Behind in Reading? You Can Help Your Child Catch Up

For parents who have just learned their child is struggling to read

If you just found out your child is behind in reading, take a breath. It is not your fault, and it is not your child's fault. Most children can catch up when they are taught how letters and sounds work. Many caring teachers were trained in a method called **balanced literacy**, which research has since shown leaves many children behind. They wanted the best for children too, and many are now learning new ways to teach. The good news: a parent with 15 to 20 minutes a day can make a real difference.

Signs your child may be learning with balanced literacy*

- Lists of **sight words** to memorize by their shape, starting in kindergarten
- When stuck on a word, being told to **"look at the picture"** or **"think of a word that would make sense"**
- Being told to look at the first letter and **guess** the rest of the word
- **Leveled** or repeating-pattern books full of words your child hasn't been taught to sound out
- Phonics as a short add-on, not a daily, step-by-step lesson
- Your child guesses, skips words, or "reads" familiar books from memory but can't read new words

What the research shows

- **Reading isn't natural the way talking is.** Children have to be taught the code: which sounds the letters stand for, and how to blend those sounds into words.
- **Step-by-step phonics helps all children,** and it helps struggling readers most. A national panel of reading researchers found this in 2000, and many studies since agree.
- **Even a few memorized words can get in the way.** A study of more than 100,000 French first graders found that children taught only with phonics, using books they could fully sound out, read better and understood more than children in mixed classrooms. Adding even about 10 memorized whole words made results worse, because guessing and memorizing compete with sounding out. Children who started behind gained the most.
- **It works for a whole state.** After Mississippi required phonics-based teaching in 2013, its fourth graders rose from near the bottom of the country to the top ten. Its Hispanic and low-income students now read better than those in any other state.

What you can do at home

1. **Find out where your child is.** A quick reading test shows your child's grade level and where to start. Free tests: thephonicspage.org/gradelevel.html
2. **Practice sounds every day,** 15 to 20 minutes: letter sounds first, then blending sounds into words (c-a-t, cat).
3. **When your child gets stuck, say "Sound it out,"** not "Look at the picture." Cover the pictures if you need to.
4. **Use books your child can sound out** (often called decodable books). Keep reading harder books aloud to your child for vocabulary and fun.
5. **If sight word lists come home, teach them with phonics.** Show the one sound that changes (the s in "was" says z), then sound the word out. Free handouts: thephonicspage.org/sight-words.html

Free help: **thephonicspage.org** · **UFLI Foundations** (free student materials, ufli.education.ufl.edu)

Working with your child's school

- **Stay calm and kind.** You will get more help as a partner than as an opponent, and the teacher in front of you may be learning new methods right now too.
- **Ask:** How is reading taught in kindergarten through 2nd grade? Does my child practice with books they can sound out? Has my child been screened for dyslexia or reading problems? What extra help will my child get, and how will you check progress?
- **Put requests in writing.** You can ask in writing for your child to be evaluated for special education services.

Learn more: Sold a Story, a free podcast by Emily Hanford (APM Reports), explains kindly and clearly how these methods spread and why schools are changing.

Your child can learn to read. You are not alone.

* Programs often built this way include Units of Study, Guided Reading, Leveled Literacy Intervention, and Reading Recovery. Many schools are now replacing them.

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