



Literacy difficulties and dyslexia

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Session overview

- Development of literacy skills
- Definitions of dyslexia
- Importance of the label?
- Causes and models
- Strategies which can be used at home
- Support for parents with reading difficulties



True or False - Statistics related to literacy

- 18% of children do not meet the phonics standard in Year 1.
- 10% of children do not meet the expected standard in reading by the end of Key Stage 1.
- 27% of children do not meet the expected standard in reading by the end of Key Stage 2.
- Up to 2.4% of children start secondary school with a significant deficit in their reading skills.
- $\frac{1}{4}$ of 15-year-olds have a reading age of 12 or lower.

Development of Literacy Skills



Early literacy skills

- Literacy is the ability to read, write, speak and listen in a way that lets us communicate effectively and make sense of the world
- Early literacy skills/pre-requisite skills are in development when children begin school
 - An interest in books and a motivation to read
 - A wide vocabulary (knowledge of words and their meaning)
 - Awareness of print (knowing that print conveys meaning and that in English words are written and read from left to right)
 - Phonological awareness (ability to hear individual sounds and put them together to make words, and hear a word and split it into individual sounds)

Development of literacy skills

1. Whole word awareness of familiar words
2. Vocabulary development in speech
3. Song and rhyme
4. Phonological awareness
5. Decoding
6. Increased sight word recognition
7. Reading with fluency

Literacy difficulties

- Difficulties will occur at varying points of development
- May be co-occurring with another area of need
- Difficulties may be in some or all of the following areas:
 - Phonological skills (phonemic awareness and phonic skill): the ability to hear sounds and put them together
 - Verbal memory: the ability to store, process and manipulate verbal information
 - Verbal processing speed: the ability to retrieve familiar words quickly and accurately

Phonics

- Synthetic phonics – sounds learned in isolation and blended
 - /c/a/t/
 - Part-to-whole approach
 - Letter by letter phonological decoding
 - Child learns to sound and blend sequential letter sounds
- Analytic phonics – sounds are not learned in isolation, but a phonic element is identified
 - How are these words alike? (*pat, park, push, pen*)
 - Whole-to-part approach

Activity

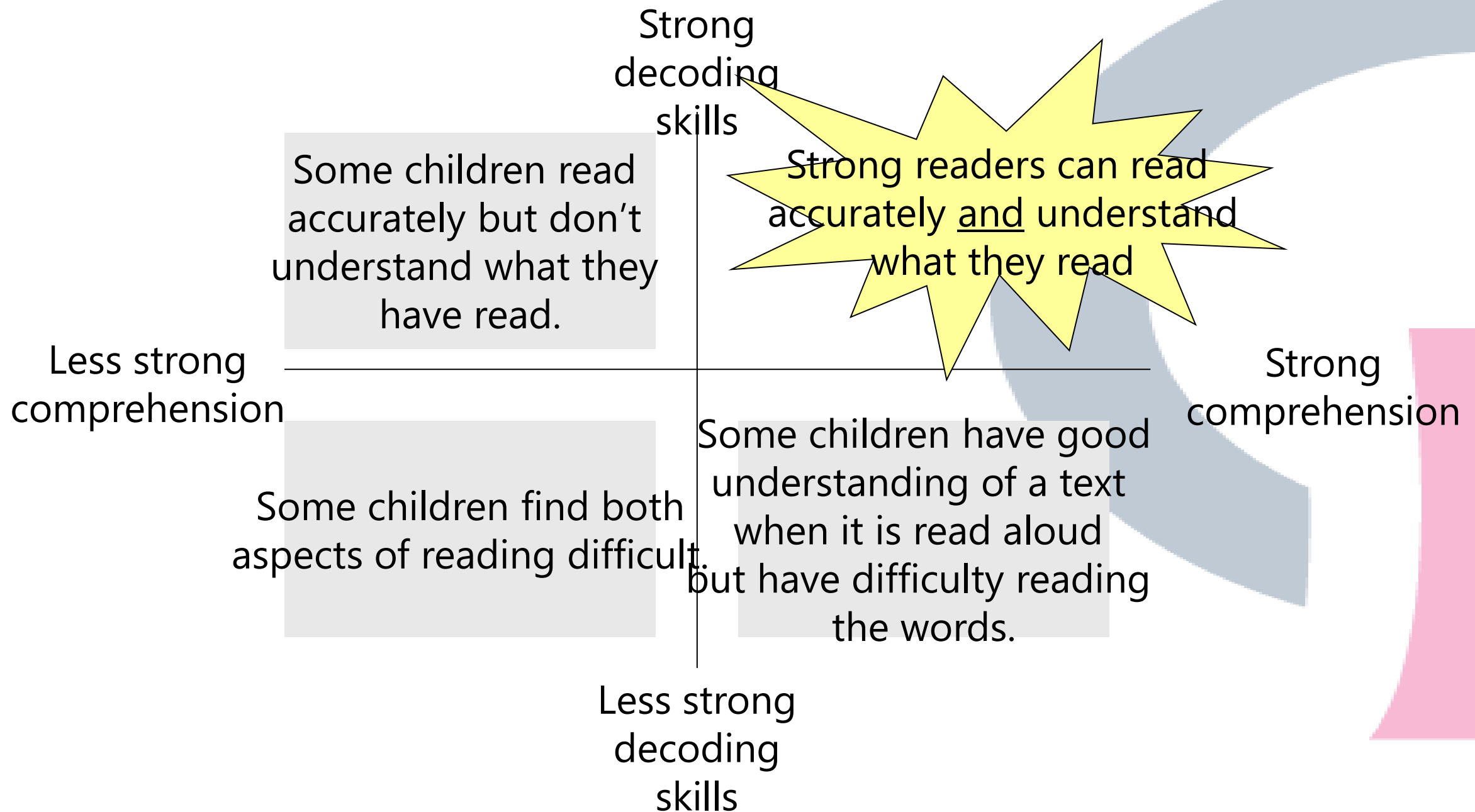
Spontech phleebees dwing tweedily.

Grumping est freeping pequeen verable
fronchets sey wisf est feetle awar bree
queets. Krepet creeteen avum crestent.



Simple view of reading

Two vital skills...



Indicators of difficulties

- Slow reading and lacking fluency
- Mistakes in reading e.g. hysterical for historical
- Difficulty changing reading rate
- Frequent spelling errors
- Slow, dysfluent and/or illegible handwriting
- Better oral skills than written skills
- Difficulty planning, sequencing and organising written text
- Difficulty with written syntax or punctuation
- Difficulty skimming, scanning and/or proofreading written text
- Trouble summarising or outlining
- Problems in taking notes and copying from the board
- Procrastinates and/or avoids reading and writing tasks
- Does not complete assignments or class work or does not hand them in
- Still mispronounces or misuses some words
- Problems recalling the names of some words or objects

Dyslexia



Literacy difficulties and dyslexia

- The subject and labelling of dyslexia can be a contentious issue
- Different understandings, changes to definitions over time
- More important - the focus is on assessment for intervention and being responsive to specific need

It is important to note that regardless of whether or not a child or young person has been identified as having dyslexia, if literacy difficulties are present, they should have access to the appropriate support.

Definition

- What is Dyslexia? : British Psychological Society (1999 p18)
- ‘Dyslexia is evident when accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling is learnt very incompletely or with great difficulty.’
- ‘This focuses on literacy learning at the **‘word level’** and implies that the problem is severe and persistent **despite appropriate learning opportunities.**’



Rose report (2009)

- Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in **accurate and fluent word reading and spelling**.
- Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed.
- Dyslexia occurs across the **range of intellectual abilities**.
- It is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are **no clear cut-off points**. So one person with dyslexia may struggle with certain aspects that another does not
- A good indication of the severity and persistence of dyslexia difficulties can be gained by examining how the individual responds or has responded to **well-founded intervention**.
- Studies report that many parents of children identified with dyslexia also have reading difficulties.


Dyslexia and delayed development in reading

- Research would suggest that there is no difference in the profile of those who are labelled as dyslexic and those who are not
- Learners can make the same mistakes when tested and make progress across the same developmental trajectory.
- No difference in intervention response; what works for one group, works for the other.



Discussion

Do you think the
dyslexia label is needed?
Why or why not?



Does having a label of dyslexia help?

- No impact on provision of intervention or additional resources in school.
- Can be detrimental in causing a ‘fixed’ view of literacy ability.
- Essentially, whether the need is labelled as dyslexia or literacy difficulties should not impact the support given.



Assessment of dyslexia

- Close observation, assessment or pre and early reading activities are preferable, and more successful than universal screeners.
- “It is now recognised that there is no sharp dividing line between having a learning difficulty such as dyslexia and not having it” Rose report, (2009)
- Response to intervention is the key component to identification.

Sutton (Cognus) Graduated response

1. Note Ordinarily available provision. What is provided in schools anyway.
2. Look at component level of reading. Good to look at different areas of reading need.
3. Standardised assessment. Assessed by an Educational Psychologist (EP) or another qualified professional
4. Around a 6 month wait
5. Repeat standardised assessment
6. Ensure there is a consideration of qualitative information. Self-esteem, other medical needs, specific aspects of reading they struggle with

Causes and Models



Discussion

Can you list potential causes of Dyslexia/literacy difficulties?

Causes

- **Genetic predisposition:** Dyslexia often runs in families, with studies indicating heritability estimates ranging from 50% to 70%. Specific genes, such as *DCDC2*, *KIAA0319*, *ROBO1*, and *DYX1C1*, have been linked to dyslexia (Paracchini, Scerri, & Monaco, 2007).
 - **Neurological differences:** Individuals with dyslexia often show less activation in the left hemisphere language areas, even before learning to read, and have reduced organisation in white matter tracts involved in reading and phonological processing (Ozernov-Palchik & Gaab, 2016; Vanderauwera et al., 2017).
 - **Phonological processing deficits:** A core difficulty in dyslexia involves recognising and manipulating the sounds in words, which is essential for reading (DyslexiaHelp, n.d.).
 - **Rapid auditory processing difficulties:** Some individuals with dyslexia struggle to process quick changes in sound, which affects how they perceive spoken language (Tallal, 2004).
 - **Visual processing difficulties:** The magnocellular theory suggests that dyslexia may stem in part from issues processing fast-moving visual information (Stein & Walsh, 1997).
 - **Comorbidity with ADHD and language impairments:** Dyslexia frequently co-occurs with ADHD and specific language impairment, suggesting overlapping developmental pathways (Germanò, Gagliano, & Curatolo, 2010).
 - **Premature birth or low birth weight:** These early biological risk factors are associated with increased likelihood of developmental disorders, including dyslexia (Ozernov-Palchik & Gaab, 2016).
 - **Limited early exposure to language and reading:** Environments lacking in books, storytelling, and rich conversation can negatively affect phonological and literacy development (DyslexiaHelp, n.d.).
 - **Stressful or unstable home environments:** Chronic stress in early childhood can impair brain development, affecting attention, memory, and language (Ozernov-Palchik & Gaab, 2016).
- Correlations
- A note on some of the research: criteria for “dyslexic” participant group varies widely between studies, which can make it hard to compare models

Discrepancy Model

- Traditionally, dyslexia seen as a specific difficulty to read and write in a child who is otherwise very intelligent and creative. Pervasive stereotype.
- Implicit assumption that IQ determines reading ability
- Problems with IQ/intelligence as a construct
- **No evidence** to support this model, and it has ethical implications:
“We do not know of any disease organisms, birth defects, or neurological disorders that selectively attack humans with above average intelligence”
(Baldwin and Vaughn, 1989)
- Some groups benefit less/are under-represented:
 - Girls (especially when identified by teacher referral).
 - Bi/multi-lingual pupils.

Poor Teaching

- *‘a label applied to children who are so confused by their poor reading instruction that they can’t overcome it without special help’*
- *‘nor do so-called dyslexic children have any more trouble learning to read than other children if they are taught with an appropriate method.’*
- A key message here is that dyslexia emerges when the instruction is ill suited.
- Lack of evidence, partly because study selection criteria rarely include failure to respond to validated interventions (see Vellutino et al, 2004)
- Note government/national influence
- Hence, the importance of response to intervention and graduated response

Phonological Deficit Model

- Poor phonological skills largely predict reading ability, evidence for this
- Difficulties are due to Poor phonological representation
- However, White (2006) found some evidence to support this but also that there was a sizeable minority of children with dyslexia that did not have a significant phonological deficit.
- Overall, phonological difficulties are usually found to be more prevalent (around 80%) among children identified as having specific reading difficulty/dyslexia but there are still 20% who do not show this impairment.
- Therefore, cannot just focus on providing more phonics support.

Other factors to consider

- **Emotional factors:**

Anxiety, low self-esteem, or past negative experiences with reading can affect a child's motivation and ability to concentrate. Stress may also interfere with working memory and processing speed, both crucial for reading fluency and comprehension.

- **Motor skills (sitting, writing, tracking):**

Poor posture control and fine motor difficulties can make it hard to sit still, write clearly, or follow text across a page. Eye tracking issues can cause problems with smoothly moving from one word or line to the next, affecting reading accuracy and speed.

- **Sensory factors (sight, hearing, glue ear):**

Undiagnosed or fluctuating hearing loss (e.g. from glue ear) can impact phonological awareness, which is important for decoding words. Vision problems can hinder a child's ability to see and interpret text, and both types of sensory input are vital in early literacy development.

Overall

- Importance of coming back to the key definition
- Also, importance of understanding where the specific difficulty lies (identified by a professional) on a case-by-case basis

Support and Strategies at Home



Strategies– developing language

- A focus on developing oral language skills is especially important for the development of a range of reading and writing skills in this age group.
- Read books aloud and have conversations about them
- Read TO your child until you can read WITH them
- Explore and learn new words (develop expressive and receptive language skills). Word of the day calendars.



Support at home– spelling

- Try to find ways that help them remember words they get stuck on
 - Making a mnemonic (e.g., because – big elephants can always understand small elephants)
 - Highlighting the part of the word they find tricky
 - Creating a picture or agreeing an action that reminds them of the word
- Create a list of words they forget and encourage them to refer to this when they get stuck
- Go over the rules of spelling together, e.g. a 'q' is always followed by a 'u'.
- Ask your child's teacher for the rules they teach in class

Support at home – reading

- Model fluency in reading through reading something first, and then having your child read it
- Encourage re-reading of their favourite books if this motivates them and increases their confidence
- Practice recognition of sight words (the words that occur most often)
- Practice blending – remind your child of the skills they learnt in KS1

Sight Words and High Frequency Words

The
and
said
in
he
I
it
is
you
of
was
to
they
on
she
we
can
me
at
be
for
are
with
his
have

up
my
what
do
no
go
so
went
come
here
there
this
look
like
will
down
now
too
back
see
got
come
make
play
take

then
don't
help
just
could
over
new
only
little
very
after
before
again
once
how
who
why
when
where
our
their
people
house
water
school

off
walk
looked
called
asked
friend
put
time
fast
away
must
because
number
every
thing
day
boy
girl
man
were
again
thank
thought
another
any

Strategies - Multisensory Learning Techniques

- Engaging multiple senses can enhance memory and learning for children
 - Alphabet Arc Activities: Lay out letters in an arc shape, sing the alphabet song while touching each letter, and use tactile materials like sand or shaving foam to form letters.
 - Incorporate Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic Modalities:
 - Incorporating visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities means engaging children through seeing, hearing, and doing.
 - For example, use colour-coded flashcards to support visual learners (e.g. **red** for vowels, **blue** for consonants, **green** for tricky words, or break each sound down in words *sh* in yellow, *i* in red, *p* in blue = **ship**).
 - Add clapping or chanting rhythms when practising spelling patterns to help auditory learners.
 - For kinesthetic learners, include activities like jumping to the correct word card or tracing letters in the air, combining movement with learning. This multi-sensory approach reinforces understanding and keeps children actively engaged.

Activity

- Write out these words and colour-code them using the key
 - **Red** = Vowels (a, e, i, o, u)
 - **Blue** = Consonants (b, c, d, f, etc.)
 - **Green** = Tricky words (e.g., *said, yacht*)
 - **Yellow** = Digraphs and blends (e.g., *sh, ch, th, bl*)
-
- Chat
 - Have
 - Enough
 - Recommend
 - Conscientious

Strategies - Assistive Technology Tools

- . Leveraging technology can provide alternative avenues for reading and writing.
- . **Text-to-Speech Programmes:** Tools like Voice Dream Reader and Learning Ally can read text aloud, aiding in comprehension.
- . **Speech-to-Text Applications:** Allow children to dictate their thoughts, which can be particularly helpful for those who struggle with writing.
- . **Spelling and Grammar Checkers:** Programmes like Grammarly can assist in writing by providing real-time feedback.

Strategies - Phonemic Awareness and Word Games



- Enhancing phonemic awareness
- **Sound and Word Games:** Engage in activities like rhyming, segmenting, and blending sounds.
 - For example, play "The Name Game". This demonstrates how when we replace the first sound in a name with another sound, we are using basic phonemic awareness skills. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MJLi5_dyn0
 - Change words in songs. First sing a familiar song, such as "Happy Birthday," then sing it again and change the first sound of each word. Use the first sound in your child's name to begin. For example, if your child's name is Mary, the new song would be "Mappy Mirthday."
- **Morphological Awareness:** Explore word structures by breaking down words into prefixes, suffixes, and root words to understand their meanings.
 - Word: unhappiness
 - Breakdown:
 - Prefix: un- → means not
 - Root word: happy → means feeling good or joyful
 - Suffix: -ness → turns an adjective into a noun, meaning state or condition of
 - Meaning: The state of not being happy

Strategies - Reading Fluency and Comprehension Practices

Improving fluency and comprehension is essential for overall reading proficiency.

- **Repeated reading:** Read a passage aloud, then have your child read the same passage, promoting fluency and confidence.
- **Reader's Theatre:** Engage in reading scripts aloud as a family, which can enhance expression and comprehension.
- **Look for different reading opportunities:** Reading football scores/sport outcomes, reading instructions on a toy package, read menus

Story Sacks

What it is:

- A cloth bag containing a storybook and related props (e.g., toys, games, puppets, story maps).
- Designed for multisensory storytelling and play-based learning.

How it helps:

- Develops vocabulary and comprehension.
- Encourages retelling and sequencing.
- Makes abstract ideas concrete and engaging through physical interaction.

Evidence base:

- Supports principles of multisensory and narrative-based learning (Torgesen, 2006; Snowling & Hulme, 2012).
- Hands-on storytelling boosts engagement and comprehension (Neuman & Wright, 2010).

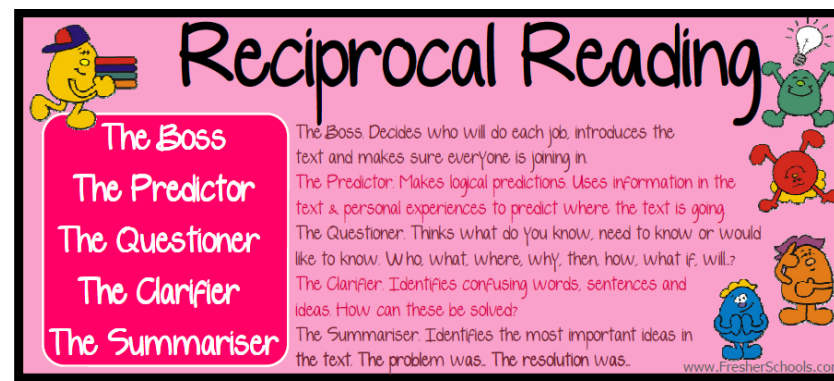
Tips for use:

- Include dolls, question cards, maps, and themed games.
- Ask your child to retell or reimagine the story using the props.

https://cdn-literacytrust-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/2. Story_sack_Guide.pdf

<https://www.betterstart.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Story-sack-tip-sheet.pdf>

Reciprocal Reading



What it is:

- Adult(s) and child(ren) take turns discussing a text using key strategies/roles: Predicting, Clarifying, Questioning, Summarising.

How it helps:

- Builds active reading habits and comprehension.
- Teaches metacognitive strategies for understanding text.
- Supports independent reading development.

Evidence base:

- Strong research support (Palincsar & Brown, 1984).
- Rated high-impact by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) for struggling readers.

Tips for use:

- Start with short, simple texts.
- Model each strategy before the child leads.
- Use prompts like: “What might happen next?” / “What does that word mean?”

<https://highlandliteracy.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/reciprocal-reading.pdf>

<https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/glowblogs/public/able/uploads/sites/4569/2017/02/Reciprocal-Reading-roles-for-younger-readers.pdf>

Paired Reading

What it is:

- Adult and child read aloud together, then the child reads solo when ready.
- Can also be done with an older/more able peer.

How it helps:

- Improves fluency and confidence.
- Offers immediate support with tricky words.
- Reduces reading anxiety.

Evidence base:

- Proven effective by Topping & Lindsay (1992).
- Backed by the British Dyslexia Association and EEF as a reliable strategy.

Tips for use:

- Read in sync at your child's pace.
- Use a signal (e.g., a tap) for when they want to read alone.
- Offer help only when needed to promote independence.

High interest/low reading level books

- **Barrington Stoke** fiction (ranging from 8-16 years, some books for adults), 4U2read.ok (8-12 years, RA of 7), GR8reads (12-16 years, RA of 7+), FYI (10-14 years, RA 8+) fiction, but with facts!, Reality Check (10-14 years, RA 8+) true stories
- **Badger** – Full Flight (11-13 years, RA 7.5+), Dark Flight (10-14 years, RA 6.5+), Polish/English dual language books
- **Ransom** – Dark Man series (teens and young adults, RA 5-8), Siti's sister (10-14 years, RA 7-8), Trailblazers
- **Penguin** Active Reading Series and Readers Series
- **Macmillan** Graded Readers – simplified stories from contemporary and classic authors
- **Heinemann** – Classical Comics (graphic novel adaptations of classical literature), Biographies series
- **Nelson Thornes** – Sports Zone series (10-14 years, RA 6.5+)

Support for Parents With Difficulties



Adult difficulties

- Study showing that parents of Children with Dyslexia performed worse in all literacy measures and more frequently reported a history of poor reading (Bonifacci et al., 2014)
- 1 in 6 (18% / 6.6 million people) adults aged 16 to 65 in England have very poor literacy skills (National Literacy Trust).
- Why;
 - Complexity of English language (inconsistent rules, English is a combination of other languages such as Germanic, Latin, French, Norse, and Greek influences, reliance on context such as their, they're and there)
 - Stigma around poor reading ability
 - Schooling experiences
 - Causes for children apply to adults too

Adult Support



- Quick reads: Short books and great stories by bestselling authors. Adult-focused content while ensuring the books are written in an accessible and easy to read style
<https://readingagency.org.uk/get-reading/our-programmes-and-campaigns/quick-reads/>
- Sutton Libraries Digital Resources: Access to digital resources, available 24/7 from a computer, smartphone or tablet, completely FREE for Cultural Services members.
<https://libraries.sutton.gov.uk/digital-content/digital-resources>
- Library Membership: access to free services including PressReader for newspapers and magazines and Overdrive for eBooks. Some libraries can offer workshops or mentoring to support with reading.
<https://libraries.sutton.gov.uk/user/register>
 - Note Sutton has several libraries, so you can phone and ask for assistance sign up (Sutton central Library number: 020 8770 5000)
- National Literacy Trust recommends several services: [Adult Literacy Rates in the UK | National Literacy Trust](#)
 - Visit the [Gov.uk site for improving English skills](#) or call the National Careers Service helpline on 0800 100 900.
 - [Read Easy](#) recruits, trains and supports volunteers to give one-to-one tuition to adults who struggle with reading.
 - [The Reading Agency](#) provides a number of free resources to help improve adult reading skills.
 - [Learn Direct](#) provides online courses and a network of learning centres. Call 0800 101 901 for advice and information on their adult literacy courses.

Summary

- Literacy difficulties continues to be a key issue in schools/ with young people
- Development of literacy skills is complex and requires several underlying skills
- The difference between the label of dyslexia vs literacy difficulties should never impact the young person's ability to get support
- What is key is knowing where specifically the difficulties lie (phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed). Whether your child has the label or not, certain strategies can be helpful especially when targeting the specific difficulty
- There are various strategies and key interventions that can be done at home to support young people
- Also reading difficulties evident in adult population, but there are still ways to support adults/parents with reading needs

Questions?

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Additional Resources

Practical Guidance

- Overcoming Dyslexia by Sally Shaywitz – Clear explanations and step-by-step strategies parents can apply.
- The Dyslexia Toolkit by Alais Winton – Packed with home-friendly activities and organisational tips.
- Helping Children with Dyslexia by Liz Dunoon – A parent-focused guide to boosting confidence and reading at home.
- The Gift of Dyslexia by Ronald D. Davis – Introduces the Davis method, which can be applied with parental guidance.

Documentaries and Films (For Insight and Understanding)

- The Big Picture: Rethinking Dyslexia – Shares real-life stories and helpful insights for families.
- Embracing Dyslexia – Features parent and teacher experiences and advice.
- Read Me Differently – A personal story that helps families reflect on communication and support.
- Kara Tointon: Don't Call Me Stupid – A BBC documentary showing how dyslexia impacts daily life and learning.
- Dyslexia and Me – A child-friendly short film ideal for watching together as a family.

Feedback

Tonika Ashley
Literacy and Dyslexia Parent Workshop

