

Reading Skills

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The Need for Volunteers

Research shows that children who read well in the early grades are far more successful in later years, making reading a gateway skill to all learning. Young, capable readers can take advantage of school opportunities and develop invaluable confidence in their own abilities. Reading success leads directly to success in other subjects such as social studies, math, and science. In the long term evidence suggests that students who cannot read well are much more likely to drop out of school and be limited to lower-paying jobs throughout their lifetimes.

Despite the significance of reading skills, according to research and testing by the U.S. Department of Education, only one third of America's fourth graders are reading at or above proficient levels as measured by the National Assessment of Education Progress. Among children from low-income households, 60 percent of fourth graders cannot read at grade level. In other words, these children struggle with fundamental reading skills like understanding and summarizing a story.

Volunteer reading tutors can offer struggling readers the individual attention and additional time they need to acquire reading skills. In turn, volunteers can enjoy being part of a learning breakthrough in the lives of their pupils.

Reading skills programs engage tutors in working with their pupils in reading, writing, and language activities that can help children become independent readers. And they use volunteers to do this in a variety of ways – some reading programs use volunteers to offer one-on-one tutoring, while others use volunteers to offer homework help or to read aloud with children.

This toolkit is designed to offer tips and resources to individuals interested in getting involved with a reading skills program or activity, as well as for organizations they are or will be working with volunteers to teach reading skills.

How Can I Make a Difference?

The easiest way to get involved in helping a child or children learn to read is to work through a volunteer program near you that offers training, resources, and support that will help you to work effectively with struggling readers. Schools, nonprofits, houses of worship and other community organizations offer a variety of types of reading programs. You might work in a classroom during the school day by tutoring an individual child, working with a small group or helping out the class as a whole. Or you might participate in an after-school homework club or other

program offering and skills instruction or enrichment after-school or on the weekends. To find opportunities to get involved in your communities, you can search online through the USA Freedom Corps Volunteer Network, at: www.usafreedomcorps.gov/for_volunteers/find_opps.asp

Tips for Reading Tutors

When working with your tutee, employ a balanced approach that incorporates some of the following activities, and let the individual needs and interests of the child should determine your choice of activities.

- Ask the child to re-read favorite stories to you. Children increase fluency and reading pleasure when they read favorite stories again and again.
- Read aloud to the child. Reading aloud provides a model of confident and expert reading and fosters an appreciation of books and the rewards of reading.
- Read high-quality children's literature together. Discussions based on excellent literature engage children, improve comprehension, and create a deeper personal connection with the text.
- Write about what you read and/or keep a journal. Reading and writing develop together. Writing about what they read allows children to explore deeper levels of meaning and express their own ideas on paper.
- Talk about stories, experience, and meaning. Encourage children to make connections between what they read and what they experience in their own lives and the world around them.
- Play word games and activities. Children need a variety of ways to learn and practice the skills they are struggling with. In the context of a game, children are often willing to engage in learning that they might otherwise resist and gain the confidence to master difficult concepts.
- Engage in dramatic play. Bringing stories to life through drama, finger puppets, or reader's theater can support a variety of literacy skills as well as get students out of their seats and actively engaged in learning.
- Provide positive feedback and summarize accomplishments. Struggling readers need to experience success; at the end of each session, be sure to point out improvements and accomplishments.

Resources

Many resources have been developed to help parents and tutors work with children who are struggling as readers. Here are a few that provide ready-to-use activities, strategies, and approaches.

For a discussion of skills and strategies for literacy tutoring, read *Tutoring Our Youngest Readers: Focusing on five major reading strategies*, online at: www.nwrel.org/learns/tutor/win2002/win2002.html

For games and word activities, visit: www.nwrel.org/learns/trainingopps/games/index.html

For sample tutoring session plans, take a look at:
www.nwrel.org/learns/resources/toolkit/SampleSession.pdf

For age-specific tutoring guidelines, visit the following links:

- For pre-kindergarten through third grade:
www.nwrel.org/learns/resources/prek3/index.html#elementary
- For middle school: www.nwrel.org/learns/resources/middleupper/index.html#middle
- For high school: www.nwrel.org/learns/resources/middleupper/index.html#high

For a closer look at techniques for reading aloud, read *Reading Aloud to Build Comprehension: Using a think-aloud technique to build understanding*, online at:
www.nwrel.org/learns/tutor/spr2001/spr2001.html

If you are working with a small group of students, read *Room for One More? Strategies for small-group tutoring*, online at: www.nwrel.org/learns/feature/index.html

How Can My Organization Help?

With the benefit of research and evaluation, we know that certain types of reading activities have been proven effective in teaching children to learn basic reading skills. The following are some tips and resources to help you integrate these effective practices into the programs you are offering or want to offer to children in your area.

Tips for Developing Reading Programs

While there are a variety of volunteer reading skills programs, research and experience in the field of volunteer tutoring show that the presence of certain key elements increase program effectiveness. The following are some tips based upon research to help you create reading skills programs that use volunteers effectively to help children acquire good reading skills.

Develop partnerships with important community stakeholders.

Strong partnerships with stakeholders are essential to tutor program success. When you work with stakeholders, you build community interest and participation in your program, multiply your creative and material resources, and help ensure the success of your program. Determine who in the community is already involved or interested in your work. Find out who else is a stakeholder by asking who will be served by the program: students, teachers, principals, other school staff, parents, community members, etc. Look for local experts: If you tutor reading in a school, is there a school or district reading specialist? Professors and students at universities, community colleges, and extension services can be valuable partners.

Identify resources for the program.

Your community can be a rich source of space, materials, books, training, curriculum assistance, and much more. For ideas about where to start, view *Identifying Local Resources for Your*

Literacy Program, online at:

www.nwrel.org/learns/resources/r&progsup/IDLLocalResources/index.html. See the *Resources* section of this toolkit for more helpful websites and organizations.

Recruit, screen, and select appropriate volunteers.

Recruit potential tutors through newsletters, local media, flyers, and word-of-mouth. You can also spread the word by making brief presentations at parent-teacher associations, teacher in-service meetings, service organization lunches, or Chamber of Commerce events.

Any volunteers working with children should be carefully screened. Make sure your application and screening process is in place before you begin recruitment. Screening mechanisms should include some or all of the following: written applications, in-person interviews, demonstrations of competency in subjects tutored, personal references, and criminal background checks.

Provide support and ongoing training.

Ongoing tutor training and support are necessary to ensure that tutors can support student learning. Tutor training should take place both before and during volunteer tutors' period of service and include orientation to the organization as well as skills-based training. A successful training program should reflect the skills and knowledge your tutors need to meet the specific goals of your program. *The Verdict Is In: Trained Tutors = Increased Student Learning* outlines the essentials of developing and implementing an effective tutor training plan, including guidelines for training delivery, suggested training content, tips for finding trainers, training evaluation strategies, and further resources. View this article online at:

www.nwrel.org/learns/tutor/sum2001/sum2001.html. For a menu of ready-to-use training activities for volunteer reading tutors, visit:

www.nwrel.org/learns/trainingopps/training/index.html.

Offer planned, structured sessions and activities.

Children benefit from well planned, structured tutoring sessions in which tutors employ a variety of materials and strategies to accommodate children's varying interests, abilities, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds. A balanced, integrated approach to tutoring activities benefits children by creating a supportive, literate environment, providing access to a variety of reading and writing materials, and instilling a passion for reading.

The National Reading Panel report *Teaching Children to Read* recommends that reading instruction include explicit and systematic instruction of the following skills:

- Phonemic awareness — the ability to break apart and manipulate the sounds in words
- Phonics — the knowledge that sounds are represented by letters of the alphabet which are blended together to form words
- Fluency — the ability to read with efficiency and ease

- Vocabulary — increased word knowledge
- Text comprehension — the ability to make meaning out of print

Provide caring, consistent support for struggling readers.

Caring, supportive relationships are a cornerstone of tutoring success. The frequency and consistency of sessions with the same tutor can be as important as session content in creating an atmosphere that is comfortable for tutees and conducive to learning. According to the *AmeriCorps Tutoring Outcomes Study*, students who met with their tutors at least three times per week “increased their reading skills scores between pretest and post-test by 2.1 points more than their peers in programs that met less frequently.” Most children benefit from regular sessions that occur at the same time, day, and place from week to week. Since they are practicing skills, meeting several times a week is important.

Keep records that document student progress.

Documentation of children’s learning and literacy development is important for all participants in a literacy tutoring program. This information is useful to everyone; tutors use it to adjust session activities, students to better understand their progress, and teachers to gain a fuller picture of students’ work with tutors. In addition to improved literacy skills, assessing student progress can address other benefits children may experience, such as improved school attendance, behavior, self-esteem, and interest in reading. For one example of a recordkeeping form and literacy assessment tool, see the LEARNS Literacy Assessment Profile (LLAP), online at: www.nwrel.org/learns/resources/llap/index.html.

Resources

Many resources have been developed for reading skills projects. Here are a few designed specifically for program development.

Program start-up:

LEARNS (www.nwrel.org/learns) is funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service, LEARNS offers a wide variety of resources for tutors and tutoring programs, including the *Tutor* newsletter, LEARNS Literacy Assessment Profile, ready-to-use tutor training activities and videos, and games and word activities for tutoring sessions. The following items are particularly useful for program start-up:

- *Day one... in the life of a program coordinator*
This monograph helps you identify and tackle the many components of your tutoring program’s first weeks, including assessing your resources, defining goals and objectives, and involving stakeholders. Available online at: www.nwrel.org/learns/resources/startup/index.html
- *Growing a Volunteer Tutor Program: Engaging Communities to Support Schools*
Developed with input from seasoned program directors, this book offers advice for

surviving the critical start-up year of a volunteer tutor program. Available by calling 1-800-860-2684, ext. 142 or by e-mail: nsrc-shipping@etr.org

Read With Me: A Guide for Student Volunteers Starting Early Childhood Literacy Programs (www.ed.gov/pubs/ReadWithMe/onecomm.html) provides tips for program start-up, information about how children learn, and links to additional resources.

Improving Children's Reading Ability Through Volunteer Reading Tutoring Programs (www.nga.org/cda/files/IB022401TEACHERPREP.pdf) is an issue brief from the National Governors Association, discusses the four elements of an effective volunteer reading tutoring program.

Tutor training:

The Verdict is In: Trained Tutors = Increased Student Learning (*The Tutor*, Summer/Fall 2001) (www.nwrel.org/learns/tutor/sum2001/sum2001.html) offers a variety of resources to help programs develop a comprehensive training plan. Includes a sample training calendar, models from the field, advice on accessing trainers and training resources, and tips on training evaluation.

LEARNS Training Activities (www.nwrel.org/learns/trainingopps/training/index.html) are ready-to-use activities for training literacy tutors on a variety of topics.

Resource Connection Fall 2001 (Volume 5, Number 3) (www.etr.org/nsrc/newsletter.html) provides guidelines for national service programs providing or coordinating training for members and volunteers. Topics include conducting needs assessment; finding trainers both within and beyond your program and community; and accessing the national network of training resources.

Reading research and support:

No Child Left Behind (www.nclb.gov) is the U.S. Department of Education's official website. It provides information and answers questions about No Child Left Behind legislation and its implications. The site also includes free and downloadable publications that support reading and homework assistance.

Reading First (www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/readingfirst/index.html) is the U.S. Department of Education's initiative to help every young child in every state become a successful reader. The site provides links to publications and resources, frequently asked questions, news and events, and much more.

The National Reading Panel (www.nationalreadingpanel.org) offers a list of publications about teaching children to read and a bibliography which includes videos and other important publications in the field.

Reading Rockets (www.readingrockets.org) provides accurate, practical information to anyone who cares about helping children to read. Features sections for parents and teachers, a book club, resources, and local and national reading news. Funded by the United States Department of Education.