

Reading Development: Two Roads

Richard Selznick 27 February 2015

Possibly nothing is more challenging to a child than to struggle in reading. Starting in early kindergarten, there are differences between the kids on the "smooth road" (those who start learning to read without difficulty) compared to those on the "rougher road" (those who show signs of early struggling).

Children on the smoother road start to learn their letters in preschool and make progress in kindergarten with letters, sounds and sight words (words that appear with high frequency in the text). They start to read easy Dr. Seuss books and receive lots of recognition from parents and teachers.

As these kids move into 1st grade, they start to internalize the "code," meaning they begin to get how words are made of subunits of sounds and syllables. Soon they are taking good guesses at more difficult words. Reading fluency starts to develop.

The Rougher Road

For the other kids (anywhere from 15 to 40 percent of the population, depending upon a variety of different factors),

they find learning letter names and the associated sounds to be a difficult process. Many of the letters seem confusing, such as b vs. d or p vs. b vs. d or p vs. g. The child intuitively understands that he or she is not doing as well as the other kids who are starting to read actual books out loud. In 1st grade, sight words come very slowly (if at all), and a sense of confusion is experienced daily.

While the smooth-road kids are progressing along by the end of 1st grade, the rougher-road kids feel very stuck in the mud.

These issues continue into 2nd and 3rd grade. Reading larger books is avoided, as the sheer number of words is overwhelming.

To call it a “reading problem” is actually a misnomer, because when a child has a reading disability (or dyslexia), he also has a spelling and writing problem. Reading, spelling, and writing problems are a package deal.

Start Early

Parents and teachers should stick to one major principle, which is supported by a mountain of research and clinical practice – start as early as possible. When it comes to identifying kids on the rougher road and offering them sensible, targeted instruction (preferably in small groups or individually), there is nothing to gain by waiting.

While there are some kids who are "late bloomers," the vast majority of children showing these early issues in kindergarten continue to show them unless they are given the right help. Kindergarten or 1st grade is not too early for a well-trained classroom teacher to do some level of assessment to identify "red flags" of concern, such as weaknesses with phonemic awareness and early decoding.

Research shows that the right help for these issues involves the delivery of instruction in a structured and explicit manner. Directly teaching the sounds and component parts of words is necessary, as these kids do not intuit them on their own. Like any other skill, such as learning to play music or a sports skill, the need for patient and explicit instruction delivered in small doses that can be absorbed by the child is essential.

Richard Selznick, Ph.D., is a psychologist and author of "Dyslexia Screening: Essential Concepts for Schools & Parents," "The Shut-Down Learner: Helping Your Academically Discouraged Child," and "School Struggles." He can be found at www.shutdownlearner.com.