

# Let's Read!

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

*IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) states: "A child with a disability is not removed from education in age-appropriate regular classes solely because of needed modifications in the general curriculum." For example, a 10-year-old student should not be removed (or denied placement) in a fifth grade classroom just because he isn't reading at grade level—the class reading material (in this case) should be modified so he can "be involved and make progress" (per IDEA) in the fifth grade curriculum. This is one in a series of articles about curriculum modifications.*



Children with disabilities who have difficulty with reading may be at risk of “punishment”—they’re given more labels, placed in a segregated classroom, or pulled out of general ed classes for “remediation” in a resource room. The ability to read is considered a prerequisite to learning, but this is a myth.

The written word (reading) is a relatively new phenomenon in human history. For countless generations of the past (and in some cultures today), the written word was nonexistent. Nevertheless, people *learned*—a great deal—by doing, through storytelling, and by other means. Reading is an important skill in today’s world, but the inability to read *doesn’t mean a person can’t learn!* It’s said we learn more from birth to five than at any other time in our lives, but most of us didn’t read during that time!

Computer programs, videos, “writing pens” that read out loud as the pen is moved over the text, and other instructional methods can be used in lieu of—or in addition to—reading, to ensure children are learning from, and participating in, the general ed curriculum, per IDEA. We can also provide a student with the modifications, assistive technology devices, and accommodations to help with reading skills.

One accommodation is large print. Some people (my son, Benjamin, for example) may have difficulties simply because the text is too small. “Beginner” books are usually in large print, and these are fine for five- to seven-year-olds. But if an emerging reader is much older, “beginner” books may not be appropriate or interesting! During Benj’s elementary school years, the school worked with the state’s “Office of the Visually Impaired” to enlarge the text in his books. Instead of

large, print, and with the advent of electronic books, alongside computers/tablets with audio/voice output, a book can read to the student.

Another strategy is to *simplify the text* by rewriting it to meet the student’s individual needs. It was difficult for Benjamin to comprehend much of his 4th grade social studies book. (It was one of the most boring books I had ever seen!) Much of each chapter seemed to be “background” material to supplement the main points. But it was confusing and irrelevant to Benj. Still, he needed to learn the main points. So throughout that year, I took each chapter—one at a time—and rewrote it on the computer with a large font size, focusing on the main points, and using words that were relevant and meaningful to Benj. Under special ed law, the responsibility for curriculum modifications belongs to the school. But I enjoyed doing this, I knew my son better than anyone else, and my familiarity with the material enabled me to help Benj learn social studies!

There’s no reason, however, why educators *shouldn’t* be involved in modifying curriculum. But if educators refuse or drag their feet, parents can pick up the slack. I’ve never expected the school to do everything for my kids, and I’ve always believed their education is ultimately our family’s responsibility.

Accommodations that change the “look” of text may be helpful. Some children have difficulty learning to read because the letters seem to move on the page and/or the letters look all squished together. Placing a color transparency over the white pages of a book or worksheet may provide a beneficial solution. Experiment with different colors of transparencies—pink,

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yellow, blue, orange, green, or others—to determine which helps the most. Alternatively, children can be fitted with glasses that have colored lens.

Lighting may also make a difference. When Benj was learning to read, we tried a variety of accommodations, including placing colored tissue paper over the florescent lights at school and attaching an incandescent clip light on his desk.

But the greatest help for Benjamin was a solution I would have never considered. His first grade classroom teacher was an extraordinary person. As a child, Mrs. M had been labeled a “slow reader.” As a teacher, she believed all children could read and she was a gifted strategist in helping all her students succeed. “For some children,” she said, “other people’s words—words in a book—don’t mean anything until *their own words* mean something to them.”

Her recommendation: encourage and help Benjamin to write his own stories. But this didn’t make any sense! How could Benjamin write—spell words or create sentences—when he couldn’t read? His teacher explained: sit Benj at the computer and ask him to write a story he was familiar with, such as a *Thomas the Tank Engine* story. He could “spell” the words the way he thought they were spelled; if he asked how to spell a word, I would help. But it was important for Benj to have control. My job was not to tell him how to do it, insist he sound out the phonetics, etc. I stayed close by if he needed me and/or to give encouragement.

He printed the story, but I couldn’t read it. To not hurt his feelings by telling him so, I asked him to read it to me. *He knew what he wrote*—and this helped me learn how he spelled things, how he thought (sentences/paragraphs), and so forth. He began writing stories on a regular basis, he read them to me (or dad or sister), we collected them in a notebook, and he was proud of the “book” he was writing! (Kids can write their stories with pencil/paper, but if handwriting is difficult, slow, or laborious, use a computer.)

As Benj continued this activity over the next days and weeks, he began asking me how to spell certain

things (you’ll be surprised at how many words kids *do* know how to spell, even if they’re not yet reading). This strategy worked: Benj’s words were meaningful to him, then the words of others became meaningful, and he learned to read.

Adults often say, “Sound it out,” when children struggle with a new word. But Mrs. M counseled against this since it interrupts the flow of the story (content) and creates frustration. She pointed out that most adults *don’t* stop to consult a dictionary if we come across a word we don’t know or can’t pronounce! We keep reading, knowing the meaning will emerge from the content and/or the word isn’t that important.

Mrs. M said to *tell the child the word* and move on with the story! Consider how frustrating it is for a child to stop so frequently to “sound it out”—reading becomes a chore, an unendurable activity that makes the child feel incompetent. Mrs. M felt we should help children learn to *love* reading, to experience the emotions of stories, and to enjoy the feeling of accomplishment of completing the story/book.

Another helpful strategy is list-making. As Benj was learning to read, I routinely asked, “I’m running late—can you write the grocery list while I finish the dishes?” Kids love to feel needed, so Benj enjoyed this responsibility. I told him what we needed, spelling the words he didn’t know. (I didn’t say, “Since you need to learn to spell and write, I’m going to make you write the grocery list.” That would have gone over like a lead balloon!) He liked the “grown-up” idea of making the all-important grocery list, and he soon began making his own lists, for Christmas presents, movies he wanted to see, and more!

You can also write the name of every item in your home on individual note cards and tape them on the item (the TV, table, sofa, etc.). Also, activate the captions on your television at all times.

Giving children the most exposure to the written word—at home, in school, through books, writing lists, on the TV and computers, and every other possible way—will enable them to enjoy the big wide world of words, and readers they will become!