

"HOW CAN I HELP MY STRUGGLING READERS?"

Two top literacy experts tackle your toughest problems. **By Nell K. Duke & Michael Pressley**



Michael Pressley and Nell K. Duke, of Michigan State University, to answer the questions of real teachers. Using the following strategies can bring you closer to the lofty goal of turning all struggling readers into successful ones.

Q. "I have a few students who are reading a year and a half behind. How can I teach to their needs and teach the rest of my class?"

A. In an average class, half will be reading below grade level and half will be reading above it. A typical class often includes a few children reading a year or more below grade level. They always deserve more teaching attention.

For some, a more intensive version of the current curriculum is needed, albeit matched to their level of reading. Such children need more small group reading time and more of the available tutoring time. It's also important to encourage parents to read regularly with these kids.

If they are struggling with beginning word recognition, students may need more explicit skills instruction, through in-the-classroom small reading groups and from tutors and a reading specialist.

Try a variety of approaches and monitor what works. If a child makes progress from reading lots of decodable books, encourage him to read more of them and steer him toward more demanding ones. If the child eats up reading series books, encourage that. If the child responds well to a classroom volunteer who has the patience to help him sound out words, give him more time with that person.

Q. "What do I do with a student who has difficulty pronouncing words, reads slowly in general, and writes with many misspelled words?"

A. Ask yourself if this child is having difficulty with pronunciation or other aspects of language. Children with oral language difficulties are at much greater risk for reading and writing problems and should be evaluated by a speech and language specialist.

This is a student who probably needs support from a professional reading >>

The reasons some children struggle with reading are as varied as the children themselves. From trouble decoding words to problems retaining information, reading difficulties are complex. All kids, says the International Reading Association, "have a right to instruction designed with their

specific needs in mind." The question is how to identify and address these needs. It can seem a daunting, if not impossible, task. But, when searching for inspiration, know that scientists estimate with the right instruction, 95 percent of students can be taught to read properly. With that in mind we asked two literacy experts,

specialist. The more signs of general language difficulties—and this student has several—the more there is reason for concern that more than just the language arts curriculum will be affected.

Q. “I have a first-grade student who is making little progress reading. He seems bright, he knows his letters, and his parents read to him regularly. What should I do next?”

A. You’re right to be concerned. One old adage about first graders was, “They’ll

specialist support is not available, one-to-one tutoring, even from individuals not specifically trained in reading, often produces improvements. So, do what you can to find adults who can read with these students, offering them support in sounding out and decoding the words.

Even if you already offer a great deal of systematic skills instruction in your class, it might make sense to have a tutor provide more such instruction and, most importantly, practice.

But this tutoring should be monitored

a century of psychological research is that, if practice does not make perfect, it makes better and faster. Encouraging a student with fluency problems to read a lot makes sense from many perspectives. It provides practice with phonics skills, increases the familiarity of words that occur frequently in text and should stimulate development of such words as sight words, and it increases vocabulary. It is hard to imagine a down side to reading more.

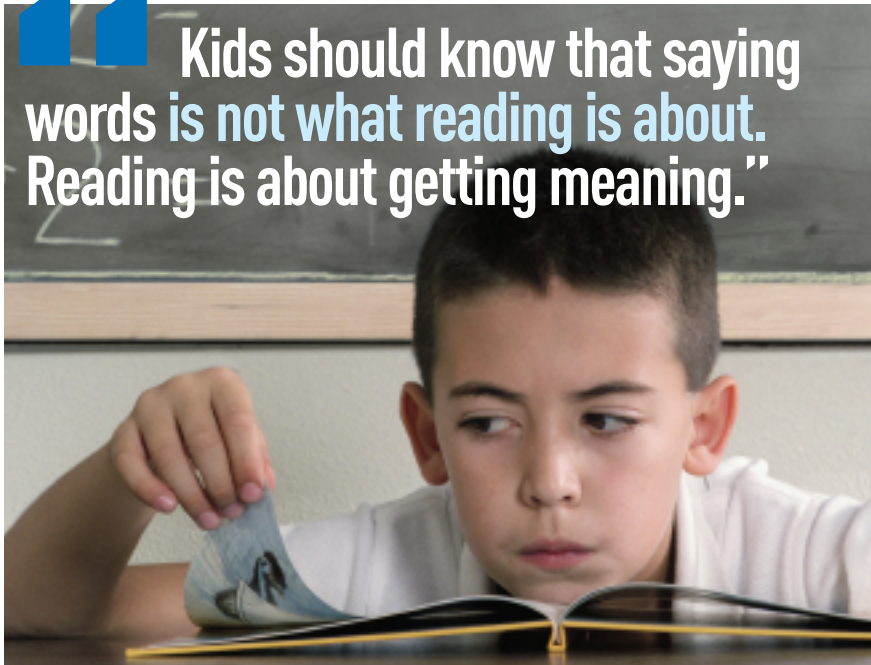
For the best results, encourage students to read both books that are at their reading level and some that are just a little bit challenging. And be sure they read the more difficult books with some support from an adult. Rereading books helps, but what seems more important is the amount of time kids spend reading.

Q. “I have several fifth-grade students who are great at reading words, but who understand or remember almost nothing they read. What is going on with these students and what should I do?”

A. There have always been “word callers” out there! The problem you describe is common. It is essential that you develop the understanding in these students that reading words is not what reading is about. Reading is about getting meaning from text. Similarly, these students need to know that reading fast is not necessarily the sign of a good reader. In fact, good readers often read quite slowly, reflecting on the text and responding to it.

Teaching these students to use comprehension strategies every time they read is key. Students should be taught to size up a text before beginning to read the words. They should look at the title, pictures, and section headers and make guesses about what is going to be in the text. As they begin to read, they should reflect on whether their predictions hold. Encourage students to develop mental images of the settings, characters, and actions, or in the case of an informational text, of the processes being explained in the text.

When text gets confusing, good read-



Kids should know that saying words is not what reading is about. Reading is about getting meaning.”

read when they’re ready!” The problem is, students who are struggling at the end of first grade often continue to struggle.

How you proceed depends on the instruction the child has received so far. For many students, the solution is more intensive and more systematic skills instruction. The most recent National Reading Panel report says that the key for many struggling readers is learning to sound out words. You can work toward this goal by including such students in small reading groups which systematically cover these skills.

But it’s ideal for these children to receive additional individual attention as well, preferably from someone with expertise in beginning reading. If reading

carefully to determine whether it is helping. Some students are not going to “get it” from systematic phonics and practice. They need a different approach. These are the students who really need time with a skilled reading specialist.

Q. “I’m a fourth-grade teacher with a student reading two years behind who is also struggling with fluency. Any ideas?”

A. The National Reading Panel rightly concluded that for increasing reading fluency the best approach is one-to-one or small group, teacher-supported, guided, and repeated reading.

In general, the best supported conclusion that follows from more than

ers re-read or slow their reading. Along the way, readers check to see if they remember what they read, and they make interpretations.

And, of course, throughout reading, they connect ideas in the text to their prior knowledge in ways that help them to understand the text. For example, while reading a book on penguins, they think, “That’s what the penguins in *March of the Penguins* did.”

There is very clear evidence that teaching readers to read actively improves comprehension. However, comprehension strategies need to be used every day since this type of instruction is most effective if it occurs over years.

Start by giving kids an overall introduction to comprehension strategies, then get them to use the techniques one at a time until they are using a small repertoire of strategies consistently. For example, a teacher might teach prediction until her students are using it on their own, and then add mental imagery to the mix, with students practicing using prediction and imagery in coordination until they are comfortable doing it habitually.

Then, the teacher might add summarization as a strategy, continuing to add strategies over the course of the school year until students are using prediction, imagery, connecting to prior knowledge, questioning, seeking clarification, and summarization all at the same time. The Learning and Academic Research Center (LARC) has developed a five-page document providing succinct guidelines on how to use comprehension-strategies instruction.

In the best of all possible worlds, comprehension-strategies instruction starts in kindergarten and first grade. If that happens, students may never develop the idea that reading is just saying the words, but rather, they’ll appreciate that reading is about understanding meaning. □

MICHAEL PRESSLEY AND NELL K. DUKE ARE LITERACY RESEARCHERS AT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY. DUKE IS THE ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF THE LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT RESEARCH CENTER (LARC). DR. PRESSLEY IS A UNIVERSITY DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR. SEND YOUR LITERACY QUESTIONS TO US AT INSTRUCTOR@SCHOLASTIC.COM.

2/3 Vertical Right