

## HELPING RELUCTANT READERS

Reading is an important life skill. Reading develops imagination and helps us to gain insight into situations, feelings and the reasons we behave the way we do. Reading helps us to learn through sharing the experiences of others, thus expanding our own knowledge and ideas. Reading also enables students to access the school curriculum and gain more detailed information about the world.

However some children do not enjoy reading or find reading difficult. Others, although able to read, may not be challenged or engaged in the types of reading activities on offer. For whatever reason, many children become **reluctant readers**, and this in turn can lead to further difficulties. As reluctant readers don't read very often, they may not develop the confidence and reading fluency that help to make reading a rewarding activity.

### **Reluctant readers may**

- fear failure
- avoid reading situations
- not be prepared to risk trying
- believe they 'can't read' or 'will never be able to read'
- view themselves as 'dumb' or 'stupid' because of their difficulty with reading
- say they don't 'care' and act in a manner that reflects this
- become passive or hit out in anger
- blame reading and label it as ... *"reading is sh\*t, reading is for 'sissies."*

Many reluctant readers are poor at decoding words. Their reading is therefore slow and laboured. This in turn can compromise their understanding of what is read. Much of the enjoyment of reading stems from following an idea to its conclusion, revealing a story or integrating new information. If reading is "hard work" it is understandable why reluctant readers lose interest. Our challenge is to encourage these students to read more and with increased motivation.

Parents and teachers need to work hard to convey to the reluctant reader whose progress is slow, some explanation of what the reading process involves. An analogy is often helpful, particularly with younger students. For example, likening learning to read to building a house. In both processes it is important to build strong foundations and slowly build up the layers. Just as the builder has needed much practice in sawing and hammering in nails, the young reader needs to practise until skills become automatic.

Reluctant readers also need to be reassured about their progress in reading. Demonstrate this in a practical way. Take out a book that was once difficult for the child to read, or show on a list of sight words how many words have been 'ticked off' as known. This is better than offering a blanket "feel good" statement such as "oh but you are so much better at reading now."

Some children are insightful about their strengths and weaknesses and are quick to compare their own performance with that of their peers. Reluctant readers need to be reminded that you have confidence that they **will** learn to read. Very

few children start school with a negative attitude to reading. Their negative attitude is a consequence of their experiences with reading. Therefore we need to provide more positive reading and learning experiences.

### **Practical Ways to Help Younger Children**

**Model reading in your daily life.** Have a variety of reading resources available in the home including books, newspapers, magazines and TV and movie guides. Talk about something that you have read that has interested you and share it with your child. It is particularly important for young male readers to see other males reading in everyday situations.

**Visit the local library** with your child and borrow books for all the family. Include books from the non-fiction section that provide illustrations that you can look at together. Search out books on a particular topic or by a known author. Create a family library.

**Let children choose their own books to read.** Maybe they like to read

- illustrated books
- wordless books where they tell their own story
- books with humour
- "How To" books
- interactive books
- predictable pattern books
- comics
- action books
- children's websites and computer games

**Make a fun book** of your own. Use jokes or photographs or suggest to the children that they do their own illustrations. Ask your child to dictate to you what the text should say.

**Read books out loud** or give opportunities for the reluctant readers to listen to stories on CD. This provides them with a model of fluent reading and well-constructed sentences. The language of books differs from conversational language, both in its use of words and how the sentences are organized.

**Read regularly to your child** both before and after they start to learn to read. It is important that reluctant readers are able to enjoy stories whilst their own reading skills are developing. Read at their interest level and do not use simplified books for this activity. Exposure to the rich language of literature helps students learn new words and gives them the opportunity to discuss problems or ideas without the additional struggle of needing to decode the text first. A shared enjoyment of books will act as an incentive for the students to keep learning to read for themselves.

**Focus on reading for a purpose.** Make sure you **support short reading practice** through rewarding activities. Simple reading tasks might be included as part of a board game or a family generated game with Mystery clues, a message about the time of the basketball match, or a list of what might need to be bought for the birthday party. Help if some words are difficult. These messages or short texts are not a test for the child but a reason for them to make an effort with

**Create frequent opportunities to read and write.** Leave simple but highly predictive notes or directions for the child to read. You can combine these with simple illustrations.

For example: 🌐 Money on bench. See you at 6.00 ♥ Mum and Dad.

The child can take his or her own time to read such a message but it creates the expectation that he/she can read and shows that being able to read is useful. Reuse the message or part of it again in a few days time. Gradually the child will learn to recognize the message and the individual words. Always encourage the child to help you write notes, lists or invitations that are important to them.

**Find books and activities with the right level of challenge.** Parents are always trying to find the book that is not too easy and not too hard. Ask your child's teacher for advice about which books are at or within the child's *comfort level*. Remember however, that whilst some books may seem to you to be 'too easy', rereading a familiar or favourite book will build confidence and reading fluency. None of us, even skilled mature readers want to always have to read *challenging* books, such as textbooks or journal articles. We also like to read comics, magazines and reviews.

**Create personalised Kids books.** There are companies that print personalised books. Your child's name is inserted in the text along with their friends and family names. Kids love reading about themselves. Better still write some simple stories with your child as the central character. Let your child help you with the stories or illustrate some pages.

**Seek professional advice** if your child's reluctance persists or you have concerns about lack of progress with reading or writing. Start with a discussion with the class teacher and then together you can arrange further specialised testing to identify specific difficulties if necessary. It is always better to catch learning problems early and work step by step through an appropriate program than 'hope' the child will grow out of reading difficulties.

## Helping Older Children

Older students, who are reluctant readers, present their parents and teachers with a number of extra challenges. In higher grades less school time is devoted to the teaching of reading and considerable time is spent using reading as a tool for learning or accessing information. Sometimes it is a matter of keeping the student engaged with reading not just for future perceived enjoyment but so that the student can cover the school curriculum requirements. However, many older reluctant readers are also **poor readers**. These students find they can't read quickly and efficiently and have difficulty understanding the texts. These students may need ongoing teacher/tutor support and the development of a range of practical strategies to help them complete homework and study requirements.

- Many reluctant readers feel **disengaged and powerless**. Think about how you can empower them as readers by giving them free choices – which books to read, how many pages, when and where the reading will take place, what topic to research.

- Many boys will be motivated to read **high interest materials** involving action, science fiction or a series where they become familiar with the characters and situations.
- **Support any form of reading activity**, no matter how simple, that highlights the usefulness of reading and has its own inherent reward. For example, reading a simple summary of a movie so they can choose which movie to go and see; checking the weather forecast in the paper to find out whether it will rain on the BBQ or if the surf is 'up'.
- Listen to **books on CD** or tape. This is particularly useful for slow readers who are expected to read and discuss several chapter books each school term.
- Compare a book to the **movie** based on the book. Draw up a comparison chart to assist in your discussion.
- When children move on to **reading chapter books** share the 'load' of reading by reading a few pages aloud at the beginning of each chapter to get them started. Parents of high-school students have also found it helpful to read the set novel themselves, so that they can discuss the themes and style of the book at home with their child.
- Older reluctant or poor readers will need to **research material** for a school project. Look for books that are visually appealing and well presented. Pages should be simply set out without too much dense text and contain clear and useful headings and subheadings. Many readers find it helpful to also have information presented visually in the form of charts, flow charts, graphs, diagrams and illustrations with captions. Encourage children to use coloured 'Post It' notes to mark the place so they can find the information again later. This will help them to answer specific questions and saves a great deal of time during what is often a slow and laboured task for poor readers.
- Develop **special interests and talents**. Reluctant readers need to develop a positive self-image. Always encourage the students' development of some appropriate non-school related activities where they can become skilled and valued for their contribution.
- Choose subjects and books on **a topic of interest** to the student. Some reluctant readers may have a great deal of knowledge about a rather specific topic and their prior knowledge helps them make good use of prediction skills when reading on this topic. Topics may be as diverse as skateboarding, surfing, engines, pop stars, craft and how to do it instruction manuals. It can be enlightening how motivated poor readers become when 'reading' means they may win prizes, gain further expertise, or have access to special events or be part of special groups.
- Put the students' knowledge to use in **practical ways** both within the home and or in the wider community. Perhaps they could teach someone else their skill or create their own book on a specific topic. It can be useful to have an audience in mind, for example a younger cousin or friend. The student can type the text on a computer and use a spell checker or else dictate the text to an adult to transcribe.

**Target the problem.** There is information available to help parents and teachers understand the specific problems a child may have with reading. Read articles from reputable sources (see below) so that you can assist in a positive ways. Contact your local or regional learning disability organisation. They can often

provide testing and tutoring of students, as well as reading material and seminars for parents on topics of interest.

Finally, if as adults we remember learning to read as an enjoyable and relatively 'easy' process, it is difficult to really understand how reluctant readers feel. We need to try and "put ourselves in their shoes", as we work with our reluctant readers to maintain motivation as their skills develop.

**Resources:**

- SPELD VICTORIA. Dyslexia and other learning disabilities support.

<http://www.speldvic.org.au/>

Other States:

<http://www.speld.org.au/> (Queensland)

<http://www.speldnsw.org.au/>

<http://www.speld-sa.org.au/>

- Learning Disabilities Australia <http://www.ldaustralia.org/>
- Reading Rockets. Strategies to help Kids Who Struggle with Reading <http://www.readingrockets.org/helping/target>
- Understanding the reluctant male reader: implications for the teacher librarian and the school library. Lyn Pritchard. [www.penguin.com.au/PUFFIN/TEACHERS/Articles/understand\\_male.htm](http://www.penguin.com.au/PUFFIN/TEACHERS/Articles/understand_male.htm)