

Breaking Down the Barriers to Reading

Elementary School

Brought to you by the editors of Building Readers

Imagine your child's education is a skyscraper. Each year, with every new subject mastered, she adds a floor, making the building a little taller. Without a solid foundation, the whole structure will topple. When it comes to your child's education, reading is that foundation.

Without good reading skills, building the skyscraper will be impossible. Fortunately, there are lots of things you can do to help your child become a better reader.

Although there are many barriers to reading, there are just as many ways you can overcome them.

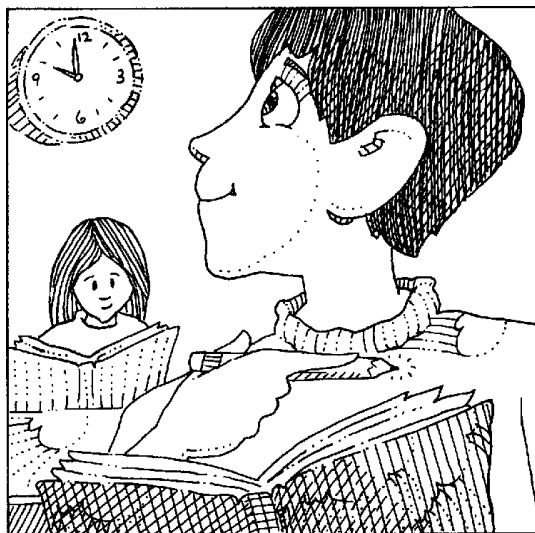
Lack of Time

With baseball practice, piano lessons, school plays and dentist appointments to juggle, not to mention the day-to-day rush of careers, cooking, housekeeping and childcare, it's no wonder many busy families feel there's just not enough time in the day to devote to reading.

Happily, they're wrong. Reading is too important *not* to be done regularly, but if you think there's no way to squeeze in some quality book time, *try some of these ideas*:

- **Schedule it.** If you have trouble finding time for your child to read because of scheduled family activities, make reading one of them.
Scratch something off of your regular weekend to-do list (do you really need to see another movie?) and pencil in a chunk of book time.
- **Be flexible.** There's no law that says bedtime must be reading time. If you and your child are too beat to read together at night, let him peruse a book at the breakfast table, before his bath or after dinner instead.

- **Take advantage** of forced downtime. If part of your child's day typically involves waiting with you (either in traffic, at the grocery store or the dry cleaners), turn it into reading time. Have small books in the car, in your purse or in her backpack, and make those moments of waiting more literary.



- **Ditch the distractions.** For thirty minutes every night, turn off the TV, computer and video games. It's amazing how much "extra" free time your child will discover once the house is unplugged.
- **Surround your child** with words! Give him plenty of access to books, magazines, paper, pencils and crayons.
The more he's exposed to reading and writing activities, the more likely he is to explore them.

Reluctance

If your child is a reluctant reader, it doesn't mean she's a poor one. Rather, reluctant readers are often average to above-average students who have simply fallen slightly behind their classmates' reading level.

Luckily, reluctant readers can usually be brought up to speed with extra encouragement, increased book time and by proving to them that reading can be fun. *Here's how*:

- **Get your child involved** in selecting books. Give him his own library card and lots of opportunities to use it. If he's put in charge of his reading, he'll likely feel more grown up. For most kids, that alone is enough incentive to keep reading!

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- **You have a major impact** on whether your child reads for pleasure, so be sure to set a good example! If you reach for a book as often as you pick up the remote control, your child will notice. Pretty soon, he'll realize that reading for fun is cool.
- **Give your child access** to interesting books (but don't force them on her). Have you noticed her bookshelf lately? If it's been a long time since you've updated her personal library, take a trip to the bookstore. If challenging titles are on hand at home, she may leaf through them more often.
- **Talk things over.** When reading together, stop once or twice to ask your child about the story. Reluctant readers may have trouble with comprehension, so discussing the story as you're reading is a good way to make sure he understands what's going on.
- **Get to know your child's** hobbies and interests, and look for books to go along with them. If she's a martial arts maven, find a well-written karate tale. If animals are more her style, consider a kid-friendly wildlife encyclopedia. Find books that touch on her passions, and she's likely to buckle down and start reading.
- **Stay involved!** Work closely with your child's teacher and school to monitor his progress and discuss changes in his reading performance.
- **Practice makes perfect,** so read together frequently. And when you do, don't "dumb things down" by choosing books well below her grade level. This deprives her of the chance to expand her vocabulary and learn new concepts. Do, however, pause occasionally to see if she understands what's being read.
- **Let your child listen** to taped stories while following along in the book. Many children with reading difficulties read too slowly for stories to make sense, and so they get frustrated. Listening to tapes helps eliminate this problem. If you can't find taped versions of his favorite books, consider recording your own.
- **Be patient!** Overcoming learning disabilities can be a lifelong task, so don't be upset if your child's progress seems slow. If you get angry or push too hard, she may begin to resist your efforts and avoid reading altogether.
- **And finally,** give yourself a break. It's not your job to solve your child's reading difficulties all alone. Do what you can to make your home a reading and writing-rich environment, but don't hesitate to ask for help. Turning your child into a good reader will be a team effort. Teachers, schools and doctors are on your side!

Learning Disabilities

If your child is one of the estimated 10,000,000 American youngsters with reading difficulties, don't panic. It's scary, but there are things you can do to help.

First, have him assessed by a learning disabilities specialist, the school or a pediatrician (to rule out vision and hearing problems) to determine his level of difficulty. After that, discuss with his teacher possible long-term strategies for dealing with the problem, because it will be a lengthy process.

On the bright side, there are many things you can do right away to help your child overcome this common barrier to reading. *Here are a few:*

- **Don't underestimate** your child's willingness to read and write. Although she has a learning disability, she needs as much access to quality reading materials as other children. Simply having exciting books available may inspire her to read more often.

Sources:

"Evaluate Your Child's Pre-School Skills," Learning Disabilities Association of America, <http://www.LDAAmerica.org/factsheets/fact1.shtml>.

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"How Can I Help My Child Learn to Read?" National Education Association, <http://www.nea.org/helpfrom/connecting/tools/read.html>.

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