



Literacy tips for children with learning difficulties and disabilities

SUPPORT AND STRATEGIES FOR E-LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

For some young people, having the opportunity to have some control over their learning and timetable, and learn without the added burden of peer pressure, comparison or rigid classes may help them to thrive. For others, adjusting to the changed circumstances will be anxiety provoking and likely take time and trial and error, along with more patience and flexible problem solving than they are used to. This information sheet will help parents and children to feel they have the tools to help them to take charge of learning remotely and when they return to the classroom. E-learning does not need to involve sticking to a rigid set tasks if these do not suit your child's needs – it may be an opportunity to gain new insights and to adapt and experiment to enhance a child's learning engagement.

The following are practical tips to support primary school children with learning difficulties in the context of e-learning with a particular focus on literacy. These have been developed to complement the different modes of service delivery and support that schools are providing at this time. Many of these tips will be of value for children well beyond the current learning-from-home situation.

Managing literacy challenges during e-learning

Students with literacy-related learning difficulties or disabilities have a higher need for support than other students. Without teachers readily available, during e-learning and COVID-19 conditions, this may add a challenging demand for the students and their families. The following suggestions may assist parents in providing some support through everyday learning opportunities, rather than feeling under pressure to act as their child's tutor. Having your child at home could, for some families, provide an opportunity to engage in literacy tasks in a way that feels less stressful to your child. You may explore ways to make the experience of reading, writing and spelling more fun and accessible during one-on-one time together. You may also need to use the time to progress your child in a structured way that fits in around your own work demands. Online options for evidence-based literacy intervention are also outlined in this sheet.

It might be helpful to discuss with your child’s teacher the possibility of using some of the class-allocated time for focusing on your child’s specific needs, rather than spending time completing all of the general set tasks, which may be difficult for your child without the teacher on hand.

Ideas for practising reading

On top of just reading books, children can practise at home by reading:

- recipes during baking activities
- instructions during craft activities
- signs while you are out walking.

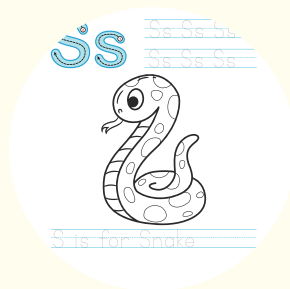
Try creating a treasure hunt, where your child has to follow written instructions to find a treat. Remember to pitch these at a level your child can read with ease and provide picture cues if necessary.

There are *five key components to effective reading instruction*, including: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. You can practise each of these through different types of activities.

Phonological awareness: Understanding word sounds

Follow a continuum.

- Start with easier sounds e.g., rhyming: Read Dr. Seuss books, nursery rhymes, songs.
- Then blend sounds together to make a word, or break words down into component sounds e.g., c.a.t, s.l.e.e.p.



Try games.

- I spy: “I spy something beginning with...” and see if the child can guess what it is.
- Letter lucky dip: make a set of letter cards – group them as consonants and vowels. Do a ‘lucky dip’ from each pile two or three times, then work together on making words from the letters you found.

- Change words by adding a different sound at the beginning, i.e., fun, run, sun, or with at the end i.e., cake, cane, cape, case – and see how many they can come up with.
 - Make this into a game by seeing if your child can beat their record.
 - Try games where the kids have to drop out a sound and make a new word i.e., train without the t = rain.

Phonics or phonological processing: Mapping letters to sounds

- When helping children to decode, begin with the easier single letter to sound representations (e.g. c-a-t)
- Next move to explicit teaching of letter groups that together make a single sound. These are:



digraphs – 2 letters, 1 sound (i.e., ee, ea, ai, etc), e.g., ‘b ea k’

trigraphs – 3 letters, 1 sound (i.e., igh) (h -igh)

quadgraphs – 4 letters, 1 sound (i.e., ough, eigh), (c - ough).

- Free synthetic phonics resources are available at www.getreadingright.com.au under free teacher’s phonics resources, with activities such as domino games that could be used at home.
- Decodable texts with a structured vocabulary are best for optimising reading success such as the Fitzroy Readers (now available as an iPad app).
- Or free decodable books are available online. Google decodable readers or see: www.oxfordowl.co.uk/for-school/default. Dandelion Readers has decodable books available through Apple Books.
- See Literacy Planet for lots of literacy games and activities, see www.literacyplanet.com. Parents can pay for a monthly subscription. This site has been used by Macquarie University in conjunction with

their well-researched and evidence-based literacy programs MiniLit and Multi-Lit.

- Multi-Lit reading tutors offer online tutoring support, see: www.multilit.com.

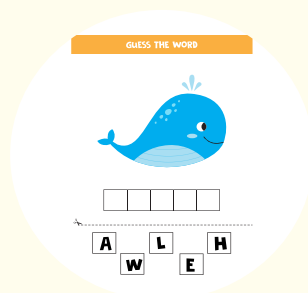
Fluency: Reading with speed, accuracy and expression

Some words are irregular and are difficult to decode i.e., said, yacht.

These words need a different approach, with more of an *emphasis on word recognition*.

As you can see, these words still have some potential for decoding, such as initial sound or ending sound, but accurate reading depends on prior exposure and experience. Y...ach ...t

- Try making flashcards with these, and practise them through games and races to boost fast recognition.
- Create two flashcards with each of the 300 most-used words on them (Google these), and use these to play snap or memory (where you turn a pile of cards upside down and mix them around... pick up two cards and if they match, say the word, and keep them. The winner has the most pairs of cards) or race and see if they can beat their time reading through the stack.
- Create word banks of key words from classroom themes so children are familiar with important words to use in their writing.
- Try word find puzzles... often in the back of the newspaper or create your own. Customise with words they are focused on at school.



Vocabulary: Building word knowledge

This one is easy.

- Talk with your kids.
- Read stories to them that are above what they could read for themselves.
- Encourage them to listen to audiobooks. Check in with them to ensure they understand difficult words.
- Discuss the television shows they like to watch – ensure they understand the meaning of difficult concepts or words – and correct them if they use a word incorrectly.
- Try using more complex language, and check their understanding.
- Crosswords are fun for this... Google the clues if the child get stuck.



Reading comprehension: Understanding what you read

- Stop when reading to discuss a concept or event that occurs in the story to check if your child understands.
- Ask questions regarding:
 - the characters
 - the setting
 - the story problem
 - what does the character want?
 - What consequence did their action lead to?
 - How did that complicate the story?



The five W's: Who, What, When, Where, Why

- Consider examples of subtext... what does the character really mean by that?
- Ask the kids to predict what might happen next in the story.
- Get them to tell you what has happened so far.

Ideas for practising writing: Spelling, handwriting and written expression

Tips for spelling: Reading relates to decoding and recognition, while spelling relates to encoding a word from the sounds a child can hear in order to represent the word in written form.

- Ask your child to listen to how many sounds they can hear when they say a word they want to spell, and direct their attention to the need to represent each one of them.
- Make a dash for each sound or a column for each sound such that they have to think if the letter representation might be a digraph (i.e., oi) or split digraph (i.e., the 'A' sound in came), or single letter to sound representation.
- Try 'building' words from small cards that show each of the letter to sound representations. Again, be careful to show digraphs, trigraphs and quadgraphs on one card so that your child understands that more than one letter can be used to represent one sound.
- See the Squeebles Spelling Test app for practising spelling lists you can customise; and THRASS is great for teaching digraphs, trigraphs and quadgraphs, see: www.thrass.com.au.

Finish the Alphabet

A		C		E
F		H	I	
	L		N	O
P	Q	R		T
U		W	X	
	ABC game for kids			

Tips for handwriting: Handwriting proficiency is important. When handwriting is effortful it takes up a lot of a child's energy and leaves less available for thinking of the answers or ideas.

- *Targeting handwriting* student books are available at Big W (or online) and great for practising correct starting positions. Starting positions are very important, particularly for the transition from printing to cursive script. If your child holds the pen awkwardly, try giving them a triangular pencil grip.
- Colouring-in books (or sheets downloaded from the internet) and mazes are fun ways to develop better motor control.

Tips for written expression: Written language comes from sequencing words into a sentence, sentences into a paragraph, and paragraphs into a form of written composition. There are six genres for written text including: descriptive writing, expository writing, journals/letters, narrative writing, persuasive writing, and poetry writing. Each of these need to be approached in a structured way.

Use a structured approach to written composition, utilising the acronym POWER (plan, organise, write, edit, revise).

- *Planning or brainstorming* stage – your child is encouraged to think of the purpose of his/her writing and his/her background knowledge of the topic.
- *Organise* step – the child needs to categorise and sequence his/her ideas and consider text structure.
- *Write* step – he/she generates his/her first draft. He/she may need to be encouraged to elaborate on ideas.
- *Edit* step – the child and his/her parent use think sheets, and suggestions are then compared and discussed in an edit conference. A meaningful storyline should be given a higher priority than mechanics. Encourage the child to evaluate his/her own work using a structured approach such as creating a set of 'rules' for writing i.e., have I answered the essay question?
- *Revise* step – incorporate the agreed upon changes.

Generate ideas for stories together and create an ideas book so that there are ideas ready to go for school-based creative writing tasks.

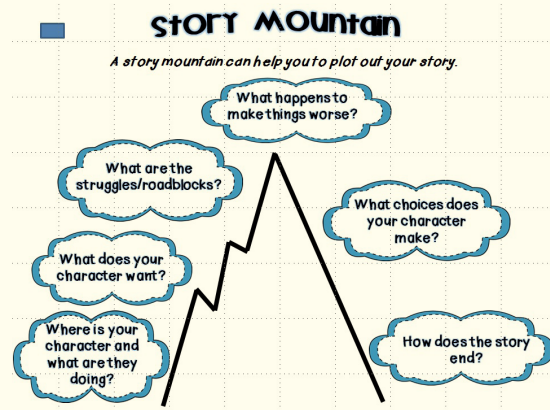
Use story starters to plant a seed from which a story can grow (give your child a starting sentence or picture).

Provide a structure for narrative writing – using text or pictures:

- set the scene
- introduce and describe the characters
- develop the plot
- introduce other characters
- pose a conflict or problem for the character
- add a climax and a resolution.

There are lots of downloadable narrative plans online, as well as plans for other text forms such as persuasive texts and recounts. There are also comic strip templates online – which can also be used to plan or create a story.

- Spend some time creating lists of ‘wow’ words in categories (e.g., happy words; spooky words; amazing words) – and stick them on your child’s wall – ready to help their writing shine.
- Your child could create a comic using pictures with text in thought and dialogue bubbles.
- Practise persuasive text: Notice something your child really wants, and encourage them to put together a written argument for why it is a good idea i.e., getting a puppy. Encourage them to use facts and examples.



- Practise procedural text by writing down the steps for everyday tasks such as baking a cake, or building an inside cubby i.e., with blankets and cushions.
- Try writing a children’s book together and illustrating it for fun.
- Encourage your child to write a journal of feelings and thoughts during the COVID-19 lockdown to look back on when the whole experience ends.

Acknowledgments

This resource was prepared by the:






A clinical neuropsychologist is a psychologist who is trained to understand brain-behaviour relationships (across the lifespan):

- To assess thinking/brain abilities and difficulties to clarify diagnosis and identify the client’s care needs and priorities
- To provide targeted intervention or rehabilitation for people with thinking/brain-related difficulties or disorders
- To adapt or modify treatments to take into account the effects of thinking/brain difficulties

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Finding extra support

If your child needs clarity and assistance as regards their learning challenges referral to an appropriate psychologist for a detailed assessment and advice may be warranted. For example, a paediatric neuropsychologist can provide a differential diagnosis and strategies, and direct you to an appropriate special education tutor or any other healthcare specialist that may be required.

The APS has other information sheets in this series to support children and teens with learning difficulties and disabilities. To access, visit: psychology.org.au for more.