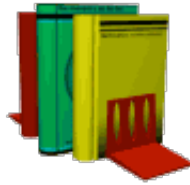




NEWFOUNDLAND AND
LABRADOR TEACHERS'
ASSOCIATION

**GUIDE TO READING AND
LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES**



The **LITERACY FOR LIFE** Guide to Reading and Language Difficulties was prepared by the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association under the direction and guidance of the 1994 / 95 and 1995 / 96 Communications Committees, committees comprised of teachers with experience at a variety of grade levels.



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ABOUT YOUR "GUIDE TO READING AND LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES"

Reading is an extremely important part of children's development process and one that affects not just how they do in school, but many other aspects of their lives as well.

The actual pace at which children learn to read arrives widely. Even if your child seems uninterested in reading or can't recognize words that are known by a friend who's the same age, it doesn't necessarily mean he or she has a disability. However, if your child does have a learning disability that affects his or her ability to read, it's extremely important to catch the problem early.

This **Guide to Reading and Language Difficulties** is the second booklet in the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association LITERACY FOR LIFE publication series. It has been produced to help you decide if your child **may** have a learning disability that affects reading and to provide some suggestions in the forms of TIPS and IDEAS on what you should do if you're concerned. It gives you **basic** information only, about the most typical characteristics of children with reading difficulties, and **is not** meant to provide all the information necessary for a complete diagnosis - special testing by trained professionals is necessary for this.

Something very important to keep in mind when reading these pages some of these characteristics are normal for some **Many children have one or more of the characteristics mentioned in this booklet - that's perfectly normal and doesn't mean they have a learning disabilities. However, a child who has many of the characteristics MAY have a learning disability and further investigation is strongly advised.**

1 READING SKILLS

Learning to read means learning to comprehend written material. It means learning to read stories and being able to re-tell stories which have been read. It means learning to read informational material and being able to recall important content.

Successful reading means successful comprehension and understanding of what has been read.

Children who are learning to read must successfully learn and use a number of different abilities.

1. Children must learn to recognize and understand the meaning of words by using the context the words are found in.

A child who is reading and meets an unknown word must be able to use the words which precede it and the words which follow it to help identify the unknown word. For example: A child who is reading the sentence, "The woman rode a horse into the castle," may have difficulty reading the word **horse**. Such children need to learn to read past the unknown word, return to the beginning of the sentence, re-read the sentence, and think of a word that would fit the meaning of the sentence. Children with reading and language difficulties often do not use these "context clues" to identify unknown words; they may often make meaningless substitutions for unknown words, reading for example, "the woman rode a **house** into the castle."

Children with reading difficulties often do not self-correct these kinds of substitutions. This leads to difficulties with comprehending stories or informational material they are reading.

This stage in the reading process involves using context clues to identify unknown words. This is a comprehension skill.

2. Children must be able to accurately "see" letters and words.

This may seem like an overly simple statement, but the point is that a small number of children actually cannot see the words that are printed on the page; for some children "b" becomes "d"; "dog" becomes "god", etc.

While most children have difficulty seeing the difference between similar letters or words up to age six, children who have pronounced difficulties with this after age six may have a visual perception problem.

3. Children must know the particular sound that goes with each letter. This is particularly true of the letters called consonants: b, c, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, q, r, s, t, v, w, x, y, z, and for consonant combinations such as th, sh, ph, and so on.

The ability to read will obviously be affected if children can't recognize the letters that make up a word or don't see a word as it is actually presented. Research has also shown, however, that reading will also be affected if the children do not know how the word they see on a page may sound. Children need to recognize words both by predicting from context clues (as noted previously) and by knowing how the word they see on the page may sound.

This stage in the reading process involves a combination of a comprehension skill, a visual skill and auditory perceptual skill.

4. As children recognize words "by context, by sight, and by sound", they must be able to understand what they are reading. This is called "comprehension". When children read a story, they need to be able to tell who was in the story, what happened, where the story occurred, what the problem was in the story and how the problem was or was not solved. When children read informational material, they need to be able to separate important ideas from less important details.

This stage in the reading process also involves the skill of comprehension.

Problems with reading can happen at any or all of these stages and how the problem will be handled will depend on the nature of the difficulty.

But how exactly do you know if your child has a reading/language difficulty?

The next section of this [Guide to Reading and Language Difficulties](#) gives you information on the general characteristics of children with learning difficulties as well as specific characteristics of children with disabilities in the "comprehending", "seeing", or "hearing", areas.

We repeat, however, that many children have one or more of the characteristics mentioned in this next section -- that's perfectly normal and doesn't mean they have learning disabilities. However, if your child has many of the characteristics, he or she **MAY** have a learning disability and we strongly advise further investigation.

2 WARNING SIGNS

Things to Look for if You Suspect There's a Problem

- ▶ Your child has difficulty following two- or three-step directions on how to complete an activity. This is a comprehension problem.
- ▶ Your child can't give you meanings for words when presented to them in a sentence, or read to them from a familiar book. This is a comprehension problem.
- ▶ Your child can't re-tell a story you read to them, or tell them. This is a comprehension problem.
- ▶ Your child can't see words properly, not necessarily because he or she needs glasses, but because he or

she actually sees the words or the letters differently than they appear. This is a visual perception problem.

▶ Your child doesn't hear words properly, not necessarily because he or she can't hear normally, but because there is a problem distinguishing between similar sounds, etc. This is an auditory perception problem.

▶ Your child can sing the alphabet song, but cannot recall forms and sequence while printing. This is a memory problem.

SOME GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Children with learning disabilities often:

- have very poor printing and/or writing skills;
- have difficulty using scissors, coloring and printing inside lines;
- have difficulty tying laces, buttoning clothes or holding pencils;
- have difficulty understanding the difference between "up" and "down", "top" and "bottom", "in" and "out", "in front of" and "behind", etc;
- have difficulty telling the difference between letters, sounds and numbers;
- may have good verbal ability, but have problems with reading or with putting their own thoughts on paper;
- have difficulty understanding what is read;
- have difficulty playing with more than one child at a time;
- have difficulty catching a ball;
- have difficulty expressing ideas and relating events in a sequence;
- become easily frustrated or upset when routine is changed;
- seem unable to judge consequences of actions;
- have difficulty remembering names of things (like the seasons, the months, streets, etc.);
- have a confused sense of time and/or distance;
- are either much more active or much less active than most other children;
- have a short attention span;
- get very uneven results in areas of testing -- they perform either unusually well or unusually poor in certain areas;
- may have delayed speech development, saying only single words by age two, or producing only short sentences by age three.

Characteristics of Children Who Comprehend Poorly

Children who suffer from comprehension problems may not read for meaning. When they look at a word, they may over-use clues to the word provided by the letters, combinations of letters, and syllables. They may not attend to the meaning of what they are reading. Such children often make up nonsense words as they are reading, or substitute words that do not make sense in the story or the informational material they are reading.

Sound confusing? It is, especially to the child who has this type of disability.

But how can you tell if your child has this problem?

▶ Read to them, at certain points stop and ask them to fill in the next word that would make sense in the sentence or the paragraph. Do not expect them to read the word; expect them to provide a meaningful response.

▶ Listen to your child as he or she reads from material in which he or she already knows 80 percent of the words. Note the substitutions he or she makes for words in the story or informational material. Do these

substitutions change the meaning of what your child is reading? Are these substitutions real words? Are these substitutions approximations of the words in the story or text that are similar to the pattern of letters in the words?

► Listen to your child as he or she reads. When they make substitutions for the words in the text, do they notice that their reading has lost meaning and go back to attempt to make self-corrections? Are their self-corrections based on producing a word that looks and sounds more like the word, or are they based on trying to make meaning from the word?

Characteristics of Children Who See Differently

Children who suffer from **visual perception problems** may look very carefully at the words on a page, but mix up what they see. That's because they have problems trying to "process" things they see and, as a result, actually see differently from other children. So even if you think certain information has been placed clearly before them, it really hasn't been, because they're not seeing what you think they're seeing and what you know is there.

Sound confusing? It is, especially to the child who has this type of disability!

But how can you tell if your child has a problem seeing the letters and words on a page? Children who see differently because they have a visual perception problems typically display many of the following characteristics:

- They reverse their letters when reading or writing.
- They are slow readers.
- They sound out words they should know by sight.
- If they substitute a word when they're reading, it usually looks similar but has a completely different meaning. For example, they read, "The car was running up a tree" instead of "The cat was running up a tree."
- When reading, they may lose their place on the page, skip words or even lines or re-read words or lines.
- They have superior ability to remember what they hear, but can't remember what they've seen. (If you read a story aloud, they'll remember it; if you ask them to read it silently, they can't.)
- They sometimes begin to learn to read and write at the same time as other children and may even progress at the same rate until Grade 2 or 3, but then they may start falling behind. (See note.)
- They may squint, open their eyes wide, rub their eyes, or have red watery eyes when reading. (Sometimes their attention span seems short simply because their eyes are hurting.)
- They may see small portions of a word in focus, while the rest of the word or the page is in a blur.
- They may have difficulty copying material from blackboards, textbooks, etc. When reading, they may move a book around quite a bit to help get the page in focus or cut down on the glare. Sometimes they'll shade the book with their arms.
- They may get motion sick when reading because of the movement they see on the page.
- They get headaches after reading for awhile.

In addition to these "reading" signs, there are also some other signs that can point to difficulties in visual perception. At home, you may notice your child writes downhill, has unequal spacing between letters and words, or can't write on the line. At school, your child's teacher may notice the same things as well as others, like he or she makes errors, or squints

NOTE:

A child who has been progressing normally and then starts falling behind in reading may have some other problem that needs to be dealt with immediately. There may be changes at home, e.g. separation, divorce, death, etc., or

and rubs his or her eyes while copying things from the chalkboard. Depth perception is also affected, and people with visual perception problems may seem clumsy, drop things more than usual, have difficulty getting on and off escalators, or constantly walk into door jams or table edges.

there may even be a clash between the child and a teacher, or there may be some physical cause for the problem. It definitely is not the normal course of events to start going backwards - so action should be taken without delay.

SOMETHING TO TRY!

Ask your child what he or she sees on the page - are the lines straight or wiggly, is the page clear or blurry, and does looking at it hurt his or her eyes? If you get answers that seem strange, believe them, because it isn't at all strange for children with visual perception problems to say things like:

"The words jump off the page at me."

"The letters start moving, look like ants and walk off the page."

"The page turns white."

"The lines look like ocean waves and I get sick to my stomach."

IDEA

Teachers use a number of techniques to help children in their classrooms who see differently from others. Many of the techniques don't fit the home environment, but some do. For instance, you can encourage your child to use their fingers, a ruler or bookmark to follow words when reading (this will help keep them from losing their place). You can tape record yourself reading a story and then have your child read along with the tape.

Remember, children with visual perception problems are much better at remembering what they hear than what they see. Keeping this in mind is an important part of helping both of you handle the disability on a day-to-day basis.

Characteristics of Children Who Hear Differently

Children who suffer from **auditory perception problems** may listen carefully, but hear inaccurately. Some can't tell the difference between the sounds they hear, or between different sounds heard at the same time; and some hear words in a sequence that are actually different from real ones. They'll have problems doing what you want them to do, or understanding what you say, simply because what you're saying doesn't make sense to them. In any case, these children are often accused of daydreaming, not listening, or being easily distracted.

Children who hear differently because they have an auditory perception problem typically display many of the following characteristics:

- They never seem to listen.
- They never seem to remember what you tell them.
- They have limited speaking or listening skills.

- They have a poor sense of rhythm.
- They can't tell the difference between similar sounds or distinguish between vowel or consonant sounds.
- They mispronounce words.
- They have difficulty sounding out words (learning phonics).
- They usually write very slowly, or may whisper while writing.
- They usually whisper when reading silently.
- They can't remember basic spelling words.
- They have superior ability to remember what they see, but not what they hear.

IDEA

Teachers use a number of techniques to help children in their classrooms who hear differently. Many of these techniques don't fit the home environment, but we've included the ones that do.

First you can try to eliminate extra noise; it may not distract you but it will distract a child with an auditory perception problem.

Second, make sure you speak slowly and clearly and, when possible, use visual clues to go with your words.

Third, check with your child to see if he or she understands what you're saying.

SOMETHING TO TRY...

When your child substitutes one word for another word in the text and changes the meaning of the sentence.

Repeat aloud to your child the entire sentence as he or she read it, including the meaning change substitution.

Note the substitution.

Ask your child if the word makes sense in the sentence

Ask your child to provide a word that would make sense.

Read the story or text aloud to your child in a section by section, or paragraph by paragraph, or page by page manner as your child follows along in the print using their finger or a ruler. Following the reading of each section, have your child read the same section aloud.

Read the story or text aloud with your child. This is called echo-reading. Keep your voice slightly ahead of your child's.

3 CHILDREN WHO DON'T UNDERSTAND

Sometimes, children who don't understand what they read are simply spending so much of their energy on "decoding" the words they don't have the time to "comprehend" them. These same children often have very good comprehension if someone reads to them, because when someone else is doing the reading, they do have the time to spend on figuring out meanings.

The best way to find out whether or not your child might have this sort of problem is to ask him or her about things he or she is reading. If the child can't describe the story to you or answer your "comprehension" questions, there may be a problem and you should seek professional advice.

You should be aware, however, that there are also disabilities that actually involve an inability to make those connections between word and meaning. Professional testing will be necessary so that you and your child's teacher can learn exactly what the problem is.

TIP!

If a child has not learned to read and to love reading by the middle of their grade one year, then parents should seek help at that time. don't wait. the sooner the better. Many children are often saved from years of frustrating experience with books if they receive proper assessment and are put in the right direction when the problem arises. Research confirms the fact that prevention and early intervention are the key to successful reading.

4 WHAT TO DO IF YOU THINK THERE'S A PROBLEM

As already noted a number of times, children often display a few of the characteristics described in this booklet without having a learning disability. However, if your child exhibits **many** of the characteristics described in either of the sections, it is important to seek further investigation. Here are some steps you can take to ensure your child gets the help he or she may need.

Step 1: Talk to your child's teacher

One of the first things to do if your child is school-aged is to talk to his or her teacher. You need to compare notes to determine whether or not you are noticing similar problems. Remember, though, teachers and parents sometimes describe the same problem differently, simply because one of you sees the child in the classroom while the other sees the child at home. You'll want to make sure, early on, that you clearly understand one another.

Step 2: Talk to your child

Another important thing to do is to talk to your child. He or she may tell you simply that things sound strange or as straight forward as: "My problem is remembering what I read." or "I miss words sometimes." But you need to take the time to sit and **really listen** so you can hear what they're telling you, and you should not be critical of what they say.

Step 3: Rule out physical problems

If you, your child, and/or your child's teacher think there may be a problem, it's time to arrange for professional assessment and extra help. The first things that should be ruled out are physical problems with vision or hearing.

Step 4: Arrange for educational, psychological and/or other special testing

If physical problems have been ruled out, it's time for educational and psychological testing. Educational tests rate your child's academic achievement relative to other children around the same age. Psychological tests measure your child's capacities or potential in a number of areas - thinking, memory, self-esteem, etc.

Some conditions that cause reading difficulties (like Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome) aren't detected during standard tests; however, there are a number of qualified screeners in the province's educational system who can do the necessary testing and prescribe treatments.

Remember, the purpose of testing is to:

1. Identify the presence or absence of a disability
2. Provide a clear description of your child's strengths and weaknesses so effective remedial strategies can be developed.

TIP!

Start keeping a file about your child as soon as you first suspect a problem. This can be in any format you find convenient (three-ring binder, series of file folders, etc.) but should include certain information:

- birth and developmental information;
- medical information, including family history;
- other pertinent family information (child's position in family, any changes or crises and any learning problems experienced by other members);
- information on schools and outside agencies you deal with;
- expenses and copies of correspondence;
- records of conversations, meetings, telephone calls (include date, person spoken to, result of conversation, etc.);
- names, addresses and phone numbers of the people who are involved with your child;
- anecdotal information that might help everyone involved, understand your child's strengths and weaknesses.

Remember: you should be given written reports of all assessments, as well as copies of test scores. Ask for these reports, and ask as many questions as you need to, because you'll need to understand the problem fully if you're going to be able to solve it.

5 AFTER A PROBLEM'S BEEN CONFIRMED

Once a problem has been identified, a team effort will be particularly important in helping you and your child cope. The bottom line is that you, your child's teacher, and all the other professionals in the education system, really want what's best for your child and together you will make up the TEAM that helps your child deal with the problem. In fact, a team approach is vital, because the mix of skills and knowledge each individual will bring to the effort is vital.

Some difficulties will require only the implementation of alternative teaching strategies designed

specifically to help children with disabilities learn more effectively. Your child's teacher will be familiar with these, or will have access to written information and/or other professionals who can help. You'll need to understand the various techniques being tried at school and know what you should do at home to help.

Other difficulties will require the development of an educational program designed specifically for your child (usually called the **Individual Program Plan** or IPP). This is a written plan that details curriculum, special accommodations (such as allowing your child to use a spell-checker, tape-recorder, calculator or computer), and other important information. There are a number of people involved with the development of the plan, including parents, classroom teachers, specialist teachers, principals, and other professionals as required.

You'll also have a role in the implementation of the plan. For instance, you may need to read to your child every night, or to respond to teacher's comments in a home-school diary. You and your child's teacher may agree that you will always respond to particular behaviors in particular ways. In fact, there are all sorts of possible involvements, from hiring tutors to simply providing a quiet and comfortable area where your child can do his or homework.

TIP!

After a problem has been identified, ask the question:
"What does my child need in order to learn?"

Also, make sure you understand your child's strengths, as well as his or her weaknesses. These strengths will form the basis for redemption and are needed to make the child feel good about himself or herself.

In all cases, ongoing evaluation and monitoring is an important part of your child's treatment, since they'll show if the teaching techniques or program plan needs to be changed.

Other Organizations That Can Help

In addition to all the individuals in the education system who can help children with learning disabilities, there are also many organizations in the community. These fall into a number of categories, including: hospitals and medical clinics; home services; counselling services; recreational and social organizations; community service organizations; advocacy groups; support and self-help groups and child protection services.

Groups that may be particularly helpful are the Learning Disabilities Association of Newfoundland and Labrador (whose mandate is to help children and adults with learning disabilities) as well as your child's school. The Department of Education should be able to provide you with information on some of the others.

6 JUST ONE MORE THING (AND IN CASE YOU'VE EVER WONDERED...) THERE ARE DIFFERENT TYPES OF LEARNERS

How Does Your Child Learn?

People who don't have learning disabilities can still have different learning styles, something that's interesting to know and can help you understand why children respond better to some things you do than others. The following characteristics will help give you an idea of how your child learns; They might also tell you a thing or two about your own learning style.

There are three main types of learner - the visual learner, the auditory learner and the kinesthetic (tactile) learner - which is not to say we can only learn in one of these ways; just that we tend to be stronger in one or two than the other(s). You can decide which type of learner your child is by deciding which of the following descriptions best applies to him or her.

Visual Learners basically like to see things. They follow instructions best after having been **shown** what to do rather than having been told what to do. They learn best from bulletin boards, posters, slides, flashcards, etc. They're "show me, don't tell me" people, who:

- learn by seeing; they watch to see what others do;
- like demonstrations;
- recognize words by sight;
- like descriptions, have lively imaginations and draw very detailed pictures;
- remember faces more often than names;
- take notes;
- have good handwriting;
- tend to be very deliberate - plan in advance, organize, and think through problems;
- are neat, meticulous;
- see details and components and may actually miss seeing a word or work as a whole;
- notice changes quickly;
- notice colour;
- prefer art to music.

Auditory Learners like to hear things. They follow oral instructions easily and verbalize well. They learn best from radio, records, TV, speeches, lectures, panels, oral questions and answers, etc. They're "tell me, don't show me" people, who:

- love noise, make lots of noise (to the point of getting into trouble for being noisy);
- enjoy talking and listening;
- move lips, whisper or even read aloud to themselves when asked to read silently;
- tend to use phonics;
- remember names more than faces;
- have well developed vocabulary for their age;
- are easily distracted by sound;
- talk problems out, try out solutions verbally;
- express emotions verbally (laugh or cry out);
- sometimes make poor clothing choices - have no sense of what goes together;
- prefer music to art.

Kinesthetic (tactile) Learners are hands-on people. They have good motor skills and learn best by actually doing. In fact, they usually just want to dig right in! They're "just let me do it" people, who:

- don't enjoy reading or being read to;
- are poor spellers;
- have poor handwriting;
- don't pay attention to auditory or visual presentation;
- fidget, tinker, touch, feel, put things in their mouths;
- are very physical when emotional;
- read laboriously;
- neither look nor listen;
- often seem absorbed by some inner life or thought and therefore oblivious to surroundings.

Hearing your child has a learning disability is very disturbing and it's natural to be upset or to worry. But while learning disabilities can't actually be "cured", children with these conditions can still lead very successful and fulfilling lives. (Think about the contributions made by Winston Churchill, Agatha Christie, Hans Christian Anderson, Leonardo de Vinci, Thomas Edison and Albert Einstein, all of whom had learning disabilities!)

As already pointed out, the earlier a problem is caught, the better, but it's never too late to seek help. And if you do learn your child has a disability, remember you don't have to cope alone - you, your child's classroom teacher, and numerous other educational professionals and community agencies, all work in your child's best interests.

Focus on your child as a whole (not just the disability).

Remember that poor self-image is often an "invisible disability" that comes hand in hand with a visible learning disability.

And offer all the encouragement, support and love that you can, so your child can have a wonderful and satisfying life.

A WHO'S WHO GLOSSARY

Here's information about people employed by some School Boards, many of whom may be involved in helping if your child has a disability.

Special Education Teacher: Provides support and instruction to students with special needs either in the classroom or in other environments.

Challenging Needs Teacher: A Special Education teacher who works with a child or a group of children with severe physical disabilities or moderate/severe handicaps.

Educational Therapist: Helps develop strategies for students with behavioral or emotional difficulties.

Student Assistant: Assists the teacher by providing personal care, carrying, lifting, behavior management, and access to educational activities for students with difficulties.

Itinerant Teacher: Visits schools in the district when needed to facilitate services for students with visual or hearing impairments.

Guidance Counselor: Helps students develop positive self-images, good relationships with their peers, problem-solving skills, and an understanding of educational and career opportunities available to them.

Speech-Language Pathologist: Provides programs for students with speech and communication disorders.

School Psychologist: Promotes mental health and helps ensure children have successful learning experiences.

Language Arts Coordinator: Promotes Language Arts curriculum by working with teachers and students, including assisting in the development of individualized reading programs.