

TIPS FOR PARENTS

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PUT READING FIRST

Success in school starts with reading.

When children become good readers in the early grades, they are more likely to become better learners throughout their school years and beyond.

Learning to read is hard work for children. Fortunately, research is now available that suggests how to give each child a good start in reading.

Becoming a reader involves the development of important skills, including learning to:

- **use** language in conversation
- **listen** and **respond** to stories read aloud
- **recognize** and name the letters of the alphabet
- **listen** to the sounds of spoken language
- **connect** sounds to letters to figure out the “code” of reading
- **read** often so that recognizing words becomes easy and automatic
- **learn** and use new words
- **understand** what is read

Preschool and kindergarten teachers set the stage for your child to learn to read with some critical early skills. First, second, and third grade teachers then take up the task of building the skills that children will use every day for the rest of their lives. As a parent, you can help by understanding what teachers are teaching and by asking questions about your child’s progress and the classroom reading program.

You can also help your children become readers. Learning to read takes practice, more practice than children get during the school day. This brochure describes what a quality reading program should look like at school and how you can support that program through activities with your children.

IF YOUR CHILD IS JUST BEGINNING TO LEARN TO READ

At school you should see teachers...

- Teaching the sounds of language. The teacher provides opportunities for children to practice with the sounds that make up words. Children learn to put sounds together to make words and to break words into their separate sounds.
- Teaching the letters of the alphabet. Teachers help children learn to recognize letter names and shapes.
- Helping children learn and use new words.
- Reading to children every day. Teachers read with expression and talk with children about what they are reading.

At home you can help by...

- Practicing the sounds of language. Read books with rhymes. Teach your child rhymes, short poems, and songs. Play simple word games: How many words can you make up that sound like the word “bat”?
- Helping your child take spoken words apart and put them together. Help your child separate the sounds in words, listen for beginning and ending sounds, and put separate sounds together.

- Practicing the alphabet by pointing out letters wherever you see them and by reading alphabet books.

IF YOUR CHILD IS JUST BEGINNING TO READ

At school you should see teachers...

- Systematically teaching phonics—how sounds and letters are related.
- Giving children the opportunity to practice the letter-sound relationships they are learning. Children have the chance to practice sounds and letters by reading easy books that use words with the letter-sound relationships they are learning.
- Helping children write the letter-sound relationships they know by using them in words, sentences, messages, and their own stories.
- Showing children ways to think about and understand what they are reading. The teacher asks children questions to show them how to think about the meaning of what they read.

At home you can help by...

- Pointing out the letter-sound relationships your child is learning on labels, boxes, newspapers, magazines and signs.
- Listening to your child read words and books from school. Be patient and listen as your child practices. Let your child know you are proud of his reading.

IF YOUR CHILD IS READING

At school you should see teachers...

- Continuing to teach letter-sound relationships for children who need more practice. On average, children need about two years of instruction in letter-sound relationships to become good spellers as well as readers.
- Teaching the meaning of words, especially words that are important to understanding a book.
- Teaching ways to learn the meaning of new words. Teachers cannot possibly teach students the meaning of every new word they see or read. Children should be taught how to use dictionaries to learn word meanings, how to use known words and word parts to figure out other words, and how to get clues about a word from the rest of the sentence.
- Helping children understand what they are reading. Good readers think as they read and they know whether what they are reading is making sense. Teachers help children to check their understanding. When children are having difficulty, teachers show them ways to figure out the meaning of what they are reading.

At home you can help your child by...

- Rereading familiar books. Children need practice in reading comfortably and with expression using books they know.
- Building reading accuracy. As your child is reading aloud, point out words he missed and help him read words correctly. If you stop to focus on a word, have your child reread the whole sentence to be sure he understands the meaning.
- Building reading comprehension. Talk with your child about what she is reading. Ask about new words. Talk about what happened in a story. Ask about the characters, places, and events that took place. Ask what new information she has learned from the book. Encourage her to read on her own.

MAKE READING A PART OF EVERY DAY

- Share conversations with your child over meal times and other times you are together. Children learn words more easily when they hear them spoken often. Introduce new and interesting words at every opportunity.
- Read together every day. Spend time talking about stories, pictures, and words.
- Be your child's best advocate. Keep informed about your child's progress in reading and ask the teacher about ways you can help.
- Be a reader and a writer. Children learn habits from the people around them.
- Visit the library often. Storytimes, computers, homework help, and other exciting activities await the entire family.

HELPING YOUR CHILD TO TALK

When a child talks, she is actually combining a lot of faculties, mainly those of listening, understanding, wanting to communicate, and good muscle coordination.

Following are a few tips for helping your child learn to talk:

1. Bend down to the child's eye level. Get your child's attention before you give a command.
2. Create opportunities for the child to communicate. For example, put food items out of his reach but within sight and wait for him to ask. Increased interaction and communication helps the child pick up language better and faster.
3. Talk to your child in short sentences. Talk throughout the day regarding what you/your child is doing. The child should look at the activity. Begin with names of objects/persons and action words.
4. Sing nursery rhymes or read storybooks aloud to your child. The more he listens to them, the more he is likely to join in the activity by singing or repeating words. Reading and talking go hand in hand. So develop the child's reading skills simultaneously.
5. Avoid asking questions. Children learn by imitation and not by answering questions.
6. Don't make a habit of correcting your child's speech errors. It is more helpful to repeat what the child has said with the error corrected. For example, if the child says, "*her gived me an apple*", you can respond, "*How nice! She gave you an apple!*" that way you can provide some useful information about forming sentences without making the child self-conscious.
7. Your child may hesitate or be unclear as she attempts to talk. Be patient with your child.
8. Give a lot of praise. Find out what reward works with your child. For example, food item or tokens. Over time, work towards using social rewards like '*well done*', '*good job*', or clapping.
9. When your baby is 3-4 months of age, start looking at picture books or magazines together. Name each picture you look at and when your child starts to repeat the names, make a scrapbook of magazine picture he recognizes. By the time your child is 8 to 9 months of age, set aside a short period every day for reading aloud.
10. If the child is exposed to two languages, it may so happen that his progress in one of them is faster or that he may mix the two up as he speaks. That is normal, and over time, most children catch up with their language difficulties.
11. Every child will have her own rate of picking up words and starting to talk. Accepting this and working with your child with patience will go a long way in helping your child learn to talk.

HELPING YOUR CHILD TO READ

DEVELOPING PHONEMIC AWARENESS:

1. Play alphabet games – ask your child to spot the letters of her name on hoardings, or have words for each letter of the alphabet.
2. Sing and teach nursery rhymes or read out stories with rhyming words. Rhyming words help promote phonemic awareness. Help your child spot rhyming words. For example, if you read out 'cat', you can ask your child to say all words she knows which sounds like 'cat'.
3. Play games in which you ask the child, "*I spy with my little eye, a toy which begins with the sound /m/. Why don't you get it for me?*" and urge the child to get his soft toy monkey. You can also ask the child to sort out objects which begin from the same sound from those which don't – "*can you separate all the animals which begin with the sound /b/ from the lot there?*"
4. Once initial mastery is achieved with beginning sounds, you can proceed to play games with ending or middle sounds.
5. Play games which focus on the number of sounds (or syllables for an elder child) in a word. Ask the child to remove /n/ from "*nice*" or to substitute /r/ in place of /n/ in '*nice*'. Breaking down words into sounds and syllables and then putting them together as words again is crucial for reading. While playing spelling games, make your child say the sounds rather than the letters (/b/ /a/ /t/), and tap as she says every sound.
6. Combine rhyming with breaking of sounds, with games such as "what rhymes with '*sun*' but begins with /p/? Focus on the sounds rather than the letters, and on single sounds rather than cluster sounds like /gr/ or /fl/ initially.

READING WITH YOUR CHILD:

1. Have special area in your house where storybooks can be kept and you and your child can read. Use books which have a large print. Let your child pick a book. Swap books if she loses interest in it.
2. Start with previewing the storybook. Before getting down to actual reading, look at the pictures, describe the actions and talk about colours used. Engage the child by drawing parallels between the pictures in the book and her own life.
3. Interactive story book reading involves the child in the reading. Let her flip the pages, or move her finger under every word that you read. Reading the entire book all by yourself as the child listens on may get monotonous for the child. Ask her which is her favourite page in the book, and read that with her. Comment and converse on what you just read. Allow the child to interrupt you and discuss what you just read. Explain the meaning of words which she doesn't know. For repeated phrases or rhymes, wait for the child to complete it, as you move your finger under the words – "*the wheels of the bus go round and ___*", "*jack and jill went up the ___*"
4. As you read, pause and play games about rhyming words or sounds and help your child in better association of sounds and syllables. Work on your child's ability to recognize letters from the alphabets, capital and small print, numbers etc as you read. Read the page numbers on each page aloud. This will help the child build an association with the number and how it is said, which will help her in reading the number.
5. Reading is a difficult skill which a child gets after putting in a lot of efforts. So praise and encourage your child at every step to keep her motivated and enthusiastic.

Finally, talking, reading and writing, all become easier for the child to grasp, if it is done together with each faculty used to reinforce the others and with correlations to the child's day to day activities.

STRENGTHEN EARLY LITERACY

Do you have or work with children who are just beginning to read? As a parent or teacher, you can strengthen these early literacy skills by becoming an active participant in this learning process. Spending time reading with your children not only encourages them to be good readers, but also helps to develop a love of reading that could last a lifetime!

PIECE YOUR WAY TO GREAT READING SKILLS

Putting puzzles together with your children is a great pre-reading activity. As children work to make the pieces fit, they learn what relationships make the pieces go together. Helping them talk about and describe what kind of piece they are looking for helps introduce such pre-reading **concepts** such as big/small, straight/round, middle/end, among others. Say things to your children to encourage this such as, *"Does it need round edges or straight edges?"; "Is the piece big or small?"; or "Is the piece near the middle or the end?"*

Strengthen the learning of **adjectives, colors, and listening skills** by providing your children with clues such as, *"I think you need a piece with BLUE on it," or "I'll bet it is the piece with the BABY cat or kitten on it."* Be creative and talk with them to help figure out the correct answers. Children will have to listen to your clue and look for the matching piece.

TALK AND READ TO CHILDREN TO STRENGTHEN EARLY LITERACY SKILLS

Reading and talking with your children provides wonderful opportunities to develop reading readiness skills such as **awareness of sounds, letters, and numbers**. When you are reading a book with your children, point out words that start with the same sound to develop an understanding of the relationship between letters and sounds. Increase recognition and awareness of numbers by pointing to and naming each page number.

When talking with your children, help them notice words that rhyme such as "shoe," "blue," "to," and "moo." Ask them to try to think of another word that sounds the same (or rhymes). If they are old enough, help your children start to copy and write their name and numbers. When children are able to connect sounds they hear with letters they see, they are building literacy skills. The more you practice these skills together, the more success your child will have when learning to read.

TEACHING A CHILD TO CARE FOR BOOKS COULD START A LIFE-LONG LOVE OF READING

Knowing how to use and take care of a book is an important skill for preschoolers and older children. Teach them to treat a book carefully, so they can enjoy it forever. Pick a *"special"* place in your child's room or the classroom to keep books where they will be safe, stacked neatly, and easy to find. Talk with children about what a book might be about just from looking at the front picture, and show your child how to turn the pages carefully so they don't tear. Teaching your child to respect and love books could build a love of reading that lasts a lifetime!

HELPING A CHILD WHO STUTTERS

1. Speak with your child in an unhurried way, pausing frequently. At the same time, try not to sound unnatural. Wait a few seconds after your child finishes speaking before you begin to speak. Your own slow, relaxed speech will be far more effective than any criticism or advice such as "slow down" or "try it again slowly." Such simplistic advice can be felt as demeaning and is not helpful.
2. Try to decrease criticisms, rapid speech patterns, interruptions and questions. Children speak more freely if they are expressing their own ideas rather than answering an adult's questions. Instead of asking questions, simply comment on what your child has said, thereby letting him know that you heard him.
3. You may be tempted to finish sentences or fill in words. Try not to.
4. Maintain natural eye contact and wait patiently and naturally until he/she is finished.
5. Give your complete undivided attention to your child at specific pre-decided times in the day. During this time, let the child choose what he would like to do. Let him direct you in activities and decide himself whether to talk or not. When you talk during this special time, use slow, calm and relaxed speech with plenty of pause. This quiet, calm time can be a confidence-builder for younger children, letting them know that their parent enjoys their company. As the child gets older, it can be a time when the child feels comfortable talking about his feelings and experiences with a parent.
6. Observe the way you interact with your child. Try to increase those times that give your child the message that you are listening to what she says rather than how she says it, and give her plenty of time to talk.
7. Help all members of the family learn to take turns talking and listening. Children, especially those who stutter, find it much easier to talk when there are few interruptions and they have the listeners' attention.
8. Be aware that those who stutter usually have more trouble controlling their speech on the telephone. Please be patient in this situation. If you pick up the phone and hear nothing, be sure that it is not a person who stutters trying to start a conversation before you hang up.
9. Above all, convey that you accept your child as he is. The most powerful force will be your support of him, whether he stutters or not.

WHY DO SOME CHILDREN REFUSE TO GO TO SCHOOL

CASE EXAMPLES

Rebecca, an eight-year-old girl, has always had difficulty attending school. Since she began third grade two months ago, her problems have significantly worsened. She constantly begs to stay home from school, having tantrums that cause delay in dressing and often result in her missing the bus. After arriving at school, Rebecca frequently complains of stomachaches, headaches and a sore throat to her teacher and asks to visit the school nurse with whom she pleads to call her mother. Her mother typically picks her up early twice a week. When Rebecca gets home she spends the remainder of the afternoon watching TV and playing with her toys. When her mother is unable to pick her up early, Rebecca calls her mother's cell phone periodically throughout the afternoon to "check in" and reassure herself that nothing bad has happened. Rebecca's teacher has expressed concern about her missing so much class time which has resulted in incomplete assignments and difficulty learning.

Nicholas is a fourteen-year-old boy who has missed forty-three days of school since beginning the eighth grade four months ago. When home from school, Nicholas spends most of the day online or playing video games. On the days he does attend school he is typically late for his first period which enables him to avoid hanging out with other kids before class. He always goes to the library during lunch. When he does go to class, he sits in the back of the classroom, never raises his hand and has difficulty working on group projects. Nicholas' teachers have noticed that he is always absent on days that tests or book reports are scheduled. His parents have already punished him after his first report card came home since he received D's in Math and Social Studies and failed Gym for cutting. Nicholas' parents have started to wonder if they should change his school placement and have asked the school to arrange home tutoring while this alternative is explored.

PREVALENCE AND DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS

As much as 28% of school aged children in America refuse school at some point during their education.¹ School refusal behavior is as common among boys as girls. While any child aged 5-17 may refuse to attend school, most youths who refuse are 10-13 years old. Peaks in school refusal behavior are also seen at times of transition such as 5-6 and 14-15 years as children enter new schools. Although the problem is considerably more prevalent in some urban areas, it is seen equally across socioeconomic levels.

Rebecca and Nicholas are just two examples of how school refusal manifests in youth. The hallmark of this behavior is its heterogeneity. Defined as substantial, child-motivated refusal to attend school and/or difficulties remaining in class for an entire day, the term "**school refusal behavior**" replaces obsolete terms such as "**truancy**" or "**school phobia**," because such labels do not adequately or accurately represent all youths who have difficulty attending school. School refusal behavior is seen as a continuum that includes youths who always miss school as well as those who rarely miss school but attend under duress.

Hence, school refusal behavior is identified in youths aged 5-17 years who:

1. are entirely absent from school, and/or
2. attend school initially but leave during the course of the school day, and/or
3. go to school following crying, clinging, tantrums or other intense behavior problems, and/or

4. exhibit unusual distress during school days that leads to pleas for future absenteeism.

As evidenced by Rebecca and Nicholas, there are varying degrees of school refusal behavior. **Initial school refusal behavior** for a brief period may resolve without intervention. Substantial school refusal behavior occurs for a minimum of two weeks. **Acute school refusal behavior** involves cases lasting two weeks to one year, being a consistent problem for the majority of that time. **Chronic school refusal behavior** interferes with two or more academic years as this refers to cases lasting more than one calendar year. Youths who are absent from school as a result of chronic physical illness, school withdrawal which is motivated by parents or societal conditions such as homelessness, or running away to avoid abuse should not be included in the above definition of school refusal behavior as these factors are not child-initiated.

While some school refusers exhibit a more heterogeneous presentation, typically these youths can be categorized into two main types of troublesome behavior — internalizing or externalizing problems. The most prevalent internalizing problems are generalized worrying (“the worry-wart”), social anxiety and isolation, depression, fatigue, and physical complaints (e.g. stomachaches, nausea, tremors and headaches). The most prevalent externalizing problems are tantrums (including crying and screaming), verbal and physical aggression, and oppositional behavior.

The cause and maintenance of school refusal behavior

Rebecca had several physiological symptoms at school and went home to be with her mother and play. Nicholas on the other hand, avoided potentially distressing social and evaluative situations at school which negatively impacted his academic performance. Although many behaviors characterize youths who refuse school, there are a few variables that serve to cause and maintain this problem.

School refusal behavior occurs for one or more of the following reasons:

1. To avoid school-related objects or situations that cause general distress such as anxiety, depression or physiological symptoms
2. To escape uncomfortable peer interactions and/or academic performance situations such as test-taking or oral presentations
3. To receive attention from significant others outside of school
4. To pursue tangible reinforcement outside of school

The above four reasons for school refusal behavior can be explained by principles of reinforcement. Any one child can refuse school for one or more of these reasons. The first two reasons characterize youths who refuse school to avoid or escape something unpleasant (negative reinforcement). For example, one of the reasons for Rebecca’s crying in the morning is her fear of riding the school bus. By tantruming she accomplishes her goal of avoiding the school-related object (the school bus) that causes her distress. Another example of negative reinforcement is when Nicholas escapes aversive peer interactions and exams by school refusing. The third and fourth reasons characterize youths who refuse school to gain rewards (positive reinforcement). Rebecca, as is common with many younger children, tries to avoid school as a means of having her mother provide her with excessive attention and closeness.

Thus, Rebecca’s behavior in this situation may be associated with separation anxiety. Another instance of positive reinforcement is exemplified by Nicholas, who basically has more fun being at home on the computer and listening to music than being in school. It is important to note that

alcohol and drug use can occur among adolescents who school refuse for one or more of the reasons listed above. For example, a teenager who is extremely socially anxious may drink alcohol as a way of enduring distressing social or evaluative situations. Another youngster who avoids school may smoke marijuana during school hours as a means of gaining acceptance by peers or simply because it is more enjoyable than attending school. While all forms of school refusal can be equally debilitating, typically, mental health professionals receive fewer referrals for youths who have internalizing as opposed to externalizing behavior problems. In other words, the youth who exhibits anxiety is less likely to receive treatment than the youth who is disruptive.

TREATMENT

School personnel — teachers, nurses, principals — are frequently the first professionals to identify the existence of a problem that requires immediate attention and intervention. As such, school personnel play a vital role in alerting parents to the problem and helping facilitate referrals for treatment by mental health specialists. The next step towards effective treatment by mental health professionals is gaining an understanding of the reasons that motivate school refusal. While school refusal per se is not a clinical disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, it can be associated with several psychiatric disorders (e.g. Separation Anxiety Disorder, Social Phobia, Conduct Disorder). Thus, it is vital that youths who are school refusing receive a comprehensive evaluation that includes a structured diagnostic interview and empirically supported assessment measures, such as “The School Refusal Assessment Scale” (SRAS)², to understand the biopsychosocial factors contributing to their behavior. Once a clear diagnostic picture is established, an individualized treatment plan can be developed to address the positive and negative reinforcers that are associated with the school refusal behavior and comorbid psychiatric disorders.

The traditional treatments for school refusal behavior employed by mental health professionals have unfortunately had limited effectiveness. While certain treatment modalities such as psychodynamic therapies, forced school attendance, family-based techniques, medication and use of systematic desensitization work as the sole treatment modality for some youngsters, not all children who refuse school will improve with the chosen treatment. Thus, clinical scientists have developed a scientifically-based, comprehensive assessment and treatment package for youths with school refusal behavior. Table 1 illustrates this effective, straightforward treatment model which addresses each of the four components of school refusal behavior. Consultation with child psychiatrists may be necessary in certain cases of school refusal behavior that involve highly complicated clinical symptoms and comorbidities. For example, in order to increase the probability of successful therapeutic intervention, the child refusing school who exhibits mainly internalizing problems may benefit from adjunctive pharmacotherapy (e.g., Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor – SSRI) to help lower his or her anxiety.

TREATMENT COMPONENTS FOR EACH FUNCTION OF SCHOOL REFUSAL BEHAVIOR

Function or Reason	Treatment Components
<p>Escape from negative affect (Sadness, the blues, fears, generalized anxiety and worry, separation anxiety, various phobias)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Somatic management skills such as breathing retraining or progressive muscle relaxation training • Gradual reintroduction (exposure) to school

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-reinforcement and building self efficacy
<p>Escape from aversive social and evaluative situations (Social phobia, test anxiety, public speaking fears, shyness, social skills deficits)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive restructuring of negative self-talk • Role play practice • Graded exposure tasks involving real-life situations • Social skills training and problem-solving skills training • Building coping templates
<p>Attention-seeking behavior (Tantrums, crying, clinging, separation anxiety)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent training in contingency management • Changing parent commands • Establishing routines • Use of rewards and punishers for school attendance and school refusal • Forced attendance, if necessary and under special circumstances
<p>Positive tangible reinforcement (Lack of structure or respect for house rules and responsibilities, free access to reinforcement, disregard for limits)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contracting with parents to increase incentive for school attendance • Curtail social and other activities as a result of nonattendance • Provide the family with alternative problem-solving strategies to reduce conflict • Communication skills and peer refusal skills are also sometimes added to this process

Returning to our case examples, careful evaluation revealed that Rebecca's school refusal behavior was initially a function of separation anxiety which was positively reinforced by having her mother's attention and play time during school hours. This lead her therapist to design a treatment program combining somatic management skills, practice in being away from her mom and parent training in contingency management. Following Nicholas' evaluation he was prescribed a treatment to address his social anxiety that motivated his school refusal. Nicholas' behavior was negatively reinforced by avoiding social and evaluative situations. Thus, his treatment plan involved cognitive restructuring, role plays, social skills and problem-solving skills, and gradual reintroduction to school. In addition, a strong working relationship between the therapist and the youth's school officials is an integral component of a successful treatment program for school refusal behavior. As an example, through a structured treatment plan with clear goals and a definitive time frame, a helpful school official

might facilitate Nicholas' return to school or Rebecca remaining in her classroom rather than the nurse's office.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

When children like Rebecca and Nicholas refuse school, immediate intervention is necessary not only because school attendance is mandated by law, but also to address negative social, psychological and academic consequences to the youth and family. If not identified and treated, school refusal behavior has severe short- and long-term consequences. Some of the short-term consequences of school refusal behavior include significant child stress, deteriorating school performance, social isolation, and family tension and conflict. Some of the longer term consequences include decreased probability of attending college, impaired social functioning impacting personal and professional goals, and increased risk of substance abuse, anxiety and depression in adulthood. Furthermore, the longer the youth refuses to attend school, the greater the risk of these problems developing. Taken together, it is essential that children, parents, mental health professionals, and school officials act collectively to further understand school refusal. It remains a prevalent and potentially grave problem that is under-investigated regarding empirically-based assessment and treatment.