

Reading Tips and Strategies for Students with Down Syndrome

Learning to read is an important academic and life skill: it contributes to independence, builds self-confidence and aides in overall development. For children with Down syndrome, reading is a relative strength with 60-70% of individuals achieving functional literacy (a 2nd to 4th grade reading level) by adulthood.

The ability to read can also promote speech and language development. When children can see the letters and syllables, they can better determine how the word should sound. Often children do not hear all the sounds in a word (beginning, middle, or end). Spoken words last only a moment, but the written word can be present for as long as needed. In addition, difficulties with auditory processing and auditory memory can make it challenging to follow and remember verbal directions; therefore written instructions, lists, and schedules can make children be more effective and independent in the classroom.

Early Reading

Children should have a receptive vocabulary of 50-100 words and be able to match and select pictures upon request prior to beginning structured reading activities. Matching words to pictures allows children to demonstrate that they can read, even if speech delays prohibit appropriate verbalizations. Use of the Matching-Selecting-Naming protocol is highly recommended and very successful as children begin to read. Provide *Errorless* practice at three levels of difficulty:

- Matching – picture to picture, then word to word, then word to picture
- Selecting – chose the correct word upon request
- Naming – child says or signs the word in response to the written word

Early reading progresses by addressing sight-reading and phonemic awareness. It typically takes 2-3 years of reading instruction for children to use their phonetic

knowledge effectively for decoding and spelling; therefore many children may not be considered phonetic readers until 7-8 years of age. Due to delays in auditory memory development, retaining the sound sequence for the phonetic decoding of words is more difficult. Therefore, teaching sight-words **prior to and while** you are teaching letters of the alphabet is helpful. When the alphabet is taught first, out of the context of the written word, many children do not connect that these symbols and sounds will help them learn to read, and they can lose motivation and learning momentum when they have to wait to learn all letters (capital and lowercase) and the corresponding sounds before they can begin to use them in words.

The following tips are recommended:

- Practice words to 80% mastery, then introduce new words, overlapping with some familiar words to increase confidence.
- During shared reading, encourage the child to read familiar words, while you read unfamiliar words, so he can continue reading with minimal interruptions. Stopping frequently to ‘sound out’ words can become distracting and impair reading comprehension.
- Once a sight-word vocabulary of 50-100 words has been achieved, then introduce short word families (e.g. -at, -ug, -en). Introduce 2 to 3 at a time, using those that have the most meaning or motivation for each child (e.g. dog, cat). Then introduce three-letter word families (-oat, -ing, -ook, etc.).
- Use single words that the child is already reading and build 2-3 word phrases (e.g. “Mommy’s hat” or “Go car”). Then build up to several words (e.g. “Mommy’s hat fell down” or “We go in the car”).

Alphabet: Rather than learning letters in alphabetical order, teach letters based on high interest. For example, the letters of their name, the first letters of their favorite people, activities, and things. Teach upper and lowercase letters together, so they learn that letters come in pairs (big & little). When referring to letters and words, use the terms to help differentiate what the child is looking at. For example say, “Point to the **letter** M” or “Show me the **word** Mommy” versus “Point to the M” or “Show me Mommy”.

Spelling: Learning to spell words one needs to write is important. For example, first and last name, address, friends’ names, and high frequency words (ex: “to” and “from”, etc). When teaching spelling, use multi-sensory activities that do not require

handwriting (letter tiles, keyboard, etc). Try to minimize handwriting requirements for spelling skills and activities, this may ease the frustration.

Create personal dictionaries or Word Banks of words that each child will use frequently and file them by category (clothes, food, friends) or alphabetically.

Reading Comprehension: Many children with Down syndrome have weaknesses with language and memory which make it harder to understand text. When sentences are challenging to read aloud, they may put all their effort into verbalizing versus comprehending. Working memory and other cognitive strengthening strategies are important in developing comprehension. Simple strategies in the classroom include stopping often to ask questions and allowing the child to fill in the blank, rather than open-ended questions for example, “The boy jumped over the _____.” Instead of, “What did the boy do?”

Composition: Use a scribe, so children can focus on composing a passage and minimize the influence of handwriting difficulties. Write about everyday sequences (e.g. I get up. I go to school. I have lunch. I go home), and special events (diaries or journals about parties or field trips). Write these in first-person language and consistent with spoken language, so these phrases can be practiced and utilized in social conversations. These are also meaningful passages for the student to practice reading skills while making social connections.

References:

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