

ASK A PROFESSOR PETRILLO!

Dear Professor Petrillo:

I am a parent who has been struggling with my child's reading problem. Although Ryan is in grade 3, his reading level has been identified as being only grade 1. I just don't know what to do about it. He gets special basic skills reading instruction but it does not seem to be working. Each year the gap seems to widen further. What should I do? Do I have any recourse? I don't want my child going through life with the inability to read like everyone else. Please give me some advice.

Sincerely,

Struggling Mom
Austin, Texas

Dear Struggling Mom:

Yours is not a unique situation and I don't blame you for being concerned. Let me start by saying that the time to deal with such problems is at the primary level (1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades). There are a few things you can still do in grade 3, although first grade is the key place to begin a serious review of every child's reading potential. Without my testing your child individually, one cannot be absolutely certain what the problem is. However, we *can* look at the number one culprit responsible for elementary school reading problems (aside from children with specific, classifiable learning disabilities, which is a whole other issue).

It could be that your child is a victim of "dysteachia." That is to say, perhaps the school's reading program is *problematic*. The best way of insuring that children will learn to read in school is for the parent to teach them how to read *before* they even get to school. Why? Because you just can't necessarily trust that the school is going to have the best program of reading instruction. During the 1990's and early 2000's, school districts nationwide were under the spell of something called "whole language," a method of reading instruction we borrowed from New Zealand which has been proven to be a disaster. Unfortunately, many students were taught using this method and will forever lag behind in reading as a result. We are presently feeling the effects in middle, high school, and even college students. Most school districts nationwide have dropped the whole language label and acquired the new *balanced literacy* label which supposedly includes phonics. However, in most cases they are still teaching whole language with a band-aid on it, as phonics still is not getting its due emphasis in the early reading program.

If Ryan is a victim of *dysteachia*, it is still not too late to rectify the problem. What he most likely needs is a strong phonics program that will teach him the basic "decoding" skills that allow him to adequately understand the alphabetic code. Yes, it means some home-schooling by mom in addition to regular schooling. Find an excellent phonics program which assesses and develops your son's phonic ability, and also provides comprehension development. Do this and little Ryan will be well on his way to conquering 4th grade. Hope this helps!

Sincerely,

Professor Petrillo, Department of Reading, College of Education, Rowan University