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# Understanding Reading Difficulties

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## Homeschooling a struggling learner

"My child wants to read so badly, but he struggles so much. He is embarrassed because his brothers and sisters, even the younger ones, can read better than he can. We have tried so many curriculums. They

have worked for my other children, but not for him."

As a reading specialist, and coordinator for HSLDA's Struggling Learner program, this is a statement I hear on a daily basis from homeschooling moms. What is really hampering this child's ability to read? Can a mom figure this out at home, or does she always need professional help for this?

My experience, after working with thousands of homeschooling families in my clinic, is that homeschooling parents are very capable of tackling this job successfully at home, once they have the correct information to work with. In this brief article, we will discuss the process that I teach parents to determine where their child's reading problem lies, and what to do about it.

Why is reading easier for the other children in the family? We are going to look at the Four Reading Components. If all of the four components are present and functioning, then reading is easy. That is what is happening with your other children. For this child, one or more of the components is missing. It is important for parents to have the tools to determine where their child's reading difficulty lies, so that they can wisely spend their time and money on the targeted areas, rather than just doing more reading, with comprehension questions.

## The Four Reading Components

### 1. Eye Tracking Ability

One very basic component to smooth, easy reading, is the ability of the eyes to work together as a team while moving from left to right without any stops, wanderings, (saccades), or reversals. For an easy checklist that you can use to determine if an eye tracking issue is affecting your child's ability to read, please use the handy checklist we have on [HSLDA's website](#). Scroll down on the first page to the Four Learning Gates, and look under Visual Processing Dysfunction.

If you determine that your child is struggling with eye tracking issues, then you can have him or her assessed by a developmental optometrist. If the optometrist finds evidence of poor eye tracking skills, then he may prescribe corrective lenses, or a series of vision therapy sessions.

Other home-based methods of improving a child's eye tracking skills for reading would be to use the very effective midline exercises found in books such as "The Brain Integration Therapy Manual" by Dianne Craft, "Brain Gym" by Paul Dennison, or NILD training. All of these resources are listed on the [HSLDA Struggling Learner website](#) for your convenience.

Just a note: If your child is two or more years behind in reading, he or she may have components missing in addition to a visual tracking problem. That is usually indicative of a child who has an auditory processing problem as well, and would benefit greatly from intensive phonics training.

### 2. Word Decoding Skills

Many struggling readers are "word guessers," because they have not mastered the basics of the decoding units in a word. You have taught them phonics, but they have never "stuck." When this component is missing, it is difficult to make much progress. The child finds that he or she needs to memorize all new words. After a while, the brain goes into overload. There are just too many words to memorize. They need to be able to break the "code" for reading.

Now this is where it gets tricky for a parent. There are many good phonics and phonemic awareness programs available. You may have used many of them. Yet, progress is at snail's pace, and your child is getting increasingly frustrated and avoiding reading at all costs. That is because these struggling learners need very specialized programs. They need phonics (or phonemic awareness) programs that give them a technique to help these sound units of reading stick. Using workbooks, worksheets, and even songs and music have not seemed to be as effective for these learners as we want them to be.

While there are many good reading programs, we reading and dyslexia specialists have found, through parent report and regular testing, that there are about six intensive phonics programs that seem to give parents the best and fastest results for their struggling reader. There is not room in this article to list the programs, but if you would like to receive a list of these intensive phonics programs, please email us at [specialneeds@hslida.org](mailto:specialneeds@hslida.org). No need for a message. Just type in, "Intensive Phonics Programs List," in the subject line, and we will email the list and descriptions to you. This is by far the most common reading component that is missing in a struggling learner. You can effectively correct this at home, with the proper tools.

### 3. Sight Word Memorization Skills

The left brain stores the names of words, while the right brain stores the picture of what the word looks like. Because of the lack of good hemispheric integration in these bright but struggling children, they often cannot bring the name from the left brain to the right brain picture of the word. Thus, they attempt to sound out all words, such as "would, many, laugh, neighbor."

In spite of the fact that you are using a good, targeted phonics program with this child, he is still reading so laboriously because he is attempting to sound out ALL words. It seems that a word never "sticks" in his right brain long-term memory.

Most reading programs for children with dyslexia approach the problem of difficulty memorizing sight words by having a child read a list of these "outlaw" words over and over. As you know, this can be a slow, frustrating process for many struggling readers. There is a technique that you can use with any reading program that will make these sight words stick so much faster--and the child will even find that he can spell these words! It is called the Right Brain Sight Word method. This uses the child's strong photographic memory to store these words.

Parents often say that their children using this method learned 15 words in a week--words they had been working on all year! The best thing about this method is that it does not involve any expense. To learn how to use this strategy with your struggling learner, if he needs this, go to [here](#) and look at the cards called "sight words." As you look at the samples that are on the site, you will see how to make these yourself at home. This method is particularly needed for our readers who are very "brittle," which refers to those who are struggling the most. Not all students need this step.

### 4. Reading Comprehension Skills

If you have a child who can read on grade level, but consistently does not remember what he or she reads, then it would be good to work for 15 minutes a day on reading comprehension training. In the classroom of bright, hard-working struggling readers, I used this daily memory training strategy. It is so easy for you to do it at home. We need to help this child convert words into pictures. The technique is simple. While the child is looking up with his eyes (to stimulate the right brain), you read an interesting passage to the child. Stop after each sentence or two and ask the child about his mental picture, or "movie." If the child has none, then describe your own picture until this becomes easier. As you do this practice daily, your child will soon learn to convert words to pictures while he or she is reading silently.

You will find many more ideas on working with a struggling reader at home on our website, <http://www.hslida.org/mlink.asp?id=10194>. You also can access the monthly newsletters that have been written on this subject on the website. The HSLDA Special Needs/Struggling Learner coordinators are always here to help you in the important work of teaching your child at home. You can be your child's best teacher, no matter what the struggle is. Let us come along side and help you with this work.





This resource is provided by the Home School Legal Defense Association's Struggling Learner's newsletter as a service to the homeschooling community.

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