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Reading difficulties and effective support

A practice guide for educators and parents

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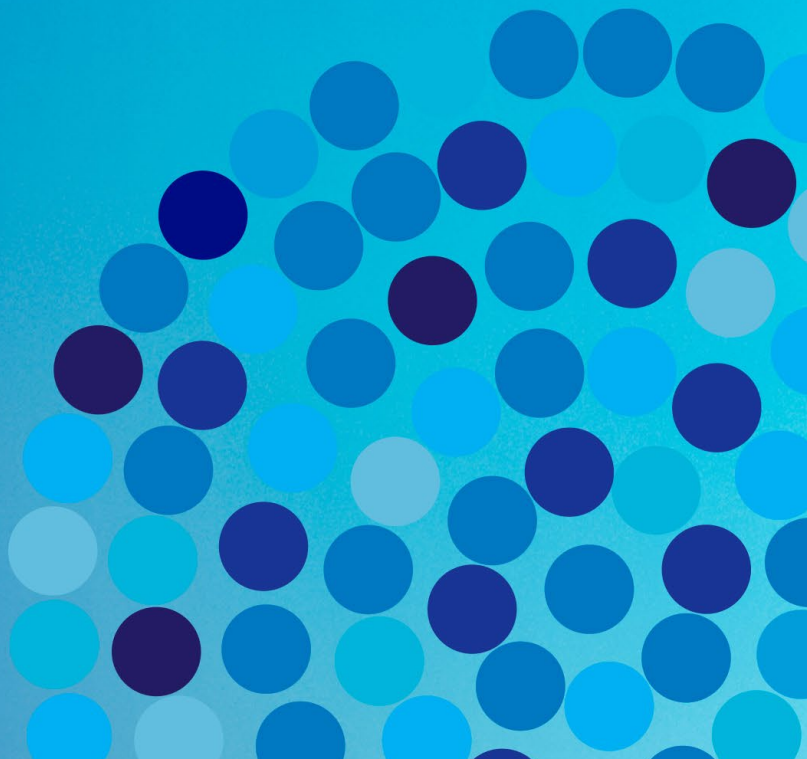

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For more information on reading interventions, access the meta-analysis:
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Table of contents

Introduction 1

About this Guide 1

Learning to read 1

Where does reading fit in the Australian National Curriculum? 2

What instruction is needed to support effective reading? 2

Why do reading difficulties get missed? 3

What can schools do? 3

What can educators do? 4

What can parents do? 8

Conclusion 8

Contact 8

Additional Resource 9

References 10

QUT Centre for Inclusive Education

Introduction

Being able to read is critical for many areas of academic learning, as well as everyday life in modern society. Learning to read is therefore one of the first things that children tackle as they start school.

We tend to think of reading as a finite ability that is acquired early and quickly overshadowed by more challenging and varied academic content. And there is some truth to this idea – for some reading skills at least. For example, recognising different alphabet letters is considered a "constrained" skill, due to the clear limit on what is to be learned.

Beyond the first few grades, classroom teaching shifts focus from constrained (or basic) reading skills to conquering more difficult texts. From this point, much of what children learn at school is dependent on their ability to read fluently. Children are no longer learning to read, instead they are reading to learn, and support to develop foundational reading skills falls away.

Yet research shows[1] that even once basic, constrained skills are mastered, reading competency continues to develop across the schooling years, for *all* students. And students who *do not* master core components of reading in early primary may not get another opportunity, as reading interventions are typically provided in the early years of school, and taper off in upper primary and high school.

All too often, reading difficulties go unnoticed or are attributed to other causes.[2] Without the right support, students with reading difficulties can experience immense barriers to learning as they progress through school.

About this Guide

This guide is designed to help educators and parents support students' reading development and to know the most effective ways to intervene or provide additional support when students face reading difficulties.

Along the way, you'll find links to additional resources and strategies you can incorporate into your classroom teaching, as indicated by the symbols below.

Symbol	Meaning
	Extra information or further resources for those who want to dig a little deeper
	Strategies for teaching reading that you can use in the classroom or in small group intervention

Learning to read

Reading is a complex activity made up of multiple and interrelated skills. To understand written text, beginning readers must learn:[3]

- that spoken language is made up of different individual sounds (known as phonological awareness)
- that these component speech sounds are associated with written symbols (known as the alphabetic principle)
- how to decipher the letters or letter combinations that represent different sounds (known as decoding)
- enough spoken language to enable deep understanding of what they are reading (known as linguistic comprehension).

The aim is for skills like decoding to become automatic and effortless, so that readers can spend their cognitive resources on understanding (and enjoying!) what they read.

According to the Simple View of Reading (SVR), successful comprehension of a text is the product of word recognition skills and linguistic comprehension.[4,5] This means that, if a student experiences problems with either decoding *OR* language comprehension, their reading comprehension will be impaired.

Where does reading fit in the Australian National Curriculum?

According to the Australian Curriculum 9.0, literacy is a General Capability and is represented as a critically important learning progression from Foundation to Year 10.

Check out the progression for the literacy General Capability on the Australian Curriculum 9.0 website: **https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/curriculum-information/understand-this-general-capability/literacy**

In 2023, the Teacher Education Expert Panel (TEEP) made specific recommendations in relation to the teaching of reading. Not only should graduate teachers of early years should be equipped through their initial teacher education to explicitly teach skills such as phonics, but *all* teachers – including those of subjects other than English – should be able to teach reading and writing.

Read the full TEEP report here: **https://www.education.gov.au/quality-initial-teacher-education-review/teacher-education-expert-panel**

What instruction is needed to support effective reading?

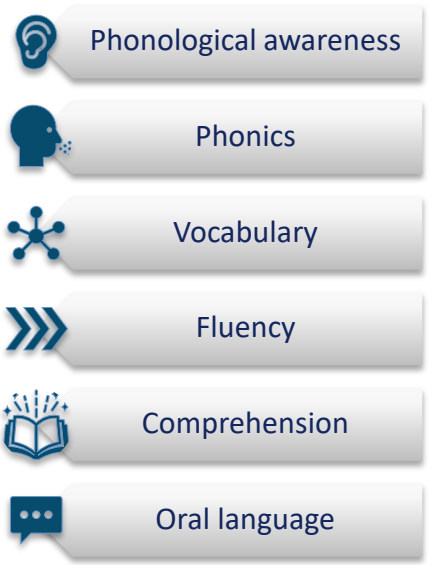
To support development of reading skills, classroom reading instruction should be both explicit and systematic. This type of instruction benefits all children but is crucial for any child who is at risk of reading difficulties.

For example, students at risk of reading difficulties may include those with neurodevelopmental attention and language disorders, such as Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)[6] or Developmental Language Disorder (DLD).[7] Yet these students are not always known to the teacher, often flying 'under the radar'.[8]

To find out more about DLD and ADHD, check out our Explainer on language and attention difficulties: **https://research.qut.edu.au/c4ie/explainer-language-and-attentional-difficulties/**

Without always knowing which students in the classroom have underlying difficulties that might make learning to read more challenging, explicit and systematic instruction in core skills for *everyone* can ensure that no students fall through the cracks.

But what are these core skills that should be focused on? Research shows that classroom teaching needs to focus on "the big six": phonological awareness, phonics (how to decode), vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and oral language.[9]



Phonological Awareness is the skill of being able to both identify and manipulate different sounds in words and sentences. This skill involves recognising patterns in sound such as rhyme, alliteration, and syllables. A critical component skill of phonological awareness is ***phonemic awareness***, which is the ability to work with the smallest unit of sound within a word. Phonemic awareness develops as the beginning reader is taught to blend individual sounds into words, as well as segment words back into sounds.

Phonics is knowledge of which letter(s) represent different spoken sounds, and the skill of applying that knowledge to decode – or "sound out" – printed words.

Vocabulary is the knowledge of words and their meanings, which is essential for being able to understand the content of what is being read.

Fluency is the skill of reading with automaticity, accuracy, and expression (or prosody). Fluency is critical for skilful reading, as it enables students to focus their cognitive resources on what they are reading, rather than on the process of reading itself.

Comprehension is the end goal of strong reading and requires all the above skills to be in place; yet it is also a capability that can be taught and honed. Subcomponent skills such as recognising inference and working out the main idea of a text are essential to skilled reading.

Oral language ability encompasses both receptive (listening) and expressive (speaking) skills and includes knowledge and use of language in terms of meaning (semantics, vocabulary), sentence structure (syntax), word structure (morphology), context (pragmatics), and sounds (phonology).

Check out this series of videos from Education Queensland to find out more about effective teaching of foundational readings skills: **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdmPW0oI0PM**

Why do reading difficulties get missed?

When basic skills like decoding are not well established, students may rely on inefficient strategies, such as memorising the visual shape of basic words, or guesswork based on pictures and context. Yet research shows that these approaches don't work in the long term.[3] Memorisation and guessing can initially mask reading difficulties, but eventually, students will not be able to keep pace with the complexity of reading material.

Reading difficulties can lead to frustration, anxiety, or embarrassment, and manifest in withdrawn or challenging behaviours; yet as we explained earlier, the underlying causes often go undetected.[2] Over time, these more overt behaviours can also make it more difficult for students to participate successfully in academic work. In this way, reading and behaviour difficulties can be reciprocally linked across development.[10]

But how do we know when reading is an underlying contributor to academic or behavioural difficulties, or what specific component of reading needs support? And when the "symptoms" of reading difficulties can vary so widely among different students, how do we know which students to follow up?

To know what is really going on behind overt behaviours, we need to have an idea of where *all* students are at on a range of different skills. This is where key practices such as universal screening come into play, which we will explain further in the next section.

What can schools do?

Timely and effective support for reading is best implemented as part of a comprehensive, systematic, whole school approach. Internationally, schools are adopting Integrated Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (I-MTSS), a framework designed to accurately identify difficulties early and guide the effective delivery of support.[11]

I-MTSS encompasses three domains of academic, behaviour, and social-emotional development, in the recognition that these domains are dynamically interrelated, and with the view that the ***whole child*** must be considered when it comes to systemic support (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Diagram representing Integrated Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (I-MTSS)

Universal screening is regularly used to assess all students for difficulties in each of the domains. By assessing all students' reading skills—early on, regularly and with precision—appropriate and timely supports can be implemented, and ongoing difficulties prevented.

Using screening data and any follow-up testing, ***data-based decision making*** is used to inform intervention and support, which is delivered at ***tiers of increasing intensity***.

- **Tier 1:** universal (whole class)
- **Tier 2:** targeted (small-group)
- **Tier 3:** intensive (small-group/one-to-one)

To make sure that the supports being delivered are effective for students, it is important to undertake **progress monitoring**, by regularly assessing students on the specific skills being targeted in the intervention to see how they are progressing.

For I-MTSS to be effective, it should be implemented at a **whole school** level, with dedicated teams appointed to oversee screening, intervention, and progress monitoring. Teams should comprise a mix of senior and middle leadership, administrative staff, allied health (e.g., speech pathologist) or support staff, and classroom teachers.

For further practical and evidence-based information on how to set up I-MTSS in your school, including information on choosing screening measures, refer to our comprehensive chapter on the topic.[11]

What can educators do?

In our international review,[1] we found that it is never too late to provide support for students with reading difficulties, even if they are beyond the early years of school. We analysed the results of 106 reading interventions, for over 156,000 students in Grades 4-12, and found positive effects on improving reading skills overall.

Interventions that focused on enhancing students' reading comprehension skills or vocabulary knowledge were the most impactful. Importantly, focusing on the right skills was more important than whether the intervention took place in or out of the classroom, or whether it was delivered by classroom teachers or researchers.

In this practice guide, we outline current recommendations based on this body of research about the most effective ways to support students' reading development.

Specifically, we describe the high-yield strategies included in interventions that received a quality rating of 100% according to the *Council for Exceptional Children (CEC): Standards for Evidence-Based Practices in Special Education*.[12] To meet this standard, studies had to fulfill certain criteria (see resource: "What are good questions to consider to assess research quality?" on page 9).

We break down the relevant research according to different areas of intervention focus: word-level reading, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency.

Word-Level Reading

In the upper years of primary school, students begin to encounter more challenging words. In particular, the proportion of multisyllable words increases. Even if students have been provided instruction in decoding basic words in the earlier years, they often have not been given explicit teaching on how to approach words of multiple syllables. And for any students with decoding difficulties, this greater complexity in word-level reading can present huge barriers.

Research shows that strategies for supporting multisyllabic word reading can be highly effective for students with persistent word-level reading difficulties, improving their skills in decoding and comprehension, as well as spelling.[13,14] Multisyllable word reading instruction includes a focus on morphology (understanding the smallest meaningful unit in a word) as well as phonology (decoding the sounds).

Effective intervention incorporates multiple opportunities for students to practise segmenting and blending the sounds of a target number of multisyllabic words (e.g., 5 new words per session), learning to read them in isolation and in context (e.g., in a short passage of text). Over time, students can build up a "bank" of these target words that they practise reading repeatedly to build fluency.

Specific strategies include teaching students to recognise and understand affixes (prefixes and suffixes), teaching students that each syllable includes its own vowel sound and explaining how to identify these different parts of the word (e.g., by underlining, circling). It is important for students to practise both reading words aloud (decoding) as well as writing them out (encoding).

These interventions may work especially well in small groups (3-4 students), for those identified as needing additional support in word-reading.

However, if universal screening results indicate that there are gaps in these skills across the cohort, then instruction in these areas should be targeted at the whole class.

To support strong multisyllabic word reading, teach students to:

- Segment and blend new target words (aim for 5 per session)
- Read words in isolation and context
- Recognise and understand affixes
- Identify syllables using vowel sounds
- Annotate parts of words
- Read words aloud (decoding)
- Write words out (encoding)

Vocabulary

Being able to read with understanding is dependent on having a wide and deep knowledge of the words being read.[15] When students have gaps in vocabulary knowledge, reading more complex texts is highly challenging.

Even if decoding skills are good, students may miss the meaning of much of what they read. And this can become a vicious cycle: when reading becomes too challenging, students may avoid it and therefore miss out on exposure to rich language and new words.

Research shows that students' vocabulary knowledge can be improved through explicit and regular vocabulary instruction.[16-18] In these studies, benefits were shown for students with English as a second language as well as those with reading disabilities.

And importantly, not only did participating students improve their knowledge of words taught within the intervention, but they also improved on standardised measures of vocabulary, showing that this type of intervention promotes vocabulary learning more generally.[17-18]

Classroom teachers delivering the intervention used a 15-minute daily lesson sequence that included the following high yield strategies:

- Four new academic words are introduced to students each week.
- Word meanings are explicitly taught using developmentally appropriate definitions, which students write out at the end of the lesson.
- Definitions are connected to their context to support understanding, and so students know how to understand the new word in relation to other words they know. Students participate in class discussion around word meanings, how they vary across settings, and when it would be appropriate to use them.
- Multiple opportunities are provided for students to practise new words (both in spoken discussion and writing) and receive instant feedback, reviewing words each lesson that week and again during later weeks.
- Teachers implement a range of follow-up activities, either teacher-led, with peers, or individual (for example: use of graphic organisers; discussing made-up scenarios where the word can be used; cloze-style or sentence-stem exercises using the new words).

To build vocabulary:

- Focus on academic 'Tier 2' words, introducing 4 per week
- Add a daily 15-min vocabulary lesson
- Teach word meanings explicitly
- Build morphological knowledge
- Use developmentally appropriate definitions connected to their context
- Engage students in class discussion about word meanings and usage
- Provide multiple opportunities (written and spoken) to practise new words
- Revisit words in follow-up activities

Another high-quality study showed that supplementing vocabulary knowledge support with morphological knowledge (as done in word-level reading interventions) can be highly effective in improving student outcomes.[19]

Learning morphological knowledge might be especially effective because it supports students to work out the meaning of new words in context, through recognising what the parts of the word represent, rather than memorising a finite list of vocabulary that doesn't generalise beyond the intervention. [20]

In this intervention, strategies used to support morphological knowledge included learning affixes and applying them to word families (e.g., pay, payment, payer, payable), interactive activities such as word sorting and matching into families, word construction through affix manipulation, reading words in context, and using target words in written exercises.

Comprehension

Comprehension is the end goal in reading and is the product of being able to read words accurately and fluently (decoding), plus understand the meaning of what those words represent (linguistic comprehension).[20] When students are struggling with comprehension, it is therefore important to determine whether underlying skills, such as decoding, may be part of the problem.

However, while other subcomponent skills are *necessary* for comprehension to take place, it doesn't necessarily mean that comprehension will happen on its own if those skills are taught.

Even with fluent word-level reading in place, and a wide vocabulary, students still need explicit teaching in a range of critical comprehension skills, such as:

- making inferences,
- understanding overall text structures,
- monitoring their own comprehension,
- connecting ideas across a text, and
- drawing generalisations from a text.[20]

As academic work becomes increasingly complex and discipline-specific across the schooling years, instruction in reading comprehension is critical for ensuring that students can access the materials being used across different subject areas.

In our review, we identified 11 high-quality studies that produced significant gains for students' reading comprehension. In these studies, the following strategies were found to be highly effective:

- building background knowledge explicitly to support understanding[21]
- teacher-modelling of how to read a text for meaning, using a 'think-aloud' approach,[22] opportunities for guided and independent practice[23]
- reading with an objective, previewing the text by looking ahead at headings and sections, activating background knowledge, coming up with questions to ask of the text while reading [22,24,25,26]
- engaging in peer discussion about a text, with different roles given to members of the group (leader, person giving the 'gist' of the text', person asking questions)[25,26]
- deliberate practice forming inferences from text, by linking text-specific information to general knowledge, looking for gaps in the text, and identifying 'clue words'[21,27]
- learning to paraphrase text through written summaries[28]
- teaching students to identify and read different text structures,[28,29] sometimes for specific disciplines such as science[30]
- learning to summarise text verbally and through class discussion, identifying key details and words in the text[20,31]

These are some of the key practices and strategies that were used in successful interventions, mostly delivered in small group settings (with one classroom and one mixed), with some interventions delivered by teachers and others by researchers. Students targeted in these interventions were in Grades 4 to 8.

To support comprehension:

- Build and activate background knowledge before reading
- Teach students to come up with an explicit objective for reading
- Help students to ask questions of the text before, during, and after reading
- Teach students to 'preview' the overall text before reading, explicitly teaching different types of text structure
- Support students to engage in oral discussion where they summarise the text, as well as written paraphrasing and summarising
- Teach inference formation, through looking for clues and gaps in the text

Fluency

While there were interventions focused solely on fluency, we did not find any that met the quality standards while also yielding significant gains in student outcomes.

However, successful reading interventions may also target multiple elements of core reading instruction – for example, word reading and vocabulary, or fluency and comprehension – or all of these at once. These are typically referred to as multicomponent interventions. And importantly, some of these multicomponent interventions showed benefits for enhancing reading fluency.

When all the elements are combined in this way, it's not possible to isolate exactly what strategy helped to improve reading fluency. But we do note below the fluency strategies that were used in multicomponent interventions where reading fluency improved, as they may be of benefit to your students.[32,33]

To support reading fluency:

- Include a daily 10-20 minutes of reading a text aligned to student instructional level in terms of readability and complexity
- Start by introducing key words that encompass the main idea of the text
- Engage students in repeated reading of the text, with a goal of improving accuracy, expression, or rate. Provide feedback to help students improve.
- Teach students to summarise the passage using key words
- Monitor student progress by regularly assessing speed, accuracy, and expression

What can parents do?

Parents play a pivotal role in supporting their children's reading development.[34] From reading street signs and cereal boxes in everyday activities and bedtime stories at night, you as a parent provide valuable support for reading, and you also model the importance of reading for life!

Parents can also sound the alarm when children might not be progressing as well as might be expected. For example, if children cannot sound out basic unfamiliar words by the end of Year 1, or are demonstrating reluctance to engage in reading activities, it is time to start asking questions.

Raising concerns with your child's teacher is one place to start. However, as time goes on, if those difficulties are at risk of becoming entrenched, you should question what interventions are being employed at the school and ensure they are evidence-based.

You can also seek assessment by a certified speech-language pathologist to help determine which component reading skills need support and provide that report to their child's school, with a request for additional support.

You can find certified speech-language pathologists through Speech Pathology Australia: **https://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/**

Conclusion

The evidence is in, and it's clear: it is *never too late* to provide high quality and effective support for reading. We hope this guide has been both practical and informative, as you seek to support students or young people in your life in developing the critical skill of being able to read.

Contact

For more information about this practice guide or the research cited, contact Dr Callula Killingly (c.killingly@qut.edu.au).

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Additional Resource

What are good questions to consider to assess research quality?

Interventions published in reports and journal articles should include certain information to help the reader evaluate its effectiveness.

Quality indicator	For example:
Context and setting	• Do the authors state where the intervention was conducted? In the classroom? One-to-one? • What information is provided about the school, its demographics and location?
Participants	• Are student demographics reported? Were students placed in the intervention based on criteria, and is that reported?
Interventionist	• Was the intervention run by researchers? Teachers? Speech pathologists? What training did they receive?
Content of the intervention	• Was there a particular focus (e.g., vocabulary) or was it multicomponent? What resources were used? • What specific strategies and skills were taught, and how? What "dosage" was provided?
Fidelity of implementation	• Were the recommended intervention components always provided to students, and at the recommended dosage? • How was fidelity monitored and assessed?
Internal validity	• How much of the intervention outcomes were under the control of the researcher(s)? • Was there a control group, and what did students in that group do instead of the intervention? • How were students assigned to groups? If not random, how did the researchers manage this? • Was there attrition? If so, what reasons are given?
Outcome measures	• How was the intervention's success evaluated? Are the measures reliable, robust, appropriate? Are they administered at a sensible point in time, enabling researchers to see if the intervention worked?
Data analysis	• Are the data analyses appropriate for the comparison of an intervention group with a control group (e.g., a t-test, ANOVA)? • Are effect sizes reported?

Adapted from Cook et al., 2014

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