

Top tips for helping struggling readers at home

Ideas from Oxford Owl website: [oxfordowl.co.uk](https://www.oxfordowl.co.uk)

Jean Gross CBE, a former teacher, educational psychologist and government adviser, shares her top ten tips for helping struggling readers at home.



1. Keep anxiety levels down

If your child is struggling, the most important thing is to keep anxiety levels down. Learning to read involves complicated skills, and these can soon go to pieces if a child gets worried.

Even if your child is not worried about their reading, they will quickly notice your tense face or ever so slightly impatient voice – so breathe deeply, smile, find some funny books that you can both laugh at, and don't drag out reading sessions if they are stressful. Keep them short and sweet, and focus on sharing a book with your child rather than 'hearing' them read.

2. Make time to share books

Try to set aside ten minutes a day to read together. Turn the television and the radio off to help your child focus. Always start a new book by looking through it together and talking about what it might be about – look at the cover, the contents page and the pictures. This kind of chat helps the child by giving them a sense of what's in the book before they start to read it, and preparing them for some of the words they will meet. This means you are setting them up for success right from the start.

When you are helping your child to choose a book, a good way to check the level is what's called the 'five finger test'. Open a page of the book and ask your child to put one finger up for every word they don't know. If all five fingers have been used up, the chances are that the book is too difficult.

Do let your child read favourite books over and over again if they want to. Research shows this will help them become more fluent readers. And let them read what most grabs their interest – comics, information books or text on websites can be just as valuable as stories.

3. Take turns to read

Your child might want to read the whole book on their own, and that's fine if it isn't too difficult. But if it is a book that is a bit hard but still really interesting for them, or if they are lacking in confidence, it can be more fun if you and your child take turns to read. They might read one page and you the next. Or you can both read out loud together, pointing to the words as you go. The important thing is to keep the flow going and keep your child interested and enjoying what they are doing.

4. Build confidence

Think back to what it was like when you were learning to drive or mastering a sport. There were probably times when you wanted to give up, so needed lots of encouragement. It's the same for reading; notice what your child has done well and tell them – often. You might say things like: 'You sounded that word out brilliantly, didn't you?'

'You noticed that word didn't make sense so you had another go. Well done!'

It is also important to react positively when your child is struggling or gets things wrong. You can make clear that mistakes are how we learn. So when your child is stuck, say things like:

'You've got a bit stuck – that's OK. What helped you last time this happened?'

'That's a hard one – good try. Let's say it together so you'll remember it next time.'

5. What to do when your child gets stuck

The first thing to do is to wait and see if they can work it out by themselves. If they can't, you might want to just tell them the word, to keep the flow of reading going. Do this if they are looking really frustrated or losing interest. But at other times you can use simple prompts to help them, like reminding them to use their phonic knowledge to sound out the letters.

Sometimes, of course, none of this will work, because you've come to one of those many tricky English words that don't follow phonic rules – words like 'the', 'said', 'once' and 'was' where the letters don't make the sounds you'd expect them to. In this case you might encourage your child to sound out as much of the word as they can. Then tell them the word and get them to repeat it.

6. Play with sounds

Many struggling readers have particular trouble with what is called phonological awareness – picking up the separate sounds in a spoken word, knowing when words rhyme, being able to blend separate sounds into whole words. There are lots of simple games you can play to help build your child's phonological awareness and phonic knowledge. The obvious one is playing 'I spy with my little eye.' You might also want to have fun helping your child make a collection of objects beginning with the same sound, and put them in a treasure box labelled with the appropriate letter.

For older children, you might want to play word games in the car where you say two words (like a labrador and a poodle) and ask your child to swap round the initial sounds (so ... a pabrador and a loodle). They can then give you two words – maybe something they can see out of the window – to do the sound swap with. Hopefully this will make you all laugh!

7. Convince them they are not stupid!

If your child sees their friends reading well, and they can't, they may have started to think they are stupid. Tell them they definitely aren't. Tell them about all the clever and famous people who struggled with reading when they were at school – people like Einstein, Charles Darwin, Hans Christian Anderson, Orlando Bloom. It's a long list!

Learning to read comes really easily to some people, but for many others it doesn't – it's hard work. There will be other skills your child learned easily that cause problems for their friends: learning to swim, maybe, or to draw. Everyone is different, and struggling to learn to read does not mean people are slow, stupid or lazy.

8. Avoid blame

When you listen to your child it may seem to you that they are just playing up, not trying – being lazy. You'll see them read a word perfectly well one day, then forget it the next. But this is normal when we are learning a new skill. Our performance is always erratic to start with. We have to repeat something again and again before it sticks and becomes automatic. Tell your child this, and let them know that you know they are trying their best.

9. Read to your child

Keep on reading to your child, as well as listening to them read, for as long as they will let you. For struggling readers, this is especially important – partly to make sure the child continues to see books as fun and interesting, but also to make sure they don't miss out on the things that other children learn from reading to themselves. These include new information, new vocabulary, and the way words and sentences are put together in print – all things that help children become good writers.

10. Use technology

As well as listening to you reading to them at bedtime, your child can listen to talking books on an MP3 player or tablet in the car. They can have fun playing phonics game apps on your smart phone. They can help you read text messages. They can go on websites for fun reading activities. There are lots of great ideas out there, from podcasts to treasure hunts to quizzes and puzzles. Look at the [National Literacy Trust's Words for Life](#) site