

Activities for Struggling Readers
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Children with disabilities can benefit from the same language and literacy activities as all young children: being read to, having rich conversations, and playing games with sounds. However, children with disabilities may need these activities to be modified or intensified for maximum benefit. Find out about activities for struggling readers in these suggestions for parents.

Literacy refers to many oral languages, reading, and writing activities, all of which are intertwined. Reading to children strengthens oral language and introduces them to various forms of discourse such as stories, fairy tales, and poetry.

Reading signs, labels, or thank you notes helps them understand relationships between oral and written language and emphasizes meaning.

Sometimes, children with language disorders do not like being read to because they cannot process all of the information. In these cases, we suggest that parents read the pictures and reduce the language level so that the child comprehends.

Wiener (1988) recommends extensive reading of pictures to build vocabulary, descriptive language, and the basis for simple narratives. From a single action picture (e. g., a child eating soup or cereal), one can ask countless questions about the objects, the actions, how things might taste, whether the soup is hot, the kinds of soup the child does or does not like, as well as simple inferential questions.

Studies of older students with reading comprehension problems indicate they have difficulty answering inferential questions. Therefore, we introduce such questions in the early childhood years. For example, "Do you think this boy likes the cereal? How do you know? Look at his face."

While reading, we also suggest that parents stop periodically and ask the child questions about the story. Sometimes, it is helpful for the parent and child to take turns asking questions about the content.

When looking at a can or carton of food, one might ask, "Which word do you think says milk?" Encourage the child to read signs such as stop or exit, and words on doors such as boys, girls, push, etc. The groceries from the market can be used for many purposes including reading labels.

Several studies in recent years have found that phonemic awareness is related to early reading. Therefore, we encourage parents to play listening games in which they identify objects that begin or end with a particular sound (i. e., Find all the things that start with m, using the letter sound not the letter name).

Blending is often difficult for poor readers so we ask children to point to the picture that goes with what I say: M - A - N. It is usually easier for children to recognize the object than to say or blend the sounds themselves, but both activities are beneficial. Rhyming games are also encouraged.

In order to strengthen visual processes and whole word recognition we suggest that when parents read to children they ask them to find letters or words that look the same.

For an independent activity, we suggest the parent cut out a page from an old magazine or a page of print and ask the children to circle words that look the same. Parents might highlight a high frequency word such as the, and ask the child to find others that look the same.

Early writing is also an important part of literacy. By age three, most children can draw a circle; by four they can draw a square, and by five they can draw a triangle as well as the rudiments of many letters and numerals. They also draw pictures of people, houses, and simple objects.

Many preschoolers enjoy pretend writing, which is an important part of development. If one analyzes their scribbles carefully, it is possible to see word-like strings of figures and drawings interspersed with letters. All of these activities should be encouraged. Do not try to achieve perfect copying or production of letters and numbers. Rather, let the child engage in writing as a communicative act.

When children can copy letters, however, we use the opportunities that arise from going shopping. Encourage children to help write the grocery list by copying one or two words from empty cartons and boxes. Not only will the children feel helpful, but they will begin to realize that writing is an aid to memory - one of the important functions of writing.

Invented spelling is also encouraged as a part of meaningful writing. When a child writes ILVU (I love you) on a note, be aware that this is good developmental spelling. The child is beginning to identify certain sounds and associating them with letters.

Many young children with learning disabilities have significant problems with visual-motor integration. Some do not know how to hold a pencil or draw the simplest figures. In these cases, an occupational therapist or specialist in learning disabilities may be needed. Parents can, however, assist by having children draw figures in sand, make designs with finger paint, etc.

Often we suggest that parents purchase or make templates (stencils) from cardboard or styrofoam so the child can trace inside the boundaries. We make basic shapes and simple outlines of figures such as an apple, a kite, or a fish. As children trace around the boundaries of the figures, they learn the motor patterns and, when the stencil is removed, they see a product that is better than one they can produce from copy.

Summary

Try to build on the child's strengths to build his or her sense of self-respect. Help the child realize the value of people in all walks of life as you go about daily routines. There is a place for everyone.

When things do not seem to go as well as expected, it is often helpful to contact teachers, physicians, and other specialists for suggestions. Parents need time out and opportunities to talk with parents of children with similar problems. Many communities have support groups that may be beneficial. Parents learn from each other and can share strategies that were most helpful for them.

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