



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

Questions and Answers about Literacy and Dyslexia

This fact sheet is for families of students who need more help learning to read and write. It provides an overview of reading instruction, answers some common questions about dyslexia, and explains how to get help if your child is struggling.

What do I need to know about how kids learn to read?

Learning to read is not easy, and many children struggle to do so. While our brains are wired from birth for *spoken* language, learning to read is *not* a natural or automatic process. This is because *written* language is a fairly recent invention. No part of the brain is specifically devoted to reading, so in order to read, we each have to build new connections between areas of our brains that evolved for other purposes, like speech and vision. For some kids, this seems to happen without much effort, but the majority need to be explicitly taught how to break the code that links spoken language with print. Without the right instruction, students struggle unnecessarily and don't learn to read as well as they could. This is *especially* true for students with disabilities like dyslexia.

The good news is that we know a lot about what works when it comes to teaching all students how to read! There are five essential components to reading instruction, sometimes called the “five pillars”: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

PHONEMIC AWARENESS

Before children can learn to read, they first have to understand that words can be broken down into smaller “chunks.” Being able to notice and use these chunks in spoken language—for example, clapping out the syllables in words and recognizing words that rhyme—is a skill called *phonological awareness*.

Phonemic awareness is a specific type of phonological awareness: the ability to hear and work with the individual sounds (called *phonemes*) that make up a spoken word. Research shows that children who have weak phonemic awareness skills have a much harder time learning how to read.

Students develop phonological and phonemic awareness through activities that let them play with sounds and language. For example:

- Identifying words that start or end with the same sound.
- Making up rhymes and playing rhyming games.
- Blending sounds together into words and breaking words apart into their individual sounds.
- Adding, dropping, or changing individual sounds within words to make new words.

PHONICS

Phonics teaches children how to connect the sounds they hear (phonemes) to the letters they see written down. Knowing letter-sound relationships is what lets us decode, or “sound out,” words we haven’t seen before. Phonics explains the “rules” of written language and the exceptions to those rules. It also teaches students about word structure and how to use the useful parts of words, like prefixes and suffixes, to figure out their meaning and pronunciation.

FLUENCY

Fluency is the ability to read easily, correctly, and with proper expression and speed. Fluent readers recognize words right away, without having to sound them out each time. When they read out loud, it sounds natural and smooth (they don’t get “stuck”). Fluency comes with lots of practice—reading and re-reading texts out loud.

VOCABULARY

Vocabulary refers to the words we know and use. It is easier for beginning readers to sound out words that they have already heard and said many times before. A large vocabulary is important for comprehension—in order to understand what we read, we first have to know what most of the words mean and how they can be used.

COMPREHENSION

Comprehension is the ability to understand what one is reading—to make connections between what is read and what is already known and to be able to draw conclusions. It requires background knowledge and vocabulary, as well as the ability to understand spoken language. Teaching comprehension skills means helping students ask questions like “what’s the most important point?” and “why did things happen that way?” This is the end goal of reading—getting meaning from print!

How can I tell if my child’s school is using a good phonics program?

Research is very clear that phonics instruction is most effective when it is **systematic** and **explicit**. This means:

- Speech sounds and the letters that correspond with those sounds are all intentionally taught, in a logical order that is planned out ahead of time. Each new lesson builds on what has already been learned, moving from the most common and consistent letter-sound patterns to harder and more complicated ones.
- Everything is directly explained in a clear, straightforward way. Students never have to guess at what they’re supposed to know or do, and they’re not expected to “discover” the rules of language on their own. The teacher tells them what the rules are and how to apply them to read and spell.

LITERACY LINGO

A **phoneme** is the smallest unit of sound in a spoken word that makes a difference to the word’s meaning. English has 44 phonemes, which combine to form syllables and words. For example, the word *bat* is made up of three phonemes (three sounds): /b/, /a/, and /t/, and the /t/ sound is what makes it different from the word *bag* or *ban*. The slash marks mean that we’re talking about the sound a letter makes, not the name of the letter itself.

In order to read, children have to be taught how letters represent speech sounds—this is called **phonics**. For example, there are several spelling patterns that represent the sound /k/: K (as in *kite*), C (as in *cat*), CK (as in *duck*), CH (as in *school*), and CC (as in *account*).

- Students have lots of opportunities to practice what they’re learning in a meaningful context—reading sentences and stories that use the letter-sound relationships they’ve been taught (sometimes called “decodable texts”)—and get feedback from the teacher right away.

A few things to look for in your child’s classroom:

- There’s a deliberate, planned order for teaching the relationships between sounds and letters. It’s not something that happens informally or as an add-on. The teacher can tell you where the class is in the sequence, what’s coming next, and why.
- There’s direct instruction—lessons led by the teacher where things are broken down step-by-step.
- When a student comes across a word they can’t read, they’re encouraged to sound it out and use their knowledge of letter-sound relationships, *not* to guess based on the pictures or context.
- If there’s a classroom “word wall,” words are grouped by sound and spelling patterns, *not* listed alphabetically from A to Z.

NOTE:

There are lots of fun, engaging phonics programs that follow these principles! Making instruction systematic and explicit *doesn’t* mean “drill and kill.”

When my child’s teacher says they’re reading at a certain level, what does that mean?

Schools often organize books by “levels” to help students choose independent reading that isn’t too easy or too hard. These levels are usually based on:

- The number of words in each sentence or on each page;
- The number of words repeated on each page and throughout the book, and how often they are repeated;
- How difficult the vocabulary is; and/or
- How much pictures help the reader understand the text.

Levels are loosely associated with a school grade and are often referred to by letters (for example, “Level D” books). In general, if your child is “on-level,” that’s a good sign that they’re on track to becoming a successful reader. However, for students who are struggling, their reading level *doesn’t* tell you *why* they’re having trouble or the specific areas where they need extra help.

What is dyslexia?

Dyslexia is the most common learning disability: experts estimate that between one in five and one in ten students is dyslexic. Dyslexia has nothing to do with intelligence, and it can range from mild to severe. Students with dyslexia typically have problems with reading because they have trouble mastering the relationships between the *sounds* of spoken language and the *letters* that represent those sounds in print. This means they have a hard time converting the written letters they see on the page into words they can say out loud, even though those words might be part of their spoken vocabulary. This results in difficulty being able to decode words accurately and quickly. And when you get tripped up trying to get individual words off the page, it’s a lot harder to remember and understand the meaning of what you’re reading.

Dyslexia is *not* a visual problem. It’s a common myth that the main symptom of dyslexia is seeing and writing letters backwards. Students with dyslexia don’t see letters and words any differently than other students, and it’s actually fairly common for young children to reverse letters (for example, mixing up

b's and d's) when they're first learning how to read and write—on its own, this isn't a warning sign that a student has dyslexia. And some dyslexic students never reverse letters at all, so just because a child *doesn't* do this doesn't mean they *don't* have a disability, either.

Is dyslexia something my child will outgrow?

No. Dyslexia is a lifelong, neurobiological (brain-based) condition, *not* a delay in typical development. Signs of trouble should always be taken seriously—if your child is struggling with reading, don't assume things will improve on their own. Scientists have used brain scans to show that when someone has dyslexia, their brain is “wired” differently—they're using different pathways and regions of the brain when they read. But with the right instruction, students with dyslexia are fully capable of learning how to read and achieving success in school. The positive effect of high-quality, evidence-based reading interventions can be seen on brain scans, too! While effective reading remediation is possible at any age, it gets harder and takes longer the more time passes. Addressing difficulties as soon as they show up helps keep students from falling behind or losing self-esteem.

What are some signs my child might be dyslexic?

Students with dyslexia may:

- Struggle to learn nursery rhymes, tell if two words rhyme, or make up their own rhymes.
- Have a lot of trouble learning the names and sounds of letters.
- Frequently mix up words that sound alike or mispronounce words that they already know (more than other children their age do).
- Read aloud slowly and awkwardly, with lots of stopping and starting and mispronunciations.
- Read words that have no connection to the letters on the page but have similar meanings in context (for example, saying *puppy* instead of *dog*).
- Frequently skip over words when reading.
- Make wild guesses at words based on the initial letter sound or on the first and last letters, ignoring the rest of the word.

NOTE:

Dyslexia often runs in families, so if you or another family member struggled with reading in school—even if you were never diagnosed—that can also be a sign that your child needs extra help.

See AFC's fact sheet *Reading Milestones: What your child should know and be able to do* (available at www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/reading_milestones.pdf) for a list of the skills your child should be mastering in pre-K through second grade, as well as some possible warning signs of a reading disability at different ages.

How do I get help?

If you think your child may be having trouble learning to read and write, ask for help right away! You know your child better than anyone, and it is better to act early than to “wait and see.” Start with your school: talk with your child's teachers, the school psychologist, or the principal. For suggestions of questions to ask to get the conversation started, see our fact sheet on literacy and parent-teacher conferences, available at: www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/literacy_parent_teacher_conferences.pdf.

RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION

When you first talk to staff at the school about your child’s progress in reading and writing, they may tell you about Response to Intervention (RTI). Schools use RTI to figure out what students need and match them with the right level of support. There are three levels, or “tiers,” under RTI:

TIER 1 — General classroom instruction.

All students are tested to figure out their individual strengths and needs. Students who are having trouble get extra help in their regular classrooms.

TIER 2 — Intervention for struggling students.

Students who aren’t making enough progress in Tier 1 get more intensive support in small groups, based on their specific needs.

TIER 3 — More intensive intervention.

This might mean spending more time receiving interventions (longer per day, or more days per week) or working with a teacher or reading specialist one-on-one.

REMEMBER:

RTI is not the same as special education! If you think your child has a disability and needs special education services at any time during the RTI process, you can ask for your child to be evaluated. You do NOT have to go through all three tiers first.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Some students struggling to learn to read may benefit from special education services, either right away or after trying other interventions. If your child is not currently getting special education services, school staff can help you start the process of evaluation. Evaluations help figure out if your child has a disability, what skills your child needs to work on, and what supports and services will help your child the most. If the evaluations find that your child qualifies for special education services, you will then meet with the school to create an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP is an important legal document that outlines your child’s needs and the services they should receive.

If your child already has an IEP, you may need to work with your school to fine-tune the services. Remember, you are an important member of the IEP team. You have the right to take part in all IEP meetings and to invite others (like a therapist or tutor, if your child is working with one) to join you.

If you feel like you are not getting the help you need at the school, don’t give up! Reach out to your Superintendent’s Office (see www.schools.nyc.gov/superintendents for more information) or contact the DOE’s Special Education Hotline at (718) 935-2007 or specialeducation@schools.nyc.gov.

What are my rights if I want a special education evaluation?

A student needs to be evaluated before getting any special education services. Evaluations can highlight reading, writing, and other academic skills your child is struggling with. The best evaluations also suggest ways school staff can help your child build those skills. The DOE is required to evaluate your child for free, and you have the right to get copies of those evaluations five days before the IEP meeting. However, you may decide you want to get an evaluation done by someone not connected to the DOE. There are two ways to make this happen:

1. You can get **private** evaluations yourself and share them with the school. A private evaluation is one set up and paid for by you or your health insurance company. The DOE must consider any private evaluations you bring them.

2. If the school fails to do evaluations on time, or if they do evaluations and you are not satisfied with them, you can ask the DOE to pay for an **independent** (outside) evaluation—a “second opinion.” Make this request in writing to your child’s school (or your Committee on Special Education, if your child attends a charter or non-public school). The DOE will either: (a) pay for the independent evaluation through an “assessment authorization form,” which lets you find a private provider at a DOE-approved rate; or (b) file an impartial hearing to try to prove their own evaluations were appropriate. For more information, see our *Guide to Special Education* at www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/special_ed_guide.pdf.

“PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL” vs. “NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL”

For a child struggling with reading, the DOE will typically do what’s called a **psycho-educational** evaluation, which combines psychological and academic achievement testing. This type of evaluation is not meant to diagnose a specific condition like dyslexia. For that, you need a **neuropsychological** evaluation, which includes many more tests designed to assess how your child’s brain works. This type of evaluation provides a detailed picture of a student’s strengths and weaknesses. It may also give research-based recommendations for how to best meet their learning needs. Unfortunately, private neuropsychological evaluations can be very costly and are not always covered by insurance. See above for information on requesting an independent evaluation paid for by the DOE.

My school says they’re not allowed to use the word “dyslexia” on my child’s IEP. Is this true?

No. Dyslexia is not one of the 13 disability classifications defined by special education law, so it won’t be listed in the “disability classification” box on the first page of the IEP. However, there is nothing in federal, state, or city law or regulations that prohibits using the word “dyslexia” elsewhere on the IEP (it could be used in the “present levels of performance and individual needs” section, for example).

The New York State Education Department put out guidance in August 2018 that *encourages* use of the term dyslexia when it’s appropriate for a given student. Schools don’t always know this, so you may want to bring a copy of that guidance document with you to the IEP meeting. You can find it at <http://bit.ly/nydyslexia>.

I’ve heard my child needs multisensory instruction. What does that mean?

“Multisensory” is just a fancy way of saying that children experience learning material in multiple ways, using multiple senses, including sight, sound, and touch. For example, a teacher might have a student trace a letter with their finger while saying the sound the letter makes out loud. This makes instruction more engaging for kids while providing lots of opportunities for them to practice what they’re learning in different ways. Students with and without disabilities can both benefit—multisensory teaching strategies aren’t just for special education! While multisensory instruction is often associated with reading, it can be used with other subjects, too.

What's "Orton-Gillingham"?

Oftentimes parents and teachers have heard that students with dyslexia or other reading difficulties need something called "Orton-Gillingham" or "OG," but are unclear about what exactly this is.

- **What Orton-Gillingham ISN'T:** A specific program or curriculum that a school can purchase and use.
- **What Orton-Gillingham IS:** A structured approach to teaching decoding and word recognition skills.

This approach to instruction is named for the neuropsychiatrist Dr. Samuel Orton and the psychologist and educator Anna Gillingham, who developed its principles in the 1930s. In a nutshell, it involves teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, and the structure of language in an explicit, systematic, multisensory way. This means that everything is directly and clearly explained, lessons follow a consistent structure and a logical order, and students have lots of opportunities to practice and get feedback. Many reading programs call themselves "Orton-Gillingham-based" because they use these key ideas and strategies—they're explicit, sequential, and multisensory. Wilson Reading System, Lindamood-Bell, and SPIRE are a few examples of OG-based programs that are effective for many students.

NOTE:

There's no one-size-fits-all solution that a school can go buy. It's important that any reading intervention be matched to an individual student's specific challenges.

This requires regular monitoring of progress and a lot of training and expertise on the part of the teacher, so that they're able to assess and target individual needs.

ALL kids benefit from structured, multisensory decoding instruction. The difference is that students with dyslexia *must* have it in order to learn to read, whereas some kids will do okay no matter what sort of approach is used. Students with disabilities also often need instruction that's more intensive—to work with a teacher one-on-one or in a small group, or simply to spend more time practicing in order to fully master a skill. To learn more about instruction and supports for students with dyslexia, check out the International Dyslexia Association's *Dyslexia Handbook*, available at <https://dyslexiaida.org/ida-dyslexia-handbook/>.

What else should I be thinking about?

There are a variety of strategies and services that can help a child learn to read and write. Every student is different, and what helps one child may not work for another. Below are a few more options you may want to think about if your child is not making progress.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Accommodations are changes to the way material is presented. There are many accommodations that can help students who are struggling to read and write. Some examples include:

- Extra time on tests, or test-taking in quieter and smaller spots;
- Texts shown in larger print; and
- Organizers, pre-written notes, and study guides.

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

Reading below grade level should not prevent a student from accessing age-appropriate books that they're able to understand. Assistive technology (AT), such as audiobooks or text-to-speech software,

can help students who struggle with decoding or fluency by letting them focus on content and meaning, instead of getting stuck on individual words. This is especially true for older students who are still working on foundational skills because they didn't receive appropriate instruction when they were young. While technology is not a substitute for effective reading instruction and intervention, it can keep students engaged and on track with the curriculum.

If you think your child could benefit from assistive technology, ask your school for an AT evaluation. To learn more, see our *Guide to Assistive Technology* at www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/assistive_technology_guide.pdf.

TIP:
Students with dyslexia, vision impairments, and other qualifying disabilities can get *free* audiobooks from Bookshare. Go to www.bookshare.org to learn more.

SUPPORT OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

If the schools have failed for a long time to teach your child to read and write, your child may be eligible for extra literacy help outside of school. If you believe this is the case, you can ask for outside, targeted tutoring as a legal remedy. For more information on how to do this, see our *Guide to Special Education* at www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/special_ed_guide.pdf.

LEARN MORE!

Interested in learning more about the science of reading, why some students need extra help, and what you can do to support your child's learning at home? Here are a few resources* to get you started:

Reading Rockets • www.readingrockets.org

National Center on Improving Literacy • www.improvingliteracy.org

Understood (for learning and attention issues) • www.understood.org

American Public Media • www.apmreports.org/reading

Institute of Education Sciences, *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten through 3rd Grade* • <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/21>

* AFC does not necessarily endorse or share the opinions of the organizations and reports listed here.

**Have questions or need assistance?
Please call AFC's Jill Chaifetz Education Helpline:**

866-427-6033 (toll free) • 10am to 4pm • Monday — Thursday

www.advocatesforchildren.org

This fact sheet does not constitute legal advice. If you have a legal problem, please contact an attorney or advocate.

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