

Improve your child's reading in 10 minutes a day



All parents want their children to realise their potential at school. A weakness in one area, such as handwriting, reading or numeracy, can lock bright children out of other areas of the curriculum. When a child falls behind it can undermine confidence and self-belief.

As parents we want to help but feel overwhelmed or underqualified. We don't know whether our input is effective, and it's easy to lose heart (and patience). It's also hard to find time.

The Irish Times has consulted experts in the primary learning and support, and identified key areas that cause problems for primary-school children. The result is a 10-minute-a-day plan that helps parents support the work of teachers and helps children progress in stubborn areas.

In the coming weeks we will hear from a range of learning experts in literacy and numeracy.

This week we look at reading fluency: the ability to decode letters and words with enough confidence to understand and enjoy reading.

Many children struggle with reading, and a supportive parent can make a big difference. The 10-minute-a-day routine is simple, requires no training or expensive equipment and gives parents a chance to enjoy quiet interaction with their children that will stand to them in all aspects of learning.

Here's the first part of our expert advice. **LOUISE HOLDEN**

Little and often

A fluent reader reads smoothly and with expression. Limited fluency, or "dysfluent reading", demands so much energy to work out what the words are that there is little opportunity to

think about what they mean. The child can read, but without getting the gist of what it was all about.

It is easy to become frustrated when your child's reading is dysfluent, but there are simple ways we can help our children.

All children learn differently, so it is worth asking your child's teacher for guidance. But the following tips are generally applicable to a wide range of children.

Do not underestimate the value of investing a little time each day in your child's reading. The adage of little and often is the best way to avoid frustration and build confidence.

Some elements of the process, such as learning high-frequency words, will be tedious, but if sessions are brief and regular it will keep your child motivated. Establish his or her current level of reading and work from there. Material that is too difficult is frustrating, but easier material can be too babyish. There is a range of reading material that interests older children but is less challenging to read.

While working with your child you may sometimes feel impatient or disappointed. Even the faintest sigh or roll of the eyes will be picked up. Remember, it is not about where the child should be but where he is and how you can help him move forward, step by step.

Remember, if you know that your child's reading level is not on a par with his peers', he knows it too. An important part of your role is to make him feel better about where he is and the progress he is making.

Have patience and try different approaches. Remember to enjoy success.

When your child finds a level at which he is reading fluently, let him stay a while and consolidate it.

When it comes to literacy, overlearning is a good thing. They will use these skills forever.

ANNE ENGLISH

Finding meaning

If you think of fluency as the ability to read with expression, then the reader needs to be able to understand the author's meaning. Learning to read is an integrated process and is not easy for most children. It has to be developed through years of purposeful activity, and parents can play a very important role.

If your child is struggling with reading, the first thing to remember is that you are not alone. If you are frustrated with the situation, you can be certain that your child is too. Don't create anxiety with unreasonable expectations. Seek help and a more rounded solution.

The first step starts with the school. Schedule a meeting and ask the teacher what they have observed in relation to your child's skills and what they might recommend.

When a child experiences difficulties with fluency, parents sometimes try to address them with long, intense sessions of reading at home. Short spells of 10 minutes each day are far more productive.

Find a quiet reading corner in the house and furnish it with reading material of interest to your child. Make your sessions in the reading corner calm, inviting and enjoyable, and don't overdo it. Leave them wanting more. Your child will be more motivated to read a book they have chosen themselves in the library or bookshop.

Don't make older children read books for younger children. There are books that are pitched at older readers with younger reading-age profiles. They are known as "high interest, low readability" books, and you can get them from educational publishers, at school or from libraries.

As a final tip on fluency, I often recommend a speech and drama club. Reading and acting out lines is a great way to build fluency and helps children engage with text in a more meaningful, purposeful and expressive way. BARRY MORRISSEY

The series is compiled by Louise Holden and Gráinne Faller

Seven steps to more fluent reading

1 In a busy home, finding time and space for quiet reading is perhaps the most difficult challenge, but the results are well worth it. Create a spot where reading sessions always happen – a corner of your child's room for example. Find a time that works, maybe just after dinner or just before bedtime. Even try getting up 10 minutes earlier in the morning.

2 Choose the right reading material. It has to be interesting but not frustrating. Don't give a child reading material with content that is too babyish for them. There are books for children whose reading level is behind their interest level. If you can't get your hands on such material, try compiling material from the internet or newspapers in the form of a project that interests the child.

3 Start with a conversation. What is this book going to be about? What does the title suggest? What do the pictures suggest? These help children to read with purpose.

4 Paired reading is when a teacher or parent reads with a child to help model good reading and to support the child's own efforts. There are several kinds of paired reading – try them all to see what works.

* Assisted reading

Read a part of the text and let the child take over at an agreed point. You read every second page, for example, or, if the going is very slow, every second paragraph. This can alleviate frustration.

* Chorus reading

Parent and child read together out loud. This way the child gets a sense of your tone and cadences, where you stop and pause and how you add expression. Listen closely to ensure that your child is able to read with you most of the time. If she is dropping out too frequently the material is too advanced.

* Echo reading

This is very effective for children experiencing significant difficulties with fluency. First you read the sentence. Then you and the child read the sentence together. Finally the child reads the sentence alone.

You are modelling the right way to read, scaffolding the child's attempt, and then giving the child an independent run at it.

Shadow reading uses a similar approach, but you use longer blocks of text.

5 If you look at any reading passage you will find that certain words occur again and again. These are known as high-frequency words (an internet search will find them).

Various studies have compiled lists of these; for example, the Dolch list contains 100 words that can constitute up to half the words in the material we read. If a child can recognise these words fluently it makes the job of reading much easier.

Pay particular attention to these words as they crop up in the text and reinforce them with your child.

6 If a child is reading without expression or apparent comprehension, but getting the words right, try asking them to read the same paragraph a number of times, but with feeling. You can model this for them. This can even be fun if you really exaggerate, use accents and hand gestures.

7 Finish the session with discussion and praise. Even if you have only succeeded in reading a few lines in your session, talk to your child about the meaning of what you have just read. This conversation extends vocabulary, aids comprehension and whets their appetite for the next session.

Are you worried about your child's progress?

“How was school today?”

“Fine.”

Does that sound familiar – and infuriating? Maybe your timing is off. Are you always ready to talk about your day right at the end of it?

Spot opportunities (when cleaning the car at the weekend or at the shops) when you can chat about school indirectly.

Also try a different opening line: “What was the best thing you did at school last week?” for instance. If there seems to be a problem at school, get in contact. If there is good

communication between child, home and school, then any problems are far more likely to be spotted and fixed.

If you're having trouble with school communication, you might want to speak to someone a little removed from the situation, to get some support or maybe even another point of view. Go to one or two trusted sources of information, and trust your own instincts.

Are your worries well founded? If not, then focus on dealing with your anxiety and trying to reduce it. If the answer is yes, then act.

Remember, you may not be able to help your child as much as you'd like. Do your best. You do not need to get every decision spot on. Perfect parents don't exist. "Good enough" parenting is enough.

Meet our experts: Trio of literacy consultants

Anne English is the principal of Scoil San Treasa, a primary school in south Co Dublin. She has worked for a number of years with primary children experiencing difficulties and has a keen interest in the challenges children face as they develop literacy skills.

Barry Morrissey is literacy co-ordinator and learning-support teacher at Scoil Na Naomh Uilig, in Newbridge, Co Kildare. He has a special interest in literacy and has worked with readers of all abilities.

Donald Ewing is the head of psychological and educational services with the Dyslexia Association of Ireland. He has held posts as both a senior and principal educational psychologist and has worked as a professional adviser within the education division of the Scottish government

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The next step to improving your child's reading

Comprehension is a complex and dynamic activity involving the reader, text and the context in which the reading occurs. Skilled readers demonstrate a facility with word identification, oral reading fluency and knowledge of vocabulary, and apply a variety of strategies to construct meaning from a range of text genres. During the past 20 years, research has demonstrated that explicit comprehension instruction can enable children to become thoughtful, strategic and independent learners.

Children in primary schools engage in comprehension activities across the school curriculum each day. For many, however, their experience of comprehension is individual and silent, with the emphasis being on the location of the correct answer rather than on the construction of knowledge in a co-operative environment. **MARTIN GLEESON**

Reading is critical for success in school and in life and permeates much of what we do every day. It nourishes the imagination, enhances creativity and builds thinking skills and a child's general knowledge.

Comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading. It is why we read, whether it's for pleasure or for information. When we read with comprehension we forget about the individual words. Instead the words wash over us; we get lost in a story; we laugh; we cry; we see the story unfolding like a movie in our minds. If it's a factual text we might get really excited by some new information that we have discovered.

All children should have the experience of finding books that they simply can't put down and that help them discover the thrill of reading. So it is important that children develop a personal taste in reading from an early age and that they are encouraged to read widely. It is also important that reading is seen as a thinking process whereby text is open to interpretation. Children should have opportunities to question what they read, to wonder, agree, disagree, critique and evaluate ideas, and they should be encouraged to justify their thoughts with evidence from the text. **EITHNE KENNEDY**

If your child has a problem with comprehension, the first thing you as a parent will probably pick up on is your child's inability to summarise a passage after reading it.

In most cases, children with comprehension problems will have significant difficulty linking one idea to another within the text, and linking those ideas to events in their real lives.

Often they will struggle to explain a character's thoughts or feelings, or empathise with a particular character. Distinguishing the important parts of the story from the minor details will also be a struggle. At a very basic level they may have difficulty understanding some of the vocabulary in a text. If you have noticed that your child has difficulty understanding the meaning of a text, in most cases they will have noticed that too. Unfortunately, there are no simple, quick-fix solutions, but you can certainly help. **BARRY MORRISEY**

Boost comprehension in 10 minutes a day

When it comes to comprehension, the best strategy is often one that is focused around 10 minutes of relaxed time, reading together, every day.

Make sure your child has chosen a book that they can read with 90 per cent accuracy and one that they find interesting. Use the five-finger rule: if there are more than five words on a page that your child struggles with, the book may be too difficult at this point in time. It would be best to choose an easier one.

Before reading

The aim is to get your child thinking about what they're going to read before they read it. Use some of these strategies every evening.

Get your child to choose the reading material. What are they in the mood for? Look at the cover and the title of the book. What do you think the book is about? What do you think will happen in the book? Or what do you think you'll find out?

What does your child know? If the book is about tigers, what can your child tell you about them? You want them to link what they already know to what they are about to read. During this time, your child will, with luck, be unconsciously using some of the vocabulary they'll be reading in the book.

During reading

The aim is the gradual release of responsibility for reading to your child, but first your child has to see what good reading is all about. Read aloud together. Choral reading provides encouragement and support for weaker readers. Allow your child to relax. Adjust your reading to their pace.

Pause occasionally. Stop at a crucial point and ask your child what they think will happen next.

Question every now and again: is your child understanding what is being read? If your child loses concentration, it could provide a natural break to introduce a chat or a question about what's happening or about what a character is feeling. The idea is to link back to your child's experience if you can.

Don't question too much. Wait for a natural break in the text. Don't ruin it by interrupting. As things progress, paired reading can be very useful. Enjoy it.

After reading

Have a chat about what happened. Was your child right in their predictions? Was there ever a time when they experienced what the character experienced? Did they find out anything they didn't know already? Encourage your child to elaborate on their ideas.

Remember: if your child has had enough, don't push it.

Solutions to problems

Problem

Difficulties with word identification and vocabulary prevent children accessing the text.

Solution

Encourage your child to sound out the words. All schools carry a range of products to help with this, so take guidance from your child's teacher about the stage of development with which to begin. This can be augmented for younger children by websites such as starfall.com and progressing systematically through the stages of this engaging phonic scheme.

Remember that sounding out is not the only strategy, and it is important that children are taught a range of strategies to use when they encounter an unfamiliar word.

When it comes to vocabulary, children who read more texts build greater reading stamina. They read many more minutes per day and read more varied texts. As a result they are exposed to richer, more complex and sophisticated language.

Introducing sophisticated words found in literature that the children may not hear spoken daily is important. Words such as "silly", "absurd", "stubborn" and "obstinate" are good examples. To ensure that new words stick, consciously revise the new vocabulary learned each week and encourage your children to use their new words.

Problem

An inability to read fluently means too much time is devoted to word recognition, with little left to focus on meaning.

Solution

Paired reading is a useful technique. Start by reading together and continue until your child feels confident to read on their own. Using some prearranged signal, the child reads unaided until they encounter difficulties. Wait and allow your child four seconds to read the word. Then tell them the word and restart reading.

Problem

If your child knows nothing about volcanoes or geology, for example, then they will have a harder time understanding a text about a volcanic eruption.

Solution

Talk about what your child knows before reading a text. Maybe look it up online beforehand. Identify key points of information in a story or text.

Problem

Some children find it difficult to figure out what parts of a text are important.

Solution

Talk to your child about the characters and the setting of the story. What happened? What problem occurred? How was the problem resolved? Or, in the case of a factual text, talk about the information provided. What is it about? What details can you remember? Teach your child how to identify key points using graphic organisers.

Long-term strategies

Nurture a love of reading. Just make reading a part of your home. This is about a small amount of time every day.

Make trips to the library and bookshops regular events and give your child control over what they choose. Don't discount the importance of computers if you are trying to get your child to read in spite of themselves.

If you have an older child who has difficulty reading, explore the idea of buying some Hi-Lo reading books online. These deal with topics and subject matter appropriate for older children but using language a lower reading level. As your child becomes more proficient, gently encourage them to try something a little more challenging.

Books you can try: Reading Resources

Hi-Lo reading books are an invaluable resource if your child is older but their reading is weak. They are available online.

High-quality picture books are also a valuable resource for the reluctant reader.

Useful favourites:

Billy the Kid by Michael Morpurgo

When Jessie Came Across the Sea by Amy Hest

Voices in the Park by Anthony Browne

Star of Fear, Star of Hope by Jo Hoestlandt

Other books for older readers:

The Invention of Hugo Cabret by Brian Selznik (watch the movie Hugo afterwards and compare versions)

Millions by Frank Cottrell Boyce

Gangsta Granny by David Walliams

Five point plan: Supporting reluctant learners

- * It can be hard to know what to do when your son or daughter seems reluctant to learn. Check if there are underlying reasons. Talk to the school. If it just seems that your child is not interested or motivated, try a few of the following ideas.
- * Get into good habits. Have planned homework time and a consistent, distraction-free space. Make sure that they are actually doing their homework. A parent's job is as coach and supporter. If your child gets badly stuck, a quick note into school is better than slogging over it all night.
- * Use information technology to support the motivation of the reluctant learner. The interactivity and multisensory nature of technology can help.
- * Take an interest. Make time to show an interest in your child's learning. You can be a good role model as an enthusiastic learner, prepared to learn stuff that is new to you, such as speaking Irish with your son over breakfast or watching the film-of-the-book with your daughter.
- * Catch them being good. Name the behaviour that you are praising them for. "I love that you are taking such an interest in this"; "You are taking such care with this."
- * Keep it in perspective. Learning and education are crucial, but so is other stuff. Your child is more than their academic side. **DONALD EWING**

Dr Martin Gleeson is a teacher educator at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, who specialises in literacy education. He helped to develop the Building Bridges of Understanding approach to children's comprehension development.

Dr Eithne Kennedy is a teacher educator at St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin. Her book *Raising Literacy Achievement in High-Poverty Schools: An Evidence-Based Approach* will be published by Routledge in 2013.

Barry Morrissey is literacy co-ordinator and learning-support teacher at Scoil na Naomh Uilig, Newbridge, Co Kildare.

Donald Ewing is the head of psychological and educational services with the Dyslexia Association of Ireland. He has also advised the Scottish government.

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