



Is It a Reading Disorder or Developmental Lag?

Get expert advice on identifying and addressing reading problems in your child's early years.

By Susan Hall, Ed.D.

How do parents know if their child's reading delay is a real problem or simply a "developmental lag?" How long should parents wait before seeking help if their child is struggling with reading? In this article, Susan Hall, Ed.D., answers these questions.

As I travel across the country speaking to groups of parents about reading difficulties, I often say "beware of the developmental lag excuse." I have several reasons for saying this. First, I have listened to parent after parent tell me about feeling there was a problem early on, yet being persuaded to discount their intuition and wait to seek help for their child. Later, when they learned time was of the essence in developing reading skills, the parents regretted the lost months or years. Second, **research shows that the crucial window of opportunity to deliver help is during the first couple of years of school.** So if your child is having trouble learning to read, the best approach is to take immediate action.

Knowing how soon to act can be easy if you are informed about important conclusions from recent research. Reading researchers tell us the ideal window of opportunity for addressing reading difficulties is during kindergarten and first grade. The National Institutes of Health state that 95 percent of poor readers can be brought up to grade level if they receive effective help early. **While it is still possible to help an older child with reading, those beyond third grade require much more intensive help.** The longer you wait to get help for a child with reading difficulties, the harder it will be for the child to catch up.

The three key research conclusions that support seeking help early are:

- 90 percent of children with reading difficulties will achieve grade level in reading if they receive help by the first grade.
- 75 percent of children whose help is delayed to age nine or later continue to struggle throughout their school careers.
- If help is given in fourth grade, rather than in late kindergarten, it takes four times as long to improve the same skills by the same amount.

Parents who understand these research conclusions realize they cannot afford to waste valuable time trying to figure out if there really is a problem or waiting for the problem to cure itself.

These research conclusions make it imperative for schools to implement screening tools that emphasize phonemic awareness skills. As discussed in the earlier Q & A on [Assessment Issues](#), the best plan is to begin screening children in mid-kindergarten and continue screening at least three times a year until the end of second grade.

Reading researchers who designed these screening tools recommend identifying and providing additional assistance to the lowest 20 percent of children. The rationale is that it is better to slightly over-identify the

number of children who may be "at risk" of reading difficulty than to miss some who may need help. The worst outcome of over-identification is that a child who would eventually have caught on receives some additional help. Parents should follow this strategy and act early because the worst that can happen is their child will get a little extra help she really didn't need.

Yet identification is only the beginning. Effective and intense intervention must be offered immediately. Students who lag behind their peers must be given extra help, preferably in groups of three or fewer students, by a well-trained educator who knows how to deliver effective instruction. Assignment to these groups can be fluid, with children joining whenever the teacher determines skills are lagging and others moving out as they master skills.

Early signs of difficulty should not be attributed to immaturity. When a kindergarten child confuses letters, associates the wrong sound with a letter, or cannot distinguish a rhyme, it usually has nothing to do with social maturity. These warning signs do not necessarily mean the child has a reading disability; these signs may indicate the child had insufficient preschool preparation. If a child has not been exposed to letters and letter sounds, she usually catches on quickly once exposed. It is only after effective instruction has been provided and the child is still struggling that one can conclude there may be a more serious problem.

Why do parents wait to seek help? In a recent Roper Starch poll, parents' attitudes about their child's learning problems and the public's general awareness of learning disabilities were explored. **The poll showed many parents waited far too long to seek help for their child because they worried their child might be stigmatized if found to have a learning problem.** Nearly half (48 percent) of parents felt having their child labeled as "learning disabled" was more harmful than struggling privately with an unidentified problem. Of the parents who expressed some concerns their child may be having trouble, 44 percent said that they waited a year or more before seeking help.

Parents who understand the risks of delay in getting help for their child's reading problems are motivated not to wait. Children can be brought up to grade level much more successfully and with less effort if effective intervention is offered early on. Once parents understand the risks of waiting, hopefully it will be easier to overcome concerns and get help immediately.

Next week, we will discuss the components of effective reading instruction, especially for children who struggle initially.