

A Parent's Guide to

Helping Struggling Readers

*The Colorado Reading Center believes
every student can thrive with the right
tools and support.*



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**This guide will help you understand common
reading struggles and give you proven
strategies and tools that can build your
child's confidence.**

Is My Child Struggling?

It can be difficult to tell if a child is struggling with reading, especially since the signs are often subtle. What may look like laziness, lack of motivation, or inattention could be an underlying reading challenge. Take a look at these common signs.

Foundational & Early Language



- Difficulty with phonological skills, for example trouble learning the alphabet, remembering letter sounds, or identifying rhymes.
- Oral language challenges, such as being a late talker, struggling to name objects, or having trouble following directions.
- Poor print awareness, meaning they don't understand that print has meaning or how a book works (e.g., reading from left to right).

Reading & Decoding



- Slow, choppy, or effortful reading.
- Frequent guessing at words instead of sounding them out.
- Trouble with phonics like difficulty sounding out words or remembering sight words.
- Inconsistent word recognition where they read a word correctly on one page but not on the next.

Writing & Spelling



- Inconsistent or poor spelling.
- Frequent letter reversals.
- Handwriting difficulties, which may include poor letter formation and spacing.

Behavioral & Emotional



- Avoidance of reading altogether or resistance to reading aloud.
- Increased frustration or anxiety during schoolwork.
- Fatigue during literacy tasks.
- Falling behind grade-level milestones for reading.

Don't wait!
The earlier help begins,
the greater the chance
of long-term success.

Grade Level Cues



- **Preschool:** Late talking, trouble naming objects, or struggling to follow directions.
- **Kindergarten:** Difficulty learning the alphabet and letter sounds.
- **1st Grade:** Trouble with blending sounds to read simple words.
- **2nd Grade:** The student should be reading fluently, so struggling with fluency is a cue.
- **Older students (3rd grade and beyond):** Signs shift to poor spelling, a slow reading rate, or avoiding reading altogether. The child may also struggle to read independently. Comprehension may suffer as well.

Uncovering the ‘Why?’

It can be frustrating when a child struggles with reading, and it’s natural to wonder why. The challenges often stem from underlying difficulties with foundational skills or how the brain processes language.

Oral Language & Auditory Processing

Strong reading skills are built on a foundation of spoken language. Difficulties with oral language (late talking or trouble naming objects) and auditory processing (how the brain interprets sounds) can be early indicators of a future reading challenge.

Handwriting

The act of writing by hand helps to strengthen language processing and memory. Therefore, difficulties with handwriting and fine motor skills can sometimes be a contributing factor to reading challenges.

Cognitive Skills

Core reading tasks require strong cognitive skills, such as working memory, sequencing, and processing speed. When a child struggles with these, decoding and reading fluency can become more difficult.

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a neurobiological learning difference that is not related to intelligence.¹ It impacts how the brain processes language, which can make reading, spelling, and writing difficult. Identifying dyslexia early can dramatically improve outcomes. Research has shown that targeted instruction can help students develop new reading pathways in the brain, which improve reading skills.

Dyslexia Indicators by Grade²

**Dyslexia is a learning difference
that is not related to intelligence.**

¹ IDA Dyslexia Handbook: What Every Family Should Know. <https://dyslexiaida.org/ida-dyslexia-handbook/> See also. <https://www.cde.state.co.us/coloradoliteracy/dyslexia-factsheet>

PRE-K

- Delayed speech
- Difficulty with rhyming and learning nursery rhymes
- Difficulty pronouncing words correctly

KINDERGARTEN

- Difficulty learning the alphabet
- Trouble matching letters and sounds
- Difficulty segmenting and blending sounds

FIRST GRADE

- Trouble reading simple words
- Frequent guessing of words
- Difficulty spelling even simple words phonetically

SECOND GRADE

- Reading is slow and requires great effort
- Trouble with spelling and sequencing sounds
- Resistance to reading aloud

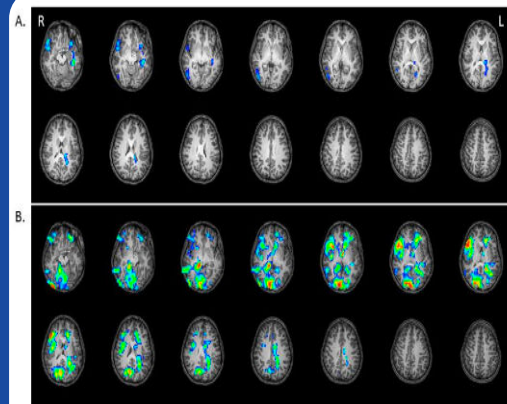
THIRD - FIFTH GRADE

- Reading remains laborious, especially with unfamiliar words
- Poor spelling, often inconsistent
- Avoidance of reading and writing assignments

MIDDLE SCHOOL AND BEYOND

- Slow reading and frequent re-reading required for comprehension
- Trouble learning foreign languages
- Persistent spelling difficulties

Neuroimaging Dyslexic Brains³



Brain activation during word reading: typical readers show stronger left-hemisphere activity (A). While children with dyslexia display more right-sided and widespread activation (B).

The Science Behind Dyslexia

Research shows that dyslexia is not the result of poor instruction or a lack of motivation. Instead, it reflects intrinsic differences in how the brain processes language. Neuroimaging studies reveal that the brains of people with dyslexia show different patterns of activity, particularly in the areas that connect sounds to letters and quickly recognize written words. Targeted instruction can help a student develop new reading pathways in the brain, improving their skills.

²Dyslexia Working Group. (2024, June). Dyslexia Working Group 2024 Annual Report. Colorado Department of Education. <https://www.cde.state.co.us/coloradoliteracy/dyslexiaworkinggroup2024annualreport>

³Quinn, C., Weisse, A., & Poole, D. (2014). An fMRI study of a dyslexia biomarker. *Journal of Young Investigators*, 27(1). <https://www.jyi.org/2014-january/2017/3/29/an-fmri-study-of-a-dyslexia-biomarker>

Taking Action

If you've noticed the signs of a struggle, waiting for your child to "catch up" on their own can lead to frustration and lowered confidence. You are your child's best advocate, and acting early makes a significant difference.

STEP 1: Get a Formal Evaluation

1

The first step is to uncover the root cause of the difficulty. A psychoeducational assessment⁴ or reading screening will measure key skills like word recognition, fluency, and comprehension.

The results will provide a clear roadmap for effective intervention. Testing can be done through your school district or privately at a location such as the Colorado Reading Center.

STEP 2: Find Research-Backed Support

Not all reading support is the same. The most effective approach for reading struggles is structured literacy, a research-backed method that addresses the cause of the struggle rather than just the symptoms. It's considered the gold standard for students with dyslexia and other reading difficulties.

Structured literacy works by teaching the structure of language in an explicit, sequential, and cumulative way. It typically includes:

- **Phonology:** The study of sounds in language.
- **Morphology:** The study of word parts that carry meaning (prefixes and suffixes).
- **Syntax:** The rules for forming sentences.

2

3

STEP 3: Partner with a Specialist

At the Colorado Reading Center, we provide diagnostic testing and individualized plans to help your child build confidence and lasting skills.

Our one-on-one instruction ensures a personalized approach that supports each student's unique profile. We partner with parents and schools to ensure consistent support. **Our goal is not just academic success, but restored confidence in reading.**

⁴<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/tests-for-dyslexia>

Colorado's READ Act

Colorado's READ Act (Reading to Ensure Academic Development)⁵ is a state law designed to ensure students with reading difficulties are identified and supported. Understanding the law can help you advocate more effectively for your child.

Here are the key takeaways for families:

Mandatory Screening: Beginning in the 2027-2028 school year, all public school students in kindergarten through third grade⁶ will receive mandatory screening for key reading skills, **including signs of dyslexia.**

Identification and Support: The law requires schools to identify students with significant reading deficiencies and create a targeted intervention plan **called a READ plan.** Teachers can determine a significant reading deficiency using a "body of evidence," which can now explicitly include information about dyslexia.

Parent Notification: If your child is identified as having a reading deficiency, including signs of dyslexia, your school must notify you and provide information about the intervention plan.

Open Communication: Teachers are now permitted to openly discuss dyslexia in meetings and reports.

What is a READ Plan?

For students identified as having a significant reading deficiency (SRD), schools must develop an individualized READ plan. This plan includes specific goals, progress monitoring, and home-based strategies for parents.

While the READ Act has increased awareness, the implementation of support can vary by school district. If you find that school services are limited, supplementing with private support may be necessary. The Colorado Reading Center is here to help you navigate this process and secure the best possible support for your child.



⁵ <https://www.cde.state.co.us/coloradoliteracy>

⁶ https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/2025a_200_signed.pdf

What Can I Do at Home?

While professional help is crucial, daily routines at home play a vital role in reinforcing learning and building confidence. The key is to create a reading-rich environment that feels joyful, not punishing.

Make time for reading

Making time for reading every day is the single best thing you can do.

Carve out consistent, distraction-free time each day for reading. Ten to fifteen minutes of shared reading daily will help solidify skills and promote bonding.

Keep practice predictable (bedtime, after school, or during breakfast) so reading becomes a natural, expected part of the routine. By establishing the habit of daily reading, you are developing the essential pathways in the brain to help make this task easier and more enjoyable for your child.

Paired reading and NIM (Neurological Impress Method)

Paired reading is a powerful strategy where the **parent and child read aloud together**. It builds fluency, reduces pressure, and models proper pacing and expression.

NIM (Neurological Impress Method) reading takes this a step further. While sitting behind and to the side of the child, the parent reads slightly ahead and louder. The child will read along, and try to match the cadence and pace of their parent. **This method provides auditory reinforcement and reduces decoding stress.**

Repeated Reading

Re-reading favorite books or passages helps build fluency, confidence, and word recognition.

Repetition aids memory and allows the child to move from decoding toward comprehension and expression.

Encourage dramatic re-readings to build prosody and fun.

Build Enjoyment

Reading should feel joyful, not punishing.

Choose books at the right level where your child can read with 90–95% accuracy. If the material is too hard, frustration builds. If it is too easy, there is no challenge.

Let your child choose some of the books to maintain engagement and ownership.

The key is to integrate literacy into everyday life.



**Making time for reading every day
is the single best thing you can do.**

Handwriting

Research confirms **handwriting activates memory, attention, and language areas in the brain more than typing**⁷ and supports letter-sound mapping, fine motor control, and visual memory. Writing by hand activates areas of the brain essential for reading fluency and retention.

Practice tracing, copying, or writing letters with textured materials like sand or shaving cream.

Encourage neat letter formation and spacing.

Everyday Activities & Games at Home

Integrate literacy into everyday life.

Play Word Games:

- Try rhyming challenges like taking turns thinking of words that rhyme with bed.
- Sing rhyming songs or read nursery rhymes.
- Play scavenger hunts for words that start with a specific sound.

Use Environmental Print:

- Go on an "environmental print" scavenger hunt by looking for words on signs, labels, and logos in your home or community.
- While driving, go through the alphabet by finding signs that have the next letter on them.

Integrate into Daily Life:

- Let your child help with grocery lists or follow recipes.
- Have kids write thank-you notes.
- Create a home "word wall" with new vocabulary.

Draw comic strips together using dialogue bubbles.

These activities boost reading and writing without feeling like schoolwork.

Games and Activities

Games or phonics-based apps make reading fun. Playfulness keeps kids engaged and lowers anxiety around reading tasks. Look for games that promote letter-sound matching, word building, and sentence formation. Processing speed, sequencing, and working memory can all be improved through targeted games.

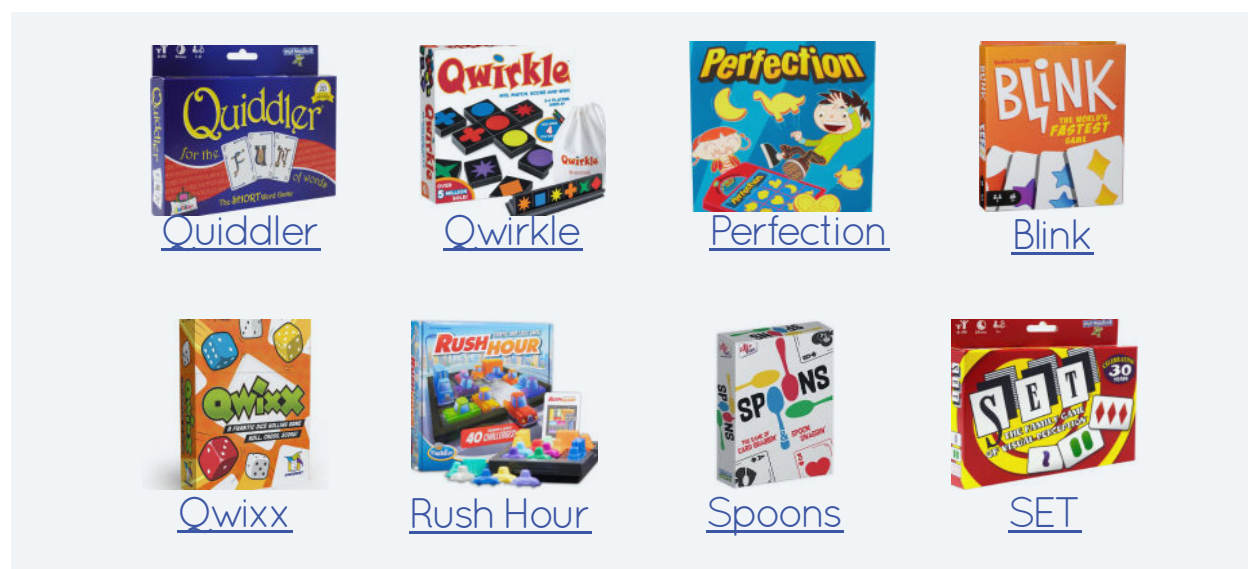
Do games really help? Studies show that consistent game-based intervention can yield a 27–32% improvement in reasoning and fluency in just 20 hours.⁸

⁷ Askvik, E. O., Van der Weel, F. R., & van der Meer, A. L. H. (2023). Handwriting but not typewriting leads to widespread brain connectivity: A high-density EEG study with implications for learning. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1219945. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1219945>

⁸ Shaywitz, S. E., & Shaywitz, B. A. (1988). Attention deficit disorder: Current perspectives. In M. M. Gluck, J. A. Ballesteros, & J. L. McGaugh (Eds.), *Learning and memory: Behavioral and biological substrates* (pp. 187–204). New York, NY: Wiley. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1989-13492-001>

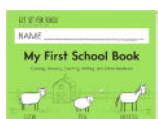
Surprising games that support literacy

These games support processing speed, sequencing, and working memory: skills essential for reading. They are so fun and engaging; your child won't even know they are learning.



Tools for handwriting and fine motor skills

Look for games, activities, and tools that challenge your child to use fine motor skills and make writing more fun.



Handwriting Without Tears® Products

- Try: [My First School Book](#), or [Slate Chalkboards](#)



Fine Motor Games

- Try: [Lacing Beads](#) or similar [Bead Crafts](#), [Light Brite](#), [Jenga](#), or [Noodle Knockout](#)



Fun Tools

- Try: [Scented Gel Pens](#), [Multi-Colored Pencils](#), [Pencil Grips](#)



Understanding the Lingo

Educational terms can be intimidating. Knowing the basics can help you understand assessments, progress updates, and strategies professionals use. To help, we have provided a short list of some of the most common terms you'll encounter.

Academic Assessment: A test or series of tests that measure a student's skills in areas like reading, writing, and spelling. These assessments help identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas where extra support may be needed.

Blending: The skill of smoothly combining individual sounds into a word (e.g., /b/ /a/ /t/ becomes bat).

Comprehension: The ability to understand and think about what is read by making connections, drawing conclusions, and remembering key details.

Decoding: Sounding out words by matching letters (or letter groups) to their sounds. Essential for reading unfamiliar or longer words. This may be referred to as word attack.

Digraph: Two letters that come together to make one sound, like ch, sh, th, or oa.

Dysgraphia: A learning difference that affects writing. It may involve poor handwriting, spelling, or organizing thoughts on paper.

Dyslexia: A language-based learning difference that primarily affects reading and spelling. It often involves difficulties with sound awareness, decoding, and fluency.

Fluency: Reading smoothly with correct pacing, intonation, and accuracy. Fluent readers focus less on sounding out and more on understanding.

Grapheme: A written letter or group of letters that represent a single sound. For example, ea represents the /ē/ sound in eat.

Morphology: The study of the smallest parts of words that carry meaning. For example, prefixes, suffixes, and roots (e.g., un- in unhappy).

Orthographic Mapping: The brain's process of storing and recognizing words instantly by connecting spelling, sound, and meaning.

Orthography: The system and rules of writing in a language including spelling patterns, punctuation, capitalization, and word formation.

Phoneme: The smallest unit of sound in a word. For example, cat has three phonemes: /k/ /a/ /t/.

Phonemic Awareness: The ability to hear, identify, and manipulate individual sounds in words. A core skill in early reading.

Phonetics: The study of how speech sounds are physically made and heard.

Phonics: Teaching the connection between letters (or groups of letters) and the sounds they represent.

Phonological Awareness: A broader skill that includes hearing and working with sounds in language (recognizing rhyming, syllables, and sound patterns).

Print Awareness: Understanding that print has meaning and knowing how books and written language work. For example, knowing that reading is from left to right, knowing what a letter or word is, and recognizing that print represents spoken language.

Prosody: The rhythm, tone, and expression used when reading aloud. Prosody includes things like pauses, emphasis, and intonation. When children read with good prosody, it sounds more like natural speech. This is a key sign of reading fluency and understanding.

Psychoeducational Assessment: A comprehensive evaluation that measures a student's thinking skills, learning style, and academic abilities. It helps identify learning differences like dyslexia and guides personalized support plans for school success.

Segmenting: Breaking a word apart into its individual sounds. For example, ship becomes /sh/ /i/ /p/.

Sight Words or High-Frequency Words: Words that appear often and may not follow phonics rules (e.g., said, of). These are best learned by sight to support fluent reading.

Structured Literacy: A teaching approach that is direct, explicit, and follows a logical progression by building phonics, spelling, and comprehension systematically.

Syllable: A part of a word with one vowel sound. For example, sunset has two syllables: sun-set.

Visual Memory: The ability to remember what something looks like. In reading, visual memory helps children recognize and recall letters, spelling patterns, and whole words. It plays an important role in word recognition and spelling accuracy.

If you've noticed the signs of a struggle, don't wait for your child to "catch up." At the Colorado Reading Center, we know that every student can succeed with the right tools and support. For more than 30 years, we've helped families like yours navigate the challenges of reading differences.



CALL US TODAY

303-781-9800

ColoradoReading.com