

Introduction

I have worked for many years with the parents of children who find it hard to learn to read. Many parents want questions answered. Why does my child find reading so hard? Will he learn in the end? What can I do to help? How can I change his negative attitude?

There is such a lot parents can do to help, with support and encouragement. You don't have to be a confident reader yourself. Many of you will have thought of good ideas, but no parent can think of everything. So it makes sense to share the tips that have helped others.

The tips in this book have been well tested by parents and pupils, and by professionals in the field. They can work for you.

Just as there is a different pattern to the difficulties of each individual child, so there is a range of solutions. Choose which tips are most useful for you! If you want to know more, use the Useful Addresses section at the back of the book to find organisations that can give you more help and advice.

I have tried to leave out jargon and anything that was too technical or just plain boring. I have included lots of true stories, to show that you are not alone.

This is the book I would love to have given to the parents I have counselled over the years. This is the book that would have saved me so much grief if I had read it when my own nine-year-old son could not read or write.

Why is it important to learn to read?

Knowing how to read for yourself is the single most important thing in life, in my opinion. It's like learning to fly on your own and you need never be bored ever again. Every journey is better if you have a paperback in your pocket; each night (and therefore bedtime) becomes madly attractive knowing that your book is waiting for you.

And learning to read is a struggle that will only happen once, like learning to swim or ride a bike. Once reading is mastered, the world opens up.

Joanna Lumley

I have years of experience of teaching children to read. I was Principal of Fairley House, a school in London for dyslexic children, and later I co-founded Barrington Stoke, a company that publishes books for reluctant readers. Parents have sent me a lot of letters over the years. They have told me what a big difference reading has made to their children's lives. Here are just three of these letters:

"Today [my son is] an enthusiastic, indeed avid reader who is much more confident [and] in touch with people around him."

"I just can't believe it!!! Our dyslexic grandson, Dominic, has just finished reading two books – this really is a breakthrough as he read them so quickly and without encouragement. His mother had to turn his bedroom light off at 1 am. He just wouldn't put the book down. He is now heading into year 6 and we feel his self-esteem has been raised. Hopefully this will help him through this next difficult year before he transfers to secondary school."

“My son is 14 and has learning difficulties. He is now sitting down and reading with enjoyment for the first time in his life. It has opened up a whole new world for him.”

Every single child will benefit from reading. Every child will be more confident if he or she learns to read well. Every child can find a whole new world of interest, adventure, learning and fun, just by opening a book. And every child must have the chance to learn to read, because reading changes lives.

You probably picked up this book because you know how important reading is these days. Reading can give a child so much joy. But if a child never learns to read, it can affect his or her whole life.

If children are poor readers, they will be more likely to fall behind at school. Homework, tests and exams will be much harder. Other children may call them names and say they're stupid.

Some children get used to failing. They may even choose to fail because it's easier that way. They may decide they are stupid, since everyone else thinks so. They may stop trying. They may feel frustrated and bored. They may muck about and get in trouble, or even bunk off school.

It's hard to get good exam results when reading is a struggle. And when you leave school, what do you do? More than 98 per cent of jobs in Britain today need reading skills.

Reading is part of everyday life. You need to read to get a driving licence, use the internet, shop, book a holiday, fill in forms, take the right medicine, order food in a cafe, catch the bus in the right direction, set up a DVD player and find out what's on TV.

If you have problems reading, everything in life is harder. If you learn to love reading, you don't miss out – and you can have so much fun!

Helping your child to read well can be the most important thing you ever do for him or her.

Helping children to read

Some children learn to read when they are very young with almost no help at all. They just seem to pick it up naturally. Some people can't even remember a time when they didn't know how to read. They are the lucky ones.

Others learn to read at school. They remember later how exciting it was when the words on the page suddenly began to make sense.

And some children have the same help and yet do not seem able to learn. They are often as clever as the others. They want to learn to read. But for a lot of different reasons it just doesn't happen.

It is not the teacher's fault. It is not the parents' fault. And most of all, it is not the child's fault.

Maybe these children have problems such as dyslexia. Maybe they have been off sick and have missed a lot of school.

Some children don't like reading because it's hard work, or they're afraid to try and fail. Maybe their parents and friends don't read. Maybe TV is just more fun!

Boys are more likely to have reading problems, though plenty of girls struggle too.

Why do girls have fewer problems? It may be to do with how we evolved. Women spent more time together looking after the children, so they talked more. Their brains developed to be good with the spoken word. Now, in our modern world, they are wired up better to deal with the written word too.

It can be very hard for a parent to help. Perhaps you aren't a confident reader yourself. Perhaps you want to help, but you don't have time. Perhaps your child seems to hate books, or has given up trying to read, and you don't know what to do.

Getting started can be hard, and that's what this book is all about.

The good news

You only have to learn to read once. Even if children learn slowly, with the right help they will get there. The important thing is that they are making progress.

That's where parents come in. You are the only people who can give constant support over the years. And there is such a lot you can do.

- You can help your child to get started on letters (**Chapter One, Starting to Read**, p.11).
- You can learn how your child's mind works, so that you can find the best way to help (**Chapter Two, How Does My Child's Mind Work?**, p.31).
- You can find out what's stopping your child from reading, and look for ways round it (**Chapter Three, Types of Reading Problem**, p.46).
- You can change your child's attitude to reading. It is a great help to have books in the house, which you can get from a library, supermarket, charity shop or bookshop. Looking through picture books with your young child is a fun and easy way to start. It's important for you or another adult to read books to your child from a young age. Maybe you can learn to love books together! (**Chapter Four, Changing Attitudes**, p.62).

- Your child will need support from you, both before starting school and right through his or her school career. But children's needs change as they get older and you will need to find out what they are. You can also support your child a lot by showing him or her how to get organised, if he or she finds that difficult (**Chapter Five, Tots to Teens**, p.77).
- You can make sure that your child has the right things to read, like books and magazines that he or she really enjoys. (**Chapter Six, Choosing the Right Book**, p.94).
- Some parents might like to brush up their own reading skills (**Chapter Seven, Adults and Reading**, p.116).
- There are also lots of contact details and links in **Useful Addresses**, p.132. You can find some really good advice for parents from the National Literacy Trust (www.literacytrust.org.uk/familyreading/parents). NIACE provides great support for parents who want to improve their own reading and help their children (www.niace.org.uk).

You don't need to read the whole of this book from start to end – it's up to you to decide what you need to know!

On the way you will find 101 tips for you to pick and choose from. They won't all work for everyone – every parent and every child is different! But some of it will be perfect for you and your child. Some of the advice is aimed at children with Specific Learning Difficulties, lots of it is great for all children. There is advice for all parents, including those who are struggling with reading themselves. See pages 70–2 and Chapter Seven if you find reading difficult.

This book will give you the help you need to give your child the best possible start in life. Good luck – and have fun!