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Helping my Child at Home

Learn how to:

1. Learn sight words (with a few simple tools and tricks)
2. Help with Spelling Homework
3. Help with Reading or Language Arts Homework
4. Do Math made easier
5. Work with other subjects

My name is Theresa Martin and I teach at St. Joseph School, a small Catholic school in the downtown area of Santa Ana. I've been an elementary school teacher for 20 years, the last five specializing in remediation instruction for students who struggle with reading. All the parents I've worked with have the same desire – how can I help my child succeed in school? For the parents of the students who read well, it's usually as easy as "give the student a clear place to work and schedule a half hour or so for them to complete their work on their own." For the parents of a child who struggles, that formula really doesn't work. In this article, I hope to give you some tools and tips that will assist you in helping your child to become more successful at reading and school in general.

Learning Sight Words

The first thing a student needs to become a better reader is to become better at recognizing words. As a child begins to learn to read, they learn 2 general categories of words – words that can be sounded out (that follow the sounds the letters make) and words that need to be memorized (usually called "sight words"). I'm going to give you a few tricks to help your child learn these sight words. You'll need to gather a few materials first.

1. 1 box of large diameter crayons
2. Index cards (make a hole in the top left corner so they can be placed on a binder ring)
3. Binder ring
4. Paper to practice on
5. List of sight words

(These can be printed out from the Internet – Google *Dolch Sight Words* or *Fry Sight Words*.)

Begin by giving your child a quick Sight Word quiz. Ask them to read the list of words and mark off the ones they miss. When they have missed 5, stop testing. We know to begin with those 5 words.

Take the first word they missed and have them write it correctly on paper using a crayon – ask them to write large and to say the letters as they write them. When they are done, have them underline the word and say the word out loud. They will do this 5 times.

s - a - i - d said
s - a - i - d said
s - a - i - d said
s - a - i - d said
s - a - i - d said

Then have them put the crayon down and use their index finger to trace the letters as they say them out loud, underlining at the end and saying the whole word, as before. Do this also 5 times (*the crayon leaves a raised mark as they write, so they should be able to feel the letters as they trace. If you put something rough under the paper – like sandpaper – the crayon will leave more wax behind and be easier to feel.*).

Now, using their non-writing hand, they should put their fingers **under** the word. At the same time, they should place their writing hand on the opposite shoulder. This time they are going to spell the word out loud and tap each letter down their arm (from shoulder to wrist), ending by saying the word (brushing down the whole arm as if

underlining). Do this 5 times. Finally, using a pencil, they should write the word on the back of the paper, seeing if they know how to write it. Make any corrections needed and write the word on an index card and place it on the ring.

Each day, you'll do another word the same way. When you add the second word to the ring, review the first word. Using this combination of touch, writing, sound and movement will give struggling students the extra practice that can help these sight words to stick better in their memory. The daily review will also help them to recognize the words in other contexts as they read. When they have finished the first five, continue to test down the list until you have another five words to work with. I would recommend only practicing one word a day as they will have other homework to complete. Keep the words on the ring until you have about 20 – 25 words that they are reading through. If they know the words without hesitation after that, remove the first five. Keep the ring to about 20 - 25 words. Be sure they are reading the words with no hesitation before you remove a word.

Spelling Homework

I'm hoping that you have a good relationship with your student's classroom and special ed. teachers. They can be a great resource and will help you to help your child. Make sure that your child is not being overwhelmed by the amount of spelling words. Most teachers will cut the list of words your child will be responsible for if you ask (let your child try the first few tests and see how many words they can work with successfully). The key to your child learning the words is to work with them every day. If you can, get the list on Friday so they can begin over the weekend. Use the techniques we used in the previous section, as well as the work the teacher assigns to help your child learn the words. Make another ring of index cards to use to practice the spelling words every day. Have them read and spell the words a few times each day (both written and out loud). If there is a spelling pattern in each list, be sure to point it out to your student and make sure they spell the pattern correctly.

Help with Reading or Language Arts Homework

Most students will be assigned between 15 and 30 minutes of reading daily. For someone who struggles to read, this can seem like an eternity. I have a few suggestions that might make this a little easier and still help your student with practicing reading and improving their comprehension skills.

One of the first things I would suggest is shared reading. You can set it up the way you like, but I suggest alternating pages. The parent would read one page and the student would read the next one. (You can alternate sentences or paragraphs if that works better for your child.) Shared reading takes the pressure off the student of having to read alone. It also makes sure the child is reading aloud so that unfamiliar words can be sounded out. Finally, because the parent is reading the story as well, the parent can ask questions to check for comprehension or understanding. (For example: Who is this story about? Where is the story taking place? What happened first, next, finally?)

Another strategy that is very helpful is having the child read along with an audio book. They need to track (follow along) with their finger as they listen to the audio book. Because this is a multisensory approach, the child will have an easier time reading and following along. Again, be sure to ask questions to check for understanding (this is easier with a book you are familiar with).

Students are often assigned questions to complete about the stories they read in class. One of the most important strategies that they can use is to look back in the story for the answer. Have them read the question and then look back in the story for the same words or situation referred to in the story. For example, if the question says, "What happened first in the story?" the student should look for the word **first** back in the story. Remind your student to look for those clue words that they find in the question. This will also help them with answering questions in tests, as they use the same skills to find those answers as well. (Another way to do this is to read the questions before reading the story. Then you can be looking for the clue words or answers as you read.)

Math Made Easier

Students who struggle with reading often do better in math except for one area – word problems. They may not be able to read all the words and usually resort to guessing what needs to be done to solve the problem with whatever numbers they see in the problem. First they need to be able to read the problem (either on their own or having

someone read it to them), then they need to “translate” the problem into math using numbers instead of words. So, first of all someone needs to read the problems aloud to the student (maybe the parent reads a segment and the student reads (repeats) after them, tracking with their finger as they go). Then they need to make the words into a math problem. If the problem says:

Johnny has 6 donuts and gives 4 of them to his friends. How many does Johnny have left?

The student should identify the two numbers (6 and 4) and notice the words *gives* and *have left*.

Those words tell us that we should subtract, so the problem becomes $6 - 4 = 2$. (Some teachers ask students to underline the important words in the problem – 6 donuts, gives, 4 to help students frame the number problem)

Here’s another example:

Beth is collecting balls from each classroom. She collects 3 balls from Room 2, 4 balls from Room 6 and 2 balls from Room 7. How many balls did she collect in all?

There are a lot of numbers in this problem, but not all of them are needed to solve it. Only the number of balls is needed. They also need to notice the words collecting and in all, which tell us we need to add. So they should underline the problem like this:

Beth is collecting balls from each classroom. She collects 3 balls from Room 2, 4 balls from Room 6 and 2 balls from Room 7. How many balls did she collect in all?

The problem should be $3 + 4 + 2 = 9$ balls in all.

Ideas for Other Subjects

Many of the ideas that have been presented so far can also be used to assist your student in other subjects. For example, if a student is going to learn vocabulary for Science, they can use some of the ideas we used to learn Sight Words – copy them 5 times with crayons, trace them with the finger, pat the spelling down the arm, make and study flash cards. Other students might be able to study the night before the test, but your student needs to work on them every day in order to help the words stick in their memory.

Another strategy is to see if the textbook is available in an audio version. That way the student can read along while listening to the audio, being sure to track with their finger as they read. If that is not available, use the strategy of alternately reading with your student (you read a paragraph or section, the student reads the next). Then, when they are answering questions, they need to look back in the text. Have them read the question and make a guess about which section the answer might be in. Then look in that section for the answer.

Conclusions

Most teachers will tell you that the students should be doing their own homework. The parent’s job is to provide a place and a time that is dedicated for homework every day, and the student does most of the work, with the parent answering the occasional question. However, with a student who struggles with reading, the parent will need to be much more involved in order for the child to be successful. The parent needs to be sure that the child is doing as much of the work as they can with the parent assisting with the reading as needed. There also needs to be a dedicated time for reading and sight word practice every day. It is beneficial for struggling readers to re-read books 2 or 3 times or more. The more familiar the story, the easier it will become to actually read the words.

Remember that although your student may be struggling to read, they are as smart as or even smarter than the other students in their class. They have to work harder and may be tired at the end of the day. Give them a predictable routine that happens every day for dealing with homework and the required daily reading. If there is a routine in place, it will be easier for both you and your student to complete the daily homework. Look for evidence of improvement and point it out to your student (“Look how many words you’ve learned!” Show them the flash cards they’ve learned). (Wow! You’re reading this story with so much expression. It makes it so much more fun to

read!). The extra effort you make in providing the extra help at home will really pay off as both you and your child notice the improvements in reading and their grades at school.