

ASK AUNT MALKIN

A veteran of the school wars herself, with the scars to prove it, Malkin Dare has all kinds of advice to offer. If you would like some been-there-done-that advice from Aunt Malkin, call her at 519-884-3166 or e-mail her at mdare@societyforqualityeducation.org. This month, Aunt Malkin answers Dominique's question about her daughter's reading problem.

QUESTION

We have now been using *Stairway to Reading* for a month, and I wanted to update you as to our progress. My daughter is doing extremely well. She is now reading silently on her own, just because she wants to. I think she jumped 7-9 months in reading level in one month. Everything has improved in her reading, but she still skips/changes the small words “the”, “a”, “this”, “in”. How can I get her to read them accurately?

Signed, Dominique in Texas

ANSWER

This is a very common problem. It's a habit, nothing to do with vision or genes or learning disabilities – but unfortunately, it's a habit that is very hard to break. The habit develops in students when they are expected to read material that includes words they can't sound out. The only way students can figure out unknown words is to guess at their meaning, based perhaps on the rest of the sentence or the pictures elsewhere on the page. Consequently, their eyes are always on the move, roving over the page and ahead in the sentence, and their eyes skip over the easy words.

Here are a couple of ideas for breaking this habit. First, have your daughter read some really easy sentences, like “The boy saw a cat”. She will probably have no difficulty reading every word correctly (if she does, provide intensive practice at this level). Gradually ramp up the difficulty of the sentences, insisting on 100% accuracy. Eventually, you should arrive at her current reading level, with the problem close to being solved.

In the meantime, of course you will want to continue her excellent progress, and here are some suggestions for her everyday read-aloud sessions.

- Cut a small rectangular hole (about 2 cm by 1 cm) in an index card, and place it over your daughter's reading material, with only the first word showing through the hole, and then advance the hole as she reads. In other words, she will be able to see only one word at a time as she reads. She will not enjoy this, and it will provide her with an additional incentive to prove to you that she can read accurately without the card.

- Right now, there is no need for your daughter to read aloud fluently, quickly, or with expression — these things will come later without being sought. For now, all that matters is accuracy. Every time your daughter makes a mistake, stop her and point out the error. It is helpful for some students to be forced to return to the beginning of the sentence in which they made the error (they hate this).
- Some students find it helpful to point to each word with their finger and/or use a ruler to keep their place. Such crutches will drop away as soon as they are no longer necessary.
- Some students are more motivated to read accurately if they can earn a few M&M's (or pennies or another small treat) per page, losing one reward for each mistake. Do not take away a reward if your daughter hesitates at an unknown word and says she can't read it. In fact, this is great progress! In the past, she would probably have taken a wild guess. After she has spent a few seconds attempting to decode the unknown word, simply supply it and praise her for not guessing.
- Recording your daughter's reading on a tape recorder is another good way to encourage accuracy.
- Because the effort to read accurately can overwhelm a reader's ability to grasp the meaning of the text, repeated readings of each story can be extremely beneficial — for comprehension, word recognition, and fluency.

I am so pleased to learn that your daughter is reading for pleasure.

Aunt Malkin