.

So, if you are concerned about a child's reading, trust your gut and find a professional who will take your concerns seriously. Research and [clinical experience](#) are behind you.

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