

# Early Reading

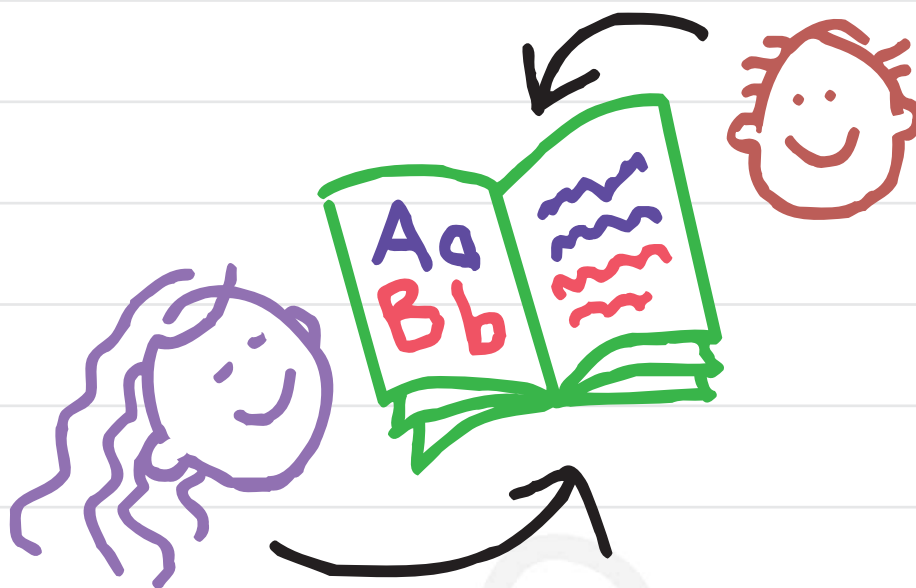


## Early Reading

“When our kids read things early, we’re more competitive.”



– Coach Calhoun



→ Whether it’s a point guard reading the other team’s defense to create the most effective scoring opportunity, or a pre-schooler recognizing letters and their sounds to get a head start on the rest of life, early reading is a core fundamental of the game.

## Moment of Victory

Every child reads with joy and wonder – and at grade level in the first, second, and third grades.



### TIP FROM THE PROS

Beyond a doubt, reading early (by the end of first grade), links one benefit to another: enjoyment of reading, exposure to the language in books, and attainment of knowledge about the world. All accrue in greater measure to those who learned how to read before the end of first grade. Difficulty with the first steps of reading, in contrast, eventually undermines vocabulary growth, knowledge of the world, mastery of language and skill in writing. Once behind in reading, few children catch up later, unless they receive intensive, individual, expensive and expert instruction, a scarce commodity in most schools.

American Federation of Teachers, 1999

## Team Stats That Don't Cut It

- In Connecticut, more than 40 percent of our children do not read on grade level.
- One-third of children from poor communities arrive in kindergarten already behind the rest of the class in early reading skills. More than 50 percent of them will not meet the standard for reading proficiency by the fourth grade.
- By middle school, children who read well read at least 10,000,000 words during the school year while children with reading difficulties read less than 100,000 words during the same period.
- In 2006 Connecticut ranked last in the nation in closing the “achievement gap” in reading.
- Half of all adolescents and young adults with criminal records have reading difficulties.
- One-quarter of the adult population lacks the basic literacy skills required in a typical job.

## Game Situation

Reading opens doors to new worlds of stories, information and life-long book friends. For instance, many children and adults think of *Goodnight Moon* as a special book friend. Familiarity with the sounds of language and exposure to words and stories bring the universe to a child. When a child has the capacity to speak, listen, and eventually read, the opportunities become limitless.

Thousands of children, however, bring their schoolbooks home without much wonder or enthusiasm. Something isn't clicking. Some of them learn to read on a very basic level, but they don't fully understand or appreciate what they read. This becomes especially tragic because reading serves as the foundation for nearly everything else taught at school.

### **It's always harder to "play catch-up."**

Ninety-five percent of all children can be taught to read. Of these, though, 40 percent are not reading on grade level. The problem appears very early. When children from poor communities arrive in kindergarten, more than one-third of them already find themselves behind the rest of their classmates. By fourth grade, more than 50 percent of them will not meet the standard for reading proficiency. Connecticut, in fact, ranked last in the nation last year when it came to closing the "achievement gap" in reading.

But poor children are hardly the only ones with reading difficulties. Nationally, one-third of poor readers come from college-educated families that encourage literacy in the home. The problem cuts across all racial, ethnic, town, and class lines.

What's in store for children with reading problems? Often, it's emptiness, shame, isolation, and a wandering away from formal learning. Without intervention by the third grade, their reading difficulties will continue, almost unavoidably, in the later grades. They will fall further behind every year. If a child does not learn to read by first grade, he or she has a one in eight chance of catching up with peers.

### **We win – or lose – as a TEAM!**

Children with reading problems are not the only ones who pay a price – we all do. National research shows half of all adolescents and young adults with criminal records have reading difficulties. It also shows that one-quarter of the adult population lacks the basic literacy skills required in a typical job.

In today's global marketplace, reading achievement is an economic necessity. Connecticut's future workforce must be competitive with the rest of the world's workforce. A less literate workforce will hurt the state's economy. We need everyone to read well.

## “Full Court Press” Game Plan

There is reason for hope. We need to remember that the number of children who absolutely cannot learn to read is quite small, only five percent, and that early intervention works best.

### What parents and other family members can do

- Read and re-read stories to your children. If you cannot read to your children, tell them stories that you know, including stories about the things you did as a child – your own personal stories.
- Talk to your children all the time. Conversation is how they begin to use words. Teach them the names of things. Encourage them to describe their experiences and anything else that’s important to them.
- Visit the library often and bring books home.
- Provide opportunities for children to draw and print, using markers, crayons and pencils.
- Select early care and education settings for your child that have a clear plan to expose your child to books, love of sound and song.
- Ask your school what they do to promote early literacy skills and how you can partner with the school at home.

### What early care educators can do

- Read aloud to children and ask them to participate.
- Establish a literacy-rich environment.
- Read and re-read favorite stories.
- Talk about letters by name and the sounds they make.
- Help children to understand that print carries a message.
- Encourage them to experiment with writing.
- Help them identify labels and signs in their environment.
- Teach them the connection between letters and sounds.
- Try games involving nursery rhymes and rhythmic activity. (Phonemic awareness, a powerful predictor of later reading success, is found in traditional rhyming, skipping, and word games.)
- Introduce them to sound matches and letter identification.
- Allow temporary invented spelling to represent written language.

## What schools and colleges can do

Ensure that students who are studying to become teachers and current teachers are taught how to teach reading to include the practice of:

- Early screening and on-going assessment that can prevent many reading difficulties from developing in the first place;
- Teaching competencies in oral language to provide the foundation for literacy;
- Teaching word identification skills, including phonics and instruction in phonemic awareness;
- Selecting and using a wide variety of interesting texts appropriate to grades and individual children's reading levels; and
- Coordinating and integrating of the teaching of spelling, writing, vocabulary, comprehension and word identification skills.

## What policymakers can do

- Help improve mothers' literacy since maternal literacy is the number one indicator of a child's capacity to learn to read.
- Set standards for what teachers need to know and be able to do for successful reading instruction.
- Set policy to ensure that future teachers are trained to use curriculum-based, progress-monitoring assessments to guide their instruction, so that each student's instruction is differentiated and monitored for response to instruction.
- Facilitate student teachers receiving more classes with up-to-date curriculum in how children learn to read.
- Set policy to ensure that local education agencies provide external reading mentors for kindergarten through grade three teachers. This will support their mastery of the information necessary to ensure children's early reading success.

## Reading is Smooth Sailing – Now

Second-grader Lavarey reads aloud with confidence, “Why does the polar bear need camouflage?” When a visitor exclaims that she doesn’t even know how to spell camouflage, he looks straight at her and says, “c-a-m-o-u-f-l-a-g-e.” When asked why the polar bear needs to blend in with his surroundings, Lavarey explains that it’s not to hide from enemies, like with other animals, but so that his prey won’t see him coming.

His teacher proudly states that halfway through the second grade, Lavarey has become proficient in reading and his comprehension is excellent.

This wasn’t always the case. When Lavarey entered first grade, he was at high risk of reading failure. Fortunately, he was in a school and classroom that was piloting a reading initiative that focuses on improving reading among children in the early grades by enhancing teachers’ knowledge of reading. The project is in five Hartford elementary schools.

Children outgrow everything but stories.

Go on long talks together.

With coordinated assistance from his teacher, the reading mentor and other support professionals that continued throughout first grade and summer school, he has caught up. “When he joined the rest of the students, he was so excited!” says his teacher. “He’s always one of the first to raise his hand to answer a question.”

Lavarey now reads to his twin five-year-old brothers. His favorite book? *Ratatouille*. (And he knows how to spell it.)

Talk with your children wherever you go. They hear you everywhere.



Lavarey

## Read More about Reading

### **Every Grownup Is a Famous Storyteller**

This booklet, created by the Commission on Children and sponsored by the state Department of Education, uses a photo exhibit to make basic points about the importance of reading to children. The introduction was written by Dr. Alice S. Carter of Yale University's Department of Psychology. Download it at [www.cga.ct.gov/coc/reading.htm](http://www.cga.ct.gov/coc/reading.htm) or call the Commission at (860) 240-0290.

### **Connecticut's Blueprint for Reading Achievement**

This 92-page document, published in 2000 by the State Department of Education (SDE), contains the report of the state's Early Reading Success Panel on the literacy needs of children in kindergarten through Grade 3. To order copies, call SDE's Bureau of Curriculum and Instruction at (860) 713-6740 or download it at [www.sde.ct.gov](http://www.sde.ct.gov).

### **Beyond the Blueprint**

This report, an 85-page follow-up to the Blueprint for Reading Achievement (cited above), focuses on the literacy needs of children in grades 4-12. To order copies, call the State Department of Education's Bureau of Curriculum and Instruction at (860) 713-6707 or download it at [www.sde.ct.gov](http://www.sde.ct.gov).

### **Straight Talk about Reading**

This book, subtitled "How Parents Can Make a Difference during the Early Years," was written by Susan L. Hall, a parent, and Louisa C. Moats, a Harvard-educated teacher. It's available from most major booksellers.

### **Why Reading Is Not a Natural Process**

Dr. G. Reid Lyon, a former chief of child development and behavior research at the National Institutes of Health, gives an overview of nearly four decades of scientific research on how children learn to read in this magazine article, available at [www.ldonline.org](http://www.ldonline.org).

# NOTES

