

Helping Struggling Readers – Top Tips For Teaching Assistants

Here you can find top tips to help you support children who are falling behind their peers in their reading. The focus is on building children's phonic skills and improving their understanding of what they read.

Encourage them

We all respond well to positive encouragement and having acknowledgement from others that we are trying hard at something and doing our best. Take this approach when children are learning to read – praise them when they have done something well, and keep doing so as they progress. Even if progress is slow or the steps that are being made are small, it is worth saying something like:

'You noticed that word didn't make sense so you had another go. Well done!'

'You used your phonic techniques to blend that new word. You see you do know your sounds!'

Sometimes, encouragement is needed especially when a child gets something wrong or is really struggling – we learn from our mistakes and these need to be recognised as part of the process of learning a new skill. So if a child is struggling, you could say:

'It's ok to get stuck because you had a go and that is all part of learning to read. It's a hard one, so shall we say it together?'

Reduce their worries

Children know that reading is important and if they are struggling then they can become anxious about how they are doing and this will make it harder for them to pick up reading skills. Reduce their anxiety by being relaxed yourself – smile, ensure your voice is calm and patient.

Laughter is an instant relaxant so perhaps find some funny books that you and your child/group can both enjoy. If the reading session becomes tense and is beginning to become stressful then keep it short and sweet – so rather than push them to continue reading, focus on enjoying and sharing the book together and understanding the meaning from the words.



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Make sure they know they are not the only ones

If your child/group have friends and peers who can read confidently and well then this may undermine their confidence and they may feel that they will never be able to read properly and it is something they just can't do. Make sure that they understand that there are many people in the world who struggled with their reading initially – these could be famous and clever people such as Einstein or Orlando Bloom or a person in your child/group's more immediate circle who they can relate to. It is important that whoever you choose to illustrate this point is someone that the children recognise, admire or respect, and that they know that struggling with reading is not at all related to being stupid.

It may also be a good idea to explain that each person is individual and can be good at some things but not others – they may be good at their maths but struggle with their reading and a friend may be a great reader but not good at science. Everyone is different and some have to work hard at their science to make progress, and some have to work hard at their reading.

Strengthen their blending techniques

As children are learning to read, some may need to go back and learn again how to blend letters and how the sounding out of the letter-sound works. It is important to recognise and make sure your child/group knows that this is not a sign of failure but that this is what happens when you learn a new skill. Take time to practise the recall of letter-sounds (grapheme-phoneme) with your child/group, strengthening this so it becomes automatic – ensure that your child/group can blend the phonemes through a word confidently and on their own. If this needs to be done a number of times then so be it, struggling readers need opportunity for overlearning – by going back to this key knowledge of blending and letter-sounds, children will strengthen their knowledge and feel that they have skills to decode any word.

Take turns to read

Your active participation in a child's reading is key to helping them succeed. If they see that you are interested in the reading material and not just following what they are doing, their motivation increases. Remain focused, calm, patient and interested as the child reads, helping them as appropriate. Once they have worked through a text with you then they may want to read it through by themselves, however if they are lacking in confidence or are finding it hard, then you could suggest taking it in turns to read. It is a great way to keep them interested and enjoying what is being read as the flow and pace is maintained. A variation of this is letting the child lead the reading and set off on their own, bringing you in to take over as they want – perhaps if they are stuck or want to hear the words spoken by someone else. This could work well for a play script or dialogue between characters in a book.



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Play games to practice sounds

Some children who are struggling with their reading have trouble with being able to blend separate sounds into whole words. Try playing some games or activities that can build up these skills and increase their phonic knowledge and confidence. Some examples of these types of games are:

- Sounding out sentences that have different adjectives but begin with the same sound, e.g. a funny cat.....a furry cat.....a fat cat.
- Using rhyming riddles so your child/group thinks of the sounds and the words, i.e. 'a fruit that sounds like ape' or 'a flower that rhymes with nose'



Let them read what interests them

We are more motivated when we are involved with doing something that is interesting to us, and reluctant or struggling readers are likely to be motivated to progress their reading skills if the subject matter is something they want to know more about. Let your child/children in your group choose their own book but ensure that the level of difficulty is appropriate. This can be easily checked through the five finger test. This test is where you open any page of the book and ask the child to put up one finger for every word they don't know on that page. If all five fingers have been put up then it is most likely that the book is too difficult. If this is the case then you can ask them to choose another book that is similar but passes the test.

Give your child/group the opportunity to try different reading formats if they want to - try comics, magazines, plays, poems, text on websites or information books as a way of encouraging and enticing them into reading and trying new materials that they may find really interesting.

If they are stuck

When a child is stuck on a word and cannot move their reading forward, firstly give them time to try and figure it out themselves – don't jump in too quickly. If they are still struggling, then you need to decide how frustrated they are and how much they are losing interest. If you feel that they are losing interest and becoming distracted then you might choose to read the word to them to help get their reading re-started. In this case you would then ask them to read the word back to you and then read the full sentence in order to get the meaning and context.

You may decide that you can help your child/group by sounding out the letters with them, and getting them to use their phonic knowledge to work through the word. Through sounding out the letters and blending them together they should be able to read the word even if they have not seen it before. However if they come across a sound they do not know or have forgotten then sound the letters out with them – you could use a phonic flashcard to show one sound, then say the sounds together quickly and then say the word.

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Help them engage with their reading

Reading becomes a pleasure for children when there is an understanding of what is being read, and an anticipation of what is to come. This comprehension goes hand in hand with the sense of achievement of actually reading the words and is part of children engaging with their reading. You can help them achieve this through talking about the text at key points – may be at the end of a page or section, or a sequence of events or after a conversation between characters. Ask your child/group questions to ensure that they have understood what they are reading, you can go further by asking them more detail about the where they think the text is going, what might happen next and so on.

To take this a step further, you could think about asking your child/group questions about their book as the school day progresses, perhaps at lunch or break, such as: ‘I can’t wait to find out what happens to the dog in the park, can you?’ ‘Do you think we will find out more about how man flew to the moon soon?’ This helps them recall the text at times when they are not set to read and hopefully will encourage them in their next reading session.

How technology can help

For some reluctant or struggling readers, reading can be encouraged through the use of technology. A variety of reading materials are available on different websites (www.oxfordowl.com) where the children can read on screen and use the mouse and keyboard to navigate the text as well as choose their book. The novelty of not reading from a page can be motivating, and often there is a wide or different choice of texts online. For example there may be reading materials from a child’s favourite TV programme or TV character.

Talking books can be a very useful tool for using with struggling readers. Children learn skills differently and some children enjoy listening to talking books, where they can pick up on how words are sounded out whilst seeing the word on screen or on the page. You could use this as a way of starting off a reading session.



How they learn a new skill

Learning to read is learning a new skill and you may find that from one day to the next your child/group’s progress falters and it may look like they are not making progress and in fact may look like they are going backwards in their reading skills. In life, skills and processes need to be repeated in order for them to become automatic, and this is the same for reading. It is important that you tell your child/group this so that they do not feel like they are not making any progress. Be patient and let them go over sentences and texts that they have tried before, this consolidation will give them confidence and even though the material may not be new to them it is still helping them become fluent readers.

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Tricky Words

Words such as 'said', 'are' and 'the' do not follow the phonic rules and appear frequently in writing. If your child/group do not know how to read these high frequency words, then this can stop the flow of reading and stop them making progress not only with the text but with reading skills. It is best to learn these words as they stand themselves. So you need to help your child/group to practise and learn the high frequency words through working with them and explaining how these words work and why they do not follow the phonic rules. If the words are posted around the class or library, try asking them to read the words out of context of the text to help them grasp what the word says and means.



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