



The Advocate

Advocates for Children of New York
Protecting every child's right to learn

Winter
2019

MISSION STATEMENT

Advocates for Children of New York's mission is to ensure a high-quality education for New York students who face barriers to academic success, focusing on students from low-income backgrounds.

AFC achieves this through four integrated strategies: free advice and legal representation for families of students; free trainings and workshops for parents and professionals, to equip them to advocate on behalf of students; policy advocacy to effect change in the education system and improve education outcomes; and impact litigation to protect the right to quality education and to compel needed education reform.

Julius' Story

Julius is a sweet 10-year-old fifth-grader who is diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD. Julius struggled in his public elementary school, especially with reading, despite having been identified as a student with a disability early on. Though Julius has the intellectual ability to achieve on grade level, he made minimal progress in first through third grades because he did not receive appropriate instruction. When his mom, Julia, reached out to Advocates for Children for help, Julius had become anxious, discouraged, and self-conscious about his academic difficulties. A special education evaluation halfway through third grade showed that Julius' reading skills were severely delayed and he was falling further and further behind academically.

After attending an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting where the school ignored the new evaluation and kept the same services that hadn't worked for Julius in the past, Julia worked with AFC to find a new program that could provide the intensive reading remediation her son needed. With our help, Julius moved to a small, specialized school for students with language-based learning disabilities for fourth grade. At his new school, Julius got one-on-one support from a teacher trained to work with students with dyslexia, and things quickly turned around. Just two months into the school year, his mom texted AFC, "Julius is coming home excited to read to me!!! In such short time, he's already making great progress. Thank you so much for everything you've done for us!"

Special edition on LITERACY



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. When Julius was evaluated in third grade, he had extremely low scores on tests measuring his decoding and word recognition abilities — he struggled to convert the written letters he saw on the page into words he could say out loud, even though those words were part of his spoken vocabulary. Like many kids with dyslexia, he instead relied on guessing words based on what they looked like or on the sounds of just some (rather than all) of the individual letters. For example, he read the word ride as "read" and the word going as "growing." Over the past year and a half, Julius has made great progress in his new school. Just like other students with dyslexia, he was always fully capable of learning to read — he just needed to be taught how!





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THE SCIENCE OF READING

Our brains are wired from birth for spoken language. For typically developing children, learning how to talk happens naturally: they pick it up from those around them. Learning to read, however, is *not* a natural or automatic process — being exposed to lots of books is important, but it's not enough to become a skilled reader. This is because *written* language is a fairly recent invention. No part of the brain is specifically devoted to reading. Instead, 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 relatively easily, 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. They're briefly described on the next page. If you want to learn more, a great place to get started is the website Reading Rockets (www.readingrockets.org) — check out “reading basics” and “target the problem.”

DID YOU KNOW?

In September 2015, Mayor de Blasio announced a new Universal Literacy initiative for New York City, with the goal of having all students reading on grade level by the end of second grade by 2026. Through this initiative, the NYC Department of Education (DOE) has trained over 400 dedicated reading coaches, who are now working with K-2 teachers in all 32 community school districts. Depending on a school's level of need, they may have a full-time coach or share a coach with several other schools.

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 instance, 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*).

THE FIVE PILLARS

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 means asking 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!



SPOTLIGHT ON PHONICS

Research is 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 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 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.
- 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 — and get feedback from the teacher right away.

Some things to look for that suggest your child’s school is using a good program:

- There’s a deliberate 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 — and a lot of student-teacher interaction.
- When a student comes across a word they can’t read, they’re encouraged to sound it out, not to guess based on the pictures or context.
- If there’s a classroom “word wall,” words are grouped by sound and letter patterns, not listed alphabetically.

There are lots of fun, engaging phonics programs that follow these principles! Making instruction systematic and explicit *doesn’t* mean “drill and kill,” and there’s no evidence that it prevents students from developing a love of books and reading. Quite the opposite — kids are typically excited to break the code and learn the “secrets” of language. There’s no joy in looking at a book and not being able to understand what it says.

READING MILESTONES

What your child should know and be able to do

The process of learning to read and write starts at birth — as babies and toddlers, children are developing the speech and language skills that will help them become successful readers in the future. The milestones listed here describe what your child should be learning during each of their first few years of school, along with common warning signs of future difficulty or disability.* It's important to remember that these are general guidelines, not hard and fast rules. Children don't all develop at exactly the same speed, and students may start working on a skill one school year but not master it until the next. And although this list ends with second grade, literacy instruction doesn't! Throughout late elementary, middle, and high school, students continue to build their vocabulary and learn new strategies for making sense of what they read.

PRE - K

MILESTONES

- ✓ Recognizes specific books by their covers.
- ✓ Knows how books are held and handled, like how to turn the page.
- ✓ Pretends to read and may have some books partly memorized.
- ✓ Looks at a book's pictures and pays attention when being read to.
- ✓ Asks questions or makes comments that show they understand what's happening in a book being read aloud. Makes connections between stories and things that have happened in real life.
- ✓ Understands that print has meaning and is different from pictures.
- ✓ Recognizes print around them, like on signs, boxes, and labels.
- ✓ Knows the names and sounds of at least 10 letters.
- ✓ Speaks in complete sentences of at least four words.
- ✓ Scribbles as a way of "writing."

POSSIBLE WARNING SIGNS

- × Can't recognize their own name in print.
- × Doesn't know any letters or often confuses letters and numbers.
- × Can't identify or understand the meaning of signs and symbols they've seen many times (for example, that the McDonald's golden M stands for the place where you eat french fries).
- × Continues to use "baby talk" more than other kids their age.
- × Has a hard time learning new words.
- × Has trouble learning nursery rhymes (like "Humpty Dumpty") or singing rhyming songs.
- × Doesn't attempt to scribble.

The website *Get Ready to Read!* has a free 20-question screening tool that you can use with your 4-year-old to see if they are on the right track: www.getreadytoread.org/screening-tools/grtr-screening-tool.

KINDERGARTEN

MILESTONES

- ✓ Follows print from left to right and from the top of the page to the bottom when read to by an adult.
- ✓ Knows the names and sounds of all 26 letters. Able to identify all letters in both upper- and lower-case.
- ✓ Recognizes some common words, such as *the* and *you*, by sight.
- ✓ Able to count the number of syllables in a word.
- ✓ Given a spoken word, can come up with another word that rhymes.
- ✓ Can blend two sounds together into a simple word (like *me* and *up*).
- ✓ Correctly identifies words that share the same beginning sound (for example, that *book* and *ball* both start with /b/).
- ✓ Understands that the order of letters in a written word matches up with the sounds of that word said out loud.
- ✓ Can write their own name and most letters.
- ✓ Writes words using made-up spelling (this shows that they're thinking about the sounds of words and how sounds relate to letters).
- ✓ Can answer questions, make predictions, and talk about stories they hear read aloud.
- ✓ Makes up and tells their own stories.

POSSIBLE WARNING SIGNS

- × Has a lot of trouble learning the names and sounds of letters (for example, making the connection between the letter S and the /s/ sound).
- × Can't sing the alphabet song in the right order.
- × Frequently mispronounces words that they already know (more than other kindergarteners do).
- × Can't tell if two words rhyme or make up their own rhymes.
- × Struggles to identify the first sound in a word.
- × Unable to talk about a book they've heard read aloud or retell a favorite story in their own words.

* SOURCE: *Overcoming Dyslexia* by Sally Shaywitz, MD (<http://dyslexia.yale.edu/research-science/overcoming-dyslexia/>); the National Resource Council's report *Preventing reading difficulties in young children* (<https://doi.org/10.17226/6023>); and Reading Rockets (www.readingrockets.org).

FIRST GRADE

MILESTONES

- ✓ Can count the number of individual sounds (phonemes) within a simple word like *cat* or *man*.
- ✓ Able to add or change individual phonemes in words in order to create new words (for example, will say the word *mice* when prompted to add /m/ to *ice*).
- ✓ Correctly decodes one-syllable words (like *pig* and *hot*) and nonsense words (like *hig* and *zot*) using what they know about phonics (mapping sounds onto letters).
- ✓ Recognizes some common, irregularly spelled words, such as *said* and *have*, by sight.
- ✓ Notices when they're having trouble understanding what they're reading or have made a mistake (for example, when an incorrectly decoded word doesn't make sense in context) and will try to self-correct.
- ✓ Can ask and answer questions about texts and make connections between what they read and what they already know.
- ✓ Writes things for other people to read.
- ✓ Knows that there is a correct way to spell words and tries to spell words based on how they sound.
- ✓ Uses basic punctuation and capitalization when writing.

POSSIBLE WARNING SIGNS

- ✗ Unable to break a compound word into its parts (for example, identifying that the word *cowboy* is made up of *cow* and *boy*).
- ✗ Frequently mixes up words that sound alike (such as *volcano* and *tornado*) when talking.
- ✗ Can't identify the first and last sound of a word (like that *map* starts with /m/ and ends with /p/).
- ✗ Has a hard time remembering letter-sound relationships.
- ✗ Unable to decode a simple, one-syllable nonsense word.
- ✗ Reads words that have no connection to the letters on the page but have similar meanings in context (for example, substituting *a* for *the*, or saying *puppy* instead of *dog*).
- ✗ When listening to a book read aloud by someone else, unable to follow along by tracking words with their finger.
- ✗ Can't remember or answer questions about what they've read.

SECOND GRADE

MILESTONES

- ✓ Correctly sounds out unfamiliar words, including some words with multiple syllables, using what they know about phonics.
- ✓ Reads second-grade level texts independently.
- ✓ Can read and re-read grade-level text aloud with appropriate speed and expression.
- ✓ Begins to use knowledge of the parts of words, like prefixes, suffixes, and root words, to figure out what new words mean and how to pronounce them.
- ✓ Correctly spells words that have been studied, and spells words the way they sound when unsure of correct spelling.
- ✓ Uses punctuation, capitalization, and different parts of speech correctly when writing.
- ✓ Understands and can talk about what is read, like identifying a book's main idea, making connections between books, and answering "why," "how," and "what-if" questions.

POSSIBLE WARNING SIGNS

- ✗ Continues to struggle to manipulate individual sounds within words (like identifying that the word *frog* without /r/ is *fog*).
- ✗ Frequently skips over words when reading.
- ✗ Makes wild guesses at words based on the initial letter sound or on the first and last letters, ignoring the rest of the word.
- ✗ Has difficulty recognizing common, frequently-used words by sight (it seems like they're always seeing the word for the first time).
- ✗ Has trouble remembering words and often uses vague, general terms like "stuff" and "things" rather than the specific names of objects.
- ✗ Reads aloud slowly and awkwardly, with lots of stopping and starting and mispronunciations.
- ✗ Avoids reading or finds reading exhausting.

What if my child isn't meeting these milestones?

If your child seems to be struggling more than their classmates, talk to their teacher about getting them extra help. After third grade, students move from "learning to read" to "reading to learn," and those who haven't mastered foundational skills will quickly start to fall behind academically. While effective reading remediation is possible at any age, it gets more difficult and takes longer the more time passes.

Check out AFC's fact sheet on literacy and parent-teacher conferences for suggestions of questions to ask to get the conversation started: www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/literacy_parent_teacher_conferences.pdf (also available in Spanish on our website). And if you feel like you aren't getting the help you need at the school, don't give up! Reach out to your Superintendent's Office or Borough Field Support Center or call our Education Helpline.

DYSLEXIA: FACT *vs.* FICTION

Dyslexia is something that most kids will naturally outgrow.

FICTION. Dyslexia is a lifelong, neurobiological condition, *not* a delay in typical development. Scientists have used brain scans to show that when someone has dyslexia, their brain is actually “wired” differently — they’re using different pathways and regions of the brain when they read. A high-quality, evidence-based reading intervention helps “rewire” the brain, and the sooner a student gets that help, the better. Signs of trouble should always be taken seriously — if your child is struggling, don’t assume things will improve on their own.



The main symptom of dyslexia is seeing and writing letters backwards. When a dyslexic student tries to read, it’s like the letters are jumping around on the page.

FICTION. Dyslexia is *not* a visual problem. Students with dyslexia don’t see letters and words any differently than other students. Instead, they tend to have trouble hearing the individual sounds in words (phonemic awareness) and connecting those sounds with the letters that represent them in print. 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.

Another important thing to know is that 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.

Dyslexia is not one of the 13 disability classifications defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), but schools can still use the word dyslexia on a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP).

FACT! Dyslexia is not a special education classification, but there is nothing in federal, state, or city law or regulations that prohibits use of the word “dyslexia” on an IEP. In fact, the New York State Education Department put out guidance in August 2018 that *encourages* use of the term when it’s appropriate for a given student. Schools don’t always know this, so parents and advocates may want to bring a copy of that guidance document with them to the IEP meeting. You can find it at <http://bit.ly/nydyslexia>.

Only special education teachers need to know about dyslexia.

FICTION. *All* teachers will have students with dyslexia in their classrooms. Experts estimate that between one in five and one in ten students are dyslexic, but not all of them qualify for special education services. In addition to needing to be able to identify kids with severe dyslexia early on in order to refer them for special education services, classroom teachers benefit from understanding the key principles of effective instruction for this population, because the same teaching strategies work for students with mild dyslexia as well as other kids struggling to decode.

A child can be both gifted and dyslexic.

FACT! Dyslexia has nothing to do with intelligence. It’s very possible for a child to be gifted and dyslexic at the same time. A student cannot be excluded from a gifted & talented (G&T) program because they have dyslexia, nor can being in a G&T class prevent them from getting special education services. Check out our guide to twice-exceptional students to learn more: www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/twice_exceptional_guide.pdf.

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 all of their 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 tends to be associated with reading, it can be used with other subjects, too.

To learn more about instruction and supports for students with dyslexia, check out the International Dyslexia Association’s *Dyslexia Handbook* (<https://dyslexiaida.org/ida-dyslexia-handbook/>).

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.

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.

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.

READING & 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.

FREE RESOURCES

- Bookshare (www.bookshare.org) and Learning Ally (www.learningally.org) provide free audiobooks to students with print disabilities, including dyslexia.
- AFC's *Guide to Assistive Technology* explains how to get AT in New York City schools: www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/assistive_technology_guide.pdf.

LEARN MORE!

IN THE NEWS...

Last fall, American Public Media released an audio documentary and article called *Hard Words: Why aren't kids being taught to read?* that explains the science of reading — as well as why that science isn't being taught in many teacher preparation programs. Check it out to learn more about how we can do a better job giving future teachers the knowledge and training they need to effectively teach all students how to read: www.apmreports.org/story/2018/09/10/hard-words-why-american-kids-arent-being-taught-to-read.

FOR PARENTS:

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

A Child Becomes A Reader: Proven Ideas from Research for Parents
<https://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/documents/readingk-3.pdf>

FOR EDUCATORS:

Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten through 3rd Grade
<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/21>



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