

## **Reading Disabilities: The Early Warning Signs**

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President Bush signed the newly amended Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) on December 3, 2004, that became effective on July 1, 2005. Among the many changes in the federal law, one of the most widely discussed has been changes to the assessment of learning disabilities. Learning disabilities are reported to affect one in every seven students, and 80% of those with learning disabilities experience a delay in reading. The actual definition of “specific learning disability” has not changed. However, in determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, a school district is no longer required to take into consideration whether a child has developed a “severe discrepancy” between achievement and intellectual ability. This prior definition of a learning disability meant that children often were not identified with reading problems until around eight to nine years of age. For example, in order for a “severe discrepancy” to emerge, a child would need to be reading approximately two years below grade level. This implies that many children were not identified with learning difficulties until third grade or later. Based on the amended version of IDEA, a school district can now determine a child has a learning disability based upon his/her predicted response to reading intervention.

This change in policy paves the way for early remediation of children at risk for a reading disability as early as Kindergarten. According to the new standards, districts can identify children at risk and provide extra support in the early grades. Research indicates that nearly 70% of students who are identified and receive research-based early intervention can learn to read at an average grade level. Unfortunately, only 10% of students with reading difficulties are diagnosed by age seven. The majority of children who do not receive help until after age nine are more likely to be slower and, therefore, less efficient readers throughout their lifetime.

Dr. Paul Satz, Professor Emeritus of The Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA and Chief of The Help Group/UCLA Neuropsychology Program, first began looking at potential early predictors of reading difficulties over 30 years ago. There is an innovative and growing body of research that now supports most of Dr. Satz’s findings. Any child with a family history of reading and/or language difficulties is considered at risk for developing reading problems. Other key risk factors include: delays in language, difficulty with attention and self-control as well as delays in specific pre-academic skills.

### **Language Development**

In general, early warning signs include children who are late talkers, have articulation/pronunciation difficulties and delayed vocabulary growth (children do not use as many words as same-aged peers, or have difficulty finding the right word to use). At 12 to 18 months of age, most children, when looking at a picture, can answer the question, “Where is \_\_\_\_\_?” Most children at that age can also fill in a word to a familiar story or song. By three years of age, children should be able to recognize a meaningful word from a nonsense word when listening to a story.

### **Behavioral Development**

By two years old, most children should be able to sit and listen to a story read to them from a book. By three years old, they should be able to listen to and retell a familiar story. Children who display a high degree of restlessness and distractibility, have difficulty following direction and routines and/or demonstrate poor frustration tolerance may not have the behavioral stamina to learn early reading skills. While these children are not commonly diagnosed with learning delays, their behavior stops them from achieving early reading skills. These children need assistance to help develop better behavioral control and then may need assistance to “catch them up” in other areas of development.

### **Pre-Academic Skills Development**

Between the ages of two to three, most children can “read pictures.” This means that they can recognize and name familiar signs or logos. In our culture, most three-year-olds can identify a “McDonald’s” sign or a “Barney the Dinosaur” logo. They are not really reading but they have recognized that certain pictures have names, and they can match the picture with the name. Children who are delayed in this process miss the critical point about reading, which is that certain symbols have a consistent meaning like speech sounds to alphabet symbols.

By age five, children should be able to identify all the letters of the alphabet, numbers 1-10 and recognize the days of the week. These skills should not be confused with a child’s ability to memorize information, such as singing the alphabet song. For instance, while many children are able to sing the song from memory, they may not be able to name the letters individually. Naming individual letters or numbers is important because it teaches the child a sequence. Sequential memory is a necessary skill to learn to read longer words.

Around the same age, most children can recognize the first few letters of their names, and begin to learn the sounds of letters (“C” makes a “cah” sound). Many five-year-olds can also name at least three words that start with the same sound. They are able to name a rhyming word for most familiar words, and can recognize when two words do not rhyme.

All of these skills are expected to have developed before the start of Kindergarten. Parents should be aware of, and actively monitor, their child’s development to look for these developmental markers. If parents note that several of the critical skills are not present, this may be an early warning sign of potential reading difficulties and intervention should begin as soon as possible.

Parents, especially those with histories of reading and/or language difficulties, should take note of their children’s early language, behavioral and cognitive development. Documenting these milestones can be a useful tool for parents and professionals to help determine if the child requires intervention. Speech and language therapists, psychologists and developmental pediatricians can recommend specific interventions prior to Kindergarten that target delays in the key areas of concern. It is also important to caution parents that development varies from child to child and the milestones described in this article are guidelines, and may not always be cause for concern.

In summary, children at risk for reading disabilities may now qualify for school-based educational intervention as early as Kindergarten. Research has shown that early intervention can result in significant positive outcomes.

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