



background

Early Reading Futures At Stake

Why Children Struggle

Risks at home and school trip young readers

Children who struggle to read have long been presented as damning evidence in the indictment of particular teaching methods, schools, and even entire education systems.

To be sure, poor instruction is a leading reason why many children stumble when learning to read. Teachers, curriculum, and the characteristics of schools also play important roles in the success and failure of students when it comes to learning to read.

But many factors contribute to reading difficulties, both inside and outside of school. The home environments in which children are raised, their socioeconomic status, characteristics of their neighborhoods, health, and biological limitations may also influence whether they will have difficulty learning to read.

For educators and researchers, understanding why children have difficulty reading is an essential first step to finding ways to ease their struggle.

Child-Based Factors

Some reading and more general learning problems are thought to result from cognitive or sensory limitations. These conditions include:

- **Cognitive deficiencies.** Children with severe cognitive deficiencies usually fail to learn to read well, if at all.
- **Hearing impairment.** Hearing impairment or deafness is associated with reading difficulty. Chronic ear infections can lead to intermittent hearing loss and the effect of this common problem on language

development and reading is a concern.

- **Early language impairment.** Although the rate at which children acquire language varies widely during the first four years of life, some lag very far behind. In many cases, delayed language development indicates a broader condition, such as hearing impairment or a general developmental disability. Others are simply not exposed to an adequately responsive language environment. As many as 75% of preschoolers with early language impairment develop reading difficulties later.¹
- **Attention deficits.** Although evidence suggests that attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and reading disability are distinct disorders, they often occur together

related reports

Poor reader, dim future

In our technological society, children must be more than merely literate. See Report 21.

Preventing reading difficulties

Comprehensive preschool reading programs and other approaches show promise. See Report 23.

and do so more frequently as a child matures. Among first graders with attention problems, 31% also have a reading disability; among ninth graders, 50% also have a reading disability.²

Poor Instruction

A large number of children who, given proper instruction, should be capable of reading adequately are not doing so. This suggests the reading instruction they are receiving is inadequate.

If poor instruction is confined to an individual teacher, a child's progress may be slowed for the year spent in that classroom, but will likely recover if exposed to more skilled teachers and better instruction in the following years. There appears to be one exception,

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however. Children who receive poor instruction in first grade are more seriously harmed by that experience and tend to do poorly throughout their school years.³

In some schools, low achievement is school-wide and persistent. Although poor instruction can sometimes be traced to the lack of an appropriate curriculum, it is more often the result of several co-existing conditions.

These conditions may include low expectations for success on the part of teachers and administration; slow-paced, undemanding curricula; teachers poorly trained in effective methods for teaching beginning readers; a poor supply of books; and noisy, overcrowded classrooms.

Unfortunately, instructional factors are rarely given serious consideration when a child is referred for evaluation for a suspected reading difficulty.

School Factors

Schools determine the effectiveness of directly teaching reading as well as the opportunities for children to learn and polish skills and attitudes important to reading.

Studies shed light on school-wide and classroom characteristics that contribute to poor student outcomes. In less effective schools, students spend less time on specific learning tasks, and teachers are less likely to present new material, express high academic expectations, or use positive reinforcement. Classrooms are seen to be less friendly than those of effective schools, and there are more classroom interruptions and more reported discipline problems.

Family-Based Factors

Parents and home environment also influence a child's reading development.

Children whose parents and siblings have reading difficulties are more likely to have trouble reading themselves. Young children less frequently exposed to books and given fewer opportunities to acquire reading-related knowledge and skills are more likely to have trouble reading than those who find a rich literacy environment at home.

Five broad areas of family functioning that may influence reading development include:

- **Value placed on literacy.** By reading themselves and encouraging reading, parents demonstrate they value literacy.
- **Press for achievement.** By expressing age-appropriate expectations, providing reading instruction, and responding to a child's reading interest, parents help a child aspire to achieve.
- **Availability and use of reading materials.** Literacy experiences are more likely to occur in homes that contain children's books and other reading and writing materials.
- **Reading with children.** Reading to and with preschoolers contributes to their development as readers.

- **Opportunities for verbal interaction.** Fewer opportunities for verbal interaction at home are related to lower child vocabulary scores, which, in turn, is related to poorer reading outcomes.

Evidence suggests that home literacy environment plays different roles at different ages. During preschool years, it may contribute primarily to a child's attitudes toward reading, knowledge of the purpose and mechanics of reading, and skills that aid learning later in school.

Socioeconomic Status

Low socioeconomic status carries with it conditions that may limit the development of children, including reading difficulties, being raised in less educated families, receiving less adequate health care, and attending substandard schools.

Although socioeconomic status is a factor related to school achievement, it is more telling of the status of a school or community than of the abilities of children. Low-income children are much less at risk for poor achievement if they attend moderate or upper-status schools, rather than schools where most, if not all, students are low-income.

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references

This report was based on the following publications:

National Research Council (1998). *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, C.E. Snow, M.S. Burns, & P. Griffin, eds. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

References noted in the text follow:

¹ Aram, D.M., & Hall, N.E. (1989). Longitudinal follow-up of children with preschool communication disorders: Treatment implications. *School of Psychology Review* **18**, 487-501.

² Bishop, D.V.M., Adams, C. (1990). A prospective study of the relationship between specific language impairment, phonological disorders and reading retardation. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* **31**, 1027-1050.

³ Pianta, R.C. (1990). Widening the debate on educational reform: Prevention as a viable alternative. *Exceptional Children* **56**, 306-313.

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