

What it Takes to Learn to Read

By Lisa Harp

Think about what it takes to be able to read well. When you break it down it's a lot. Fluent readers need to:

- Use their eye muscles guided by peripheral vision to successfully track the page
- Recognize sight words using visual closure
- Hold pictures and sounds in memory
- Have symbol recognition
- Have visual discrimination skills to tell the difference between similar letters and words
- Use auditory discrimination skills to clearly "hear" the sounds in their minds
- Have knowledge of phonemic awareness
- Combine all these skills so that a word, sentence, or paragraph has meaning

Phew! That's a lot of skills and that's just the basics of reading. It's no wonder that so many readers struggle, especially if they are tactile learners with weak auditory and visual processing skills.

Most poor readers are word guessers and lack basic decoding skills. They look at the first syllable or two of a word and start sounding it out. However, this is as far as they can get, and from there they start guessing. For instance, the word dignity may be read as digital by the student or the word green is read for the word grass. Does that sound like your child?

As parents and caregivers we have a lot on our plates and helping our children with all their academic needs can be daunting. If there is just one skill you can spend time on to help a student succeed in school and in life, it would be reading.

Most people try to teach reading using traditional methods, which is often the way they were taught. But if your student is still struggling with reading, then there's a good chance the traditional method isn't working or otherwise they would be reading and reading well. Phonics is a left brain activity, and many right brain dominant students have a terrible time learning to read with traditional phonics based methods. So, to start with, different methods must be used to help a struggling reader. A combination of brain, visual, visual memory, auditory, and tactile decoding training is a method that works to help students learn to read, especially when traditional methods have failed.

Touch to Read

Have you ever noticed that when a child is learning to read they want to touch every word? Or maybe they will nod their head and point to each word as they sound it out.

Why do you think that is?

It's because kids intrinsically know that learning comes from the outside in. They know that their bodies are tied to their brains and one activates the other. It is all about being tactile...using the hands and body to get the brain working. They want to use their hands to learn to read and once they do, these tactile methods to teach reading work amazing well.

Start by printing out letters on "tiles" on paper. The student simply touches a tile and says the sound. Then the student slides all of the sounds together to make a word.

They integrate the tactile motion and the sound and they learn much faster.

Incredibly faster actually. The touching and sliding is perfect for poor readers. It takes them all the way back to phonemic units. By touching each tile or tile combination, the student relates the sound to the individual letter and this gives them the ability to develop their decoding skills and break a word down.

Feel to Read

Another tactile option is to have the student pull down a coin or tile at every sound read. This involves another tactile operation while reading and also forces the student to look at sounds as he reads instead of the whole word and a mental picture that might go with it, often one that is incorrect.

The next step is to dictate the real words the student learned and have the student write them down on paper or in a gooey substance. This not only helps with spelling, but it will give you a good idea if the student has mastered the decoding unit. You would call out the words far, dark, remark, etc. and have the student write them. If the phonemic unit was learned, the student will recall the unit and spell it correctly.

Once they master the letter skills they can move on to consonant-vowel combinations then four letter combinations and digraphs (such as th and ch). From there they can use the same "tile" approach to cover the long "E" and well as word endings (which commonly give poor readers trouble.) Then finally multiple syllable words. And that is reading!

Tips for Dyslexic Readers

For many students the key to learning to read involves color and patterns. These students need to sound out a phonemic unit that is in color, since the right side of the brain is attracted to color. The decoding unit is placed within a larger word. There is also a picture to represent the decoding unit, once again because the right side of the brain works in pictures. For example, the decoding unit **ar** would have a picture of a car for the picture. Then the student reads a list of words with the **ar** sound embedded within them. The words might be far, dark, remark, etc. The ar would be in color while the rest of the word is in black. The student has a picture and a color to help remember the sound.

Next, the student reads nonsense words with the **ar** sound. These might be something like lar, smar, cark, etc. This time there is no color or picture. The student uses a highlighter to go over the sounds while reading the nonsense words. As the student moves the marker over the letters, he reads the sounds. Once again, the color activates the right side of the brain while the student is forced to stay on the sound that he is looking at. This prevents looking at the word as a whole and guessing. (Right brain dominant students look at the whole of something as well as pictures and colors.)

As you can see, the decoding process also involves using patterns. Many kids with Dyslexia are great with patterns and by grouping the words they are learning with the recurring ar pattern in the word, it is easier for them to learn sight words.

Just 15 Minutes A Day

If the student learns one decoding unit per day, it will only take about 15 minutes per day. There are more than 52 known decoding units that can be used. With a few simple techniques kids who have struggled with reading can raise their reading levels, test scores and grades, usually within six weeks. This read, touch, and write method works when all other methods have failed.