

The Sport of Reading; Getting Your Child Off the Bench and Into the Game

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Why do some children jump right into the sport of reading while others warm the bench? Why are some children reading naturals while others fumble around trying to figure out the rules of the game?

The image of reading as a sport came to me while watching my ten-year-old daughter attempt to read a book that would have taken her peers minutes to read. She struggled on, wiggling all over, contorting her body, tilting her head, using energy more appropriate for completing an Olympic gymnastics event than reading a simple book.

Over the past 18 years teaching children to read, I have often witnessed this phenomenon, but, never felt the anxiety so deeply as experiencing my own child's struggle. Reading for her is an endurance sport. In these hard-hitting academic times, the pressure is on to find a quick cure for the spectrum of reading maladies. This isn't T-ball anymore. With the stringent guidelines of No Child Left Behind, kindergarteners join the major leagues as soon as they are drafted out of preschool. Ready to hit the pitch or not, it's time to perform. It's the bottom of the ninth with bases loaded. The struggling readers are up to bat.

There are more worksheets to complete, more computerized phonics games to play, more after school homework classes to attend. Are these strategies all we have to offer struggling readers, or are essential elements missing that haven't been brought to the game? I've contacted three of my daughter's coaches to share insider information, hoping to put a spin on the way we pitch balls to our players.

Batter Up!

"Batter up!" are two simple words that children often hear when it's time to bat, but can the child who's struggling with reading actually hear the words clearly, or did the child hear, "Butter Cup!" and remain sitting on the bench, losing their chance at bat?

Audiologist Patricia Weil (MS, CCC-A) states, "Studies show 13% of school-age children have some degree of hearing loss. Mild or temporary hearing loss from ear infections or allergies can cause significant learning delays. Children with mild hearing loss may be able to pass a simple hearing screening. A complete diagnostic audiological evaluation is strongly recommended for children with reading difficulties." For children with auditory issues, learning phonics is like trying to read the umpire's lips to figure out when to step up to the plate.

It's a Swing and a Miss!

A keen visual system that is smoothly integrated into the body provides the power behind a solid hit and getting into the reading game. Without honed vision skills, children will strike out when it comes to

building up reading speed.

Behavioral Optometrist, Steven Goedert (OD) says, “The visual system is a dynamic system requiring the body to move with it. Vision, hearing, and postural information must work as a team for reading success. Weak postural and visual systems can decrease reading comprehension by as much as eighty percent.”

Hey, Batter Batter. You’re Looking Good!

It’s no accident baseball players are toned, strong, and solidly grounded at the plate. They must be in top condition to hit a ball out of the park. The same is true for fluent readers. In order to sit upright, focus, and comprehend text, children must be solidly grounded in their bodies to maximize energy available for reading.

Occupational Therapist, Stacey Neill-Wiseman (MA, OTR/L, SIPT) states, “Vestibular (inner-ear) processing is important for upright sitting posture that supports efficient eye movement with minimal head and neck involvement. This upright posture is essential for concentration and reading comprehension.” What can we do at home to get our players on base? Here are a few simple ideas.

• First Base

Play rhyming games like, “If I give you a hat, you’ll give me a _____. (Bat!) If your child is having trouble with rhyming, can’t follow a sequence of instructions, or often asks you to repeat yourself, see a pediatric audiologist to make sure the auditory system is up to par. Use Phonics Phones® or Blending Bands® during reading to “amp up” auditory input.

• Second Base

Hone vision skills by turning off bedroom lights right before bedtime and playing flashlight tag. Take turns chasing and tagging each other’s beam around the room. Vary beam distance by shining it on the ceiling and on objects at reading distance. If vision remains a challenge, an evaluation from a behavioral optometrist is recommended.

• Third Base

Movement activities, like gymnastics, strengthen postural muscles, making it easier for children to focus while sitting at a desk. Using a fitness ball instead of a chair for twenty minutes at a time, improves core muscles and increases time on task. If your child is hyperactive or doesn’t enjoy movement activities, a sensory processing evaluation may be in order.

The Batter Swings! It’s a Hit, and the Crowd Goes Wild!

Ensuring readers have integrated posture, vision and auditory systems provide the foundation skills to hit the ball and get on base. Bringing players home requires the collaborative coaching of parents, teachers and specialists who support children’s unique learning styles and strengths.

Many brilliant individuals warmed the reading bench—the most famous, of course, was Einstein.

Helping children find their gifts is the most important contribution we can make in the life of a child.

Coaching my daughter through the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat has been the inspiration for this article. Her reading improves daily, but, in retrospect, maybe it's the comment I made to her this summer that had the biggest impact, "You know, Shalea, if you don't learn to read, you'll need to live with me the rest of your life." That seemed to light a fire under her buns. The bench has been cold ever since!