

Yes, I See You:

Literacy Discussions Workbook by Faith Borkowsky



Can You See Me?

YES, I SEE YOU

Copyright: Faith Borkowsky (2022)



I am in preschool. It took me a long time to speak. Only my family understands me. I have trouble finding the words to describe what I want to say. It's so frustrating when people ask my mommy or daddy to interpret for me. Sometimes I throw myself into walls or on the floor because I can't express myself. When I began to talk, I didn't pronounce words correctly, and I still have trouble with certain words. Sometimes I feel people grow impatient with me when I try to tell them something.

Children develop the majority of their speech and language skills in the first three years of life. If a child is not reaching language milestones, speech and language intervention services should be started as soon as possible during this critical period. No age is too early for a speech and language assessment, and parents do not need to wait for referrals from doctors to seek help.

You got mad at me because I didn't listen. But I really did listen; I just couldn't remember all the things you told me to do. I wish you would just speak slower and give me only one direction at a time. I know you would like me to be more like you. I wish I could run faster, play catch, and not fall over my own feet. I'm sorry that I make a mess with my food and half of it ends up on my clothes.



Skill deficits giving rise to the need for early intervention are different for each child. Some children will need a suite of services including occupational therapy, sensory integration, physical therapy, and social-emotional learning. There are parent-training and information centers in the community that provide resources to help parents actively participate in their child's development. We can educate parents and help them locate the nearest centers and resources.



Preschool and kindergarten teachers can detect early signs and symptoms of developmental delays or disabilities IF they are aware that there is a problem. Sometimes, such teachers observe behaviors but do not want to share their concerns for fear of being viewed as alarmist or incorrect. They tend to default to a "wait and see what happens" or "give it time" approach. Preschool and kindergarten teachers should be trained to identify areas of concern and not take them lightly. It's so hard to pick up a crayon and color. I want to write my name, but I can't remember the letters. You keep showing me how to use a pair of scissors, but I can't seem to get it to cut paper. Please don't yell. Loud noises really bother me, and it makes me scream and cry. And I hate when you flick the light on and off before story-time. Sitting still and listening for a long time make me want to run out of the room.

I told Mommy that I have to learn to tie my shoes, snap my pants, and button my coat like the other kids. She told me that she decided to get me the same pair of sweatpants in different colors because she is tired of fighting with me about what I will wear. Ah, this feels much better! I don't like itchy, stiff jeans, and there are no annoying tags rubbing against my skin. I also told her that when she puts food on my plate, make sure the vegetables do not touch the meat.



Some children are overly sensitive to stimuli such as loud noises, bright lights, and itchy fabrics. Sensory challenges can be indicative of other problems and should be part of the conversation when looking at a child's development. There is important information to glean from looking at sensory responses, even if a child is not labeled as having a Sensory Processing Disorder.



Well-child visits are the perfect time for pediatricians to share information and educate parents about language, literacy, and dyslexia. They are the professionals that parents trust when seeking guidance. Simple questionnaires can be used to gather information to evaluate the emergent literacy skills and language development of young children to see if they are at risk for later reading impairment. I hate going to the doctor even though she is very nice to me. She spends a lot of time with my mommy talking about me. Mommy is worried that I am starting school and can't do lots of things like the other kids. I still have trouble talking; I mix up words that sound alike, and I can't seem to be able to remember the words I want to say. Mommy also wants me to sit and read books with her, but it is so hard for me to follow a story. I just jump out of her arms.

I can't hear rhymes, and I don't like to play listening games. Hickory Dickory Dock, the mouse went up the... stairs? I don't know. What sound is at the beginning of the word "stop"? I wish this would stop! It's hard for me to recognize and recall the first sound in a word. By the time the word comes out, I've already forgotten the first sound. Sometimes, I work so hard to hear the first sound that I don't pay attention to the rest of the word. Good grief!



It is imperative that pediatricians have basic knowledge about underlying prerequisite literacy skills. Since phonological awareness, the ability to recognize and work with the sounds in spoken language, is a reliable predictor of later reading ability, asking parents questions such as, "Can your child recite nursery rhymes? Can your child tell you when two words rhyme? Can your child separate a compound word like rain-bow? Can your child tell you if two or more words begin with the same sound? Can your child tell you which word does not start with the same sound when given three or four words?" will help doctors and parents determine if there are phonological deficits that could impact literacy attainment in the future, and whether referral to qualified educational professionals is necessary.



I am in kindergarten. I hate school. Why does the teacher send me home with words that I have to memorize? It's so hard to remember the difference between "when" and "then," "for," "of," and "from," and "a" and "the." And mommy and daddy get so frustrated with me.

In most kindergarten and first grade classrooms today, children are encouraged to memorize high frequency words so they will recognize them on sight. The memorized words are then supposed to be reinforced using books containing predictable, repetitive phrases designed to assist the children in the memorization task and pictures to help them figure out unknown words. This type of instruction—telling children to memorize words or look at pictures and context cues to figure out words - is not really "teaching" children how to read. Time and time again, the method has proven a failure as, in later grades, the strategies no longer work when the words get longer and the pictures disappear.

I am trying to get better at using the pictures and the first letter of words in the books to figure out words I don't know, like the teacher tells me. I get so tired trying to read the words, I just want to put my head down and sleep. Then, the teacher wants me to write, too!



Not surprisingly, many struggling readers quickly become withdrawn or belligerent when they recognize that they are not keeping up with their peers. The literacy gap only grows if they are not explicitly taught how to read as soon as possible.

While some young children will develop as readers no matter how they are taught, a significant number struggle because they need explicit teaching of letter and sound relationships. A Structured Literacy approach that is rooted in evidence and what scientists and researchers know about how the brain learns to read should be used from the start. This includes explicit instruction in phonemic awareness (the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the smallest units of sounds in words) and phonics (a method of teaching reading and writing by demonstrating the relationship between letters and spoken language). Schools should revamp their English Language Arts curricula and follow the research and science in order to align instruction with best practices.

Parents should be knowledgeable about the research and demand better for all children.



There is evidence that handwriting and reading ability develop together. Classroom teachers in the early grades should focus on handwriting "automaticity" — the ability to retrieve and write the letters of the alphabet automatically and legibly. Many children are not getting enough explicit instruction and practice in handwriting, and this contributes, in part, to their inability to get their thoughts down quickly. To get a child with handwriting difficulties to form letters correctly without any conscious effort, a partnership between the classroom teacher, occupational therapist, and parents should be formed. Lots of reinforcement with corrective feedback can have a powerful effect. The OT has me doing all sorts of hand exercises. She also says I have to build up my core strength. My classroom teacher is always getting mad at me because I slump in my chair and write with my head sideways on the desk. I don't form the letters correctly, and I don't start at the margin. Even when the OT tries to correct my grip, I go back to holding a pencil in a way that is more comfortable for me.

I am in first grade. I try telling a story about what happened to me, but I mix everything up. My speech teacher tries to help me follow directions and find the words that match what I want to say. She tries to help me tell a story in the right order. I have it in my head, but it comes out in a completely different way. I'm so stupid.

Even worse is when we try to work on listening for sounds in words. This is really hard for me, even when she slows her speech down and has me watch her mouth. I need more time and practice to move the sounds around in words.



Children become frustrated with their inability to communicate and many begin to internalize these struggles in the form of self-loathing. A speech-language pathologist (SLP) can help children communicate more effectively. Language interventions should include work on proper grammar, articulation, building vocabulary, taking turns in conversation, and organizing thoughts. Parents and teachers should be aware of language disorders so they can get help before a problem impacts learning across school subject matter.

The SLP should also work on developing phonological awareness, specifically, phonemic awareness, so that children will be able to make the connection between letters and sounds in words.



Difficulty with motor skills can be recognized easily, but such problems are often overlooked in schools, misunderstood, or misconstrued as just clumsiness. When children do not receive intervention for their developmental delays, it can cause problems with focus and attention. These are the kids who tend to rock in their chairs, fidget, and cannot complete tasks without constant reminders. Physical therapy should also be considered a necessary part of a child's Individual Education Plan (IEP). (Sigh)... Another pull-out from my class. It is so hard to keep going in and out of my classroom. Now they are trying to help me with balance and coordination! My physical therapist is working on my posture and helping me to build up my core strength. I was born with "hypotonia" which is low muscle tone. This makes it harder for me to complete tasks at school. I hate being reminded to sit up straight with my feet on the floor and to get my head off the desk. I like to sit with my legs spread out in a W formation. I guess that is not a good thing.

It takes me forever to complete my homework. I cry and scream. My mother gets angry and runs to tell my father. My father gets angry and runs to tell my mother. Both of them hate homework more than I do! It is really stupid. I read the same book over and over again until I know it by heart. My mother tries to encourage me to read other books from the library. If the pictures can't help me figure out the meaning, I can't read them. I know my parents love me, but I can feel their frustration with me.



A child's academic difficulties will impact the health of the entire family, and many parents seek out others who share their frustrations and concerns. Social media groups on platforms like Twitter and Facebook can give parents a voice, and many become fierce advocates for their children and others. If a school or district does not have a Special Education Parent-Teacher Association (SEPTA), parents can start a group, participate in SEPTA at another school or district, or coordinate SEPTA groups in the local community. Information and knowledge are powerful tools, and it's helpful for affected parents to have support from others and a strong, unified message.



The reading specialist pulls me out of class often to read. She uses the same kind of little books my teacher uses in my classroom. My teacher told her that I can't read past level C. The reading specialist tells me the same thing my teacher tells me—to skip over words and try to use the pictures and other words to figure out the hard words. I get my mouth ready and look at the picture. I think I am doing everything right but it's still not making sense.

Then, we practice learning the sounds of letters, and I try to match the letters to the sounds in the words. My dad does this with me at home too. He always tells me to try to sound out words. This does not make sense to me. Why do I need letters and sounds if I am supposed to memorize the words and look at pictures, right? I used to be a better guesser, but now the words are getting harder, and there aren't as many pictures. Ugh... This is so boring... I'm so confused.

One of the greatest travesties in literacy education today is that children are required to struggle or fail under the ill-conceived teaching approach used in mainstream classrooms before they are sent for extra help and, hopefully, a structured phonics approach that actually works. Unfortunately, the extra help they receive is often a mixed methods approach that frequently does more harm than good. When young children are encouraged to look for clues to figure out words, while, at the same time, asked to sound out words, they will usually make guessing the words their default strategy.

"The guiding principle here would be that although there are many different aspects of reading that must be learned—alphabetic decoding, fluent word reading, text comprehension—this does not mean that instructional time should be devoted equally to all of them at all points in reading acquisition. Rather, instructional regimens to support these various abilities are likely to be most effective at particular points in development, and limited teaching time should be structured to reflect this." (Castles, et al 2018) https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1529100618772271

If struggling readers are provided the same "leveled" books in intervention as they see in the classroom, there will be few opportunities for them to apply phonics skills through cumulative practice. Currently, decodable texts, which are designed to reinforce phonics concepts in a cumulative fashion, are not prevalent in schools, so whatever phonics is being taught in the classroom or during intervention is not being practiced enough. **"Designing comprehensive literacy instruction requires a good understanding of what decodable readers are, why they are needed, and how they should and should not be used."** (Lorimor-Easley 2020) https://iowareadingresearch.org/blog/decodable-readers-phonics-instruction

Literacy expert and researcher Susan Brady said, "The research reviewed here underscores the importance of the kindergarten year for teaching phoneme awareness and letter knowledge, and for segueing into beginning reading with phonics instruction that is systematic, explicit and synthetic. Subsequent word-level instruction needs to extend beyond first grade, covering more advanced content about the structure of the writing system. For students needing further support in word reading skills, phonics interventions should be provided at the level required." (Brady 2020)

https://www.thereadingleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Brady-Expanded-Version-of-Alphabetics-TRLJ.pdf

7



Reading struggles are a major cause of anxiety and depression for children as young as five-years-old. Shouldn't we look at and monitor the emotional well-being of kindergartners and firstgraders who may be suffering from anxiety because they are not able to keep up with their classmates? Both mental health counseling and reading intervention should begin with treating the cause, not the symptoms. School nurses could benefit from asking the classroom teachers about the academic standing of these "sick" children who repeatedly visit their offices. These are the children who do not intuitively understand the rules of spelling; they continue to use inventive spelling beyond first grade and cannot even correct themselves because they don't know how to judge what looks right. These are the children who figure out what letters "kinda" look like, and draw the letters from the bottom up, or worse, use different starting points until the letters look correct. These are the children who are referred to selfcontained special education classes.

I am in second grade. I am still at the same level book. I must be really stupid. When it is reading time I get stomachaches and headaches. I have been going to the nurse almost every day with a different ache or pain. I think she has caught on that something else is going on. She told my mother that she thinks I just want to get out of class. Truthfully, I just want to go home.



During silent reading time, my teacher wants me to write about the book I am supposed to be reading on little Post-it notes. It is so hard to write on little pieces of paper. I'm not really sure how I am supposed to respond. I haven't really read the book. I pretend to read sometimes. The teacher caught me with the book upside down. She thinks I am lazy. I really want to read and write. This is just getting to be unbearable.



For struggling readers, sitting quietly for fifteen minutes or longer with a book can be torturous. For each minute of "pretend" reading, struggling readers fall further and further behind their peers. Couldn't the time be used in a more productive way? Many kids with reading difficulties, including those with dyslexia, can comprehend information way above their ability to decode words. Audiobooks would be a good option during silent reading time for such struggling readers.



We must prioritize early detection and effective educational interventions for children with dyslexia or language-based disabilities. One study found that 89% of suicide notes contain dyslexic-type spelling errors (Journal of Learning Disabilities, Vol. 30, 6: pp 652-659, 1997). Perhaps because spelling is not valued in our schools anymore, particularly in the lower grades, such a pattern has gone widely unnoticed. But ask any parent of a struggling reader and he or she will tell you their child's mental health is at stake. We know that anxiety and depression put children at a higher risk for self-mutilation and suicide. How can writing samples be used to help determine a child's needs, academically and emotionally? I am in third grade. The school psychologist is testing me. It is such an effort for me to read. I try to read the words slowly and that doesn't work. When I read in my head, I skip words and lines. I have no idea what I am reading. When she has me read out loud, I leave out sounds or add in sounds that are not there. I leave off endings and substitute words. I don't even realize what I am doing. She is giving me words I can't spell. She, too, will soon know that I am stupid. It is getting harder and harder to hide my problems. This is making me so nervous that I am blanking out and can't do anything right now. I just want to run and hide.

I am in fourth grade. The teacher called on me to read my written answer. I ended up writing short sentences because I couldn't think of anything to write. I stumbled over my words and heard some of the kids laughing at me. It is so embarrassing when I mix up words and can't get my thoughts out. I tried to rip up my paper before the other kids saw it. Too late. How humiliating... Nobody wants to be friends with a dumb kid.



As the years pass and the workload and expectations on kids increase, the deficiencies that were once invisible or believed to be temporary become glaring. Written expression becomes even more challenging than reading. Children who write poorly and only use simple words that are in their sight vocabularies are not going to be able to keep up in English and content area subjects such as science and social studies. Just as reading needs to be taught with a structure and a sequence of skills that build cumulatively, writing should be taught systematically as well. Is it assumed that children will just pick up writing by looking at well-written books and studying text features? Or is there a coordinated effort across the school building to improve writing skills?



I don't want to go to school. My father takes me to the bus stop, watches me take my seat, and waves goodbye. He tells me to work hard and pay attention. He doesn't want to hear a bad report again. The day is so long and so hard. I count the days until we have a day off. Each day, I am filled with dread and just want to sleep on the bus.

Many children are exhausted by school. It takes so much mental energy to study and deal with the frustration of not succeeding. Lack of confidence and low self-esteem make each day intolerable. In 2019, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) issued a report showing that the rate of suicide among young people, generally, had jumped dramatically over the past decade, 56% among teenagers. Bullying, stress, family problems, social media, the pressure to fit in, and other factors are frequently referenced in news accounts and discussions among concerned parents, educators, and health care providers. One thing that never seems to be mentioned, however, is the role learning difficulties play in causing anxiety and depression.

My mother feels she is to blame for me not reading. We go to the library once a week to pick out books that she thinks I will like. I don't want her to be upset, so I try to find books to make her happy. The librarian makes suggestions based on my age, but I can't read any of them. I picked out some books about sports that have lots of pictures. It's hard to enjoy reading when you can't read the words.

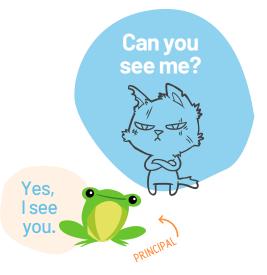


Children who can read will be very happy to have time to "chill out" with books and read; the children who cannot read won't. It is the Matthew Effect: the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. A child who loves to read will always find time to delve into wonderful books and get lost in the pleasure of a good story. But for the children who find reading difficult, looking at a book can be as pleasurable as getting root canal at the dentist. The fallacy of literacy instruction in schools today is that promoting a love of reading is paramount. No one loves to do what they are incapable of doing.



When children have not been successful at "picking up" reading or writing, the school usually offers help in the form of accommodations. Assistive Technology (AT), unfortunately, becomes a substitute for intervention, and children become dependent on "ear" reading and speech-to-text apps. Accommodations are necessary as children get older, but that should not be a reason to give up on intensive, teacher-led interventions. So many of these kids CAN learn if taught correctly. I am in fifth grade. I think the OT gave up trying to get me to hold a pencil correctly. I am now given assistive technology to "write" from speech to text. I am able to talk into a mic, and it picks up my words. It's pretty cool. Meanwhile, I am learning to use all sorts of apps on the computer to help me keep up in school. I guess this helps a little. I need to learn how to type with two hands quickly. Right now, I am using one hand on the keyboard, and it is still hard to get my ideas down.

I am in sixth grade. I don't think anyone can teach me to read. I must really be stupid. At this point, I don't even try. I continue to read inaccurately and slowly. I don't understand the books that I am given to read, and I avoid reading whenever possible. I can't stand the thought of writing. The teachers want me to write essays, and I have trouble writing a sentence. I can't remember to include capitalization and punctuation. It's so difficult to organize my thoughts. To entertain myself, I act out and now have become a behavior problem. It's a lot more fun to get a laugh from the kids than have them laugh at me.



If there is a correlation between poor literacy and poor behavior, how can teachers, parents, and school-based support members use this information? Currently, most kids who demonstrate unacceptable behavior are put on a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP). Although the purpose of this document is to prevent or stop misbehavior, not just punish the child, it is based on a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) that sometimes misses the mark on why the problem behavior occurs. An analysis of the root causes of a child's misbehavior must include an interpretation by someone who will recognize the connection. Rewards and incentives for "good" behavior will not last for kids with persistent learning challenges.



Although many children with reading problems are likely to display poor engagement in learning activities, appear inattentive, be easily distracted, or have behavioral outbursts, there are some children who will hold it inside. They internalize their frustrations in school and let it out when they get home, a safe environment filled with unconditional love. Thus, a parent might see meltdowns while, in school, it's not noticed because the child sits quietly, suffering inside. Or it could be the opposite. Home life for some kids can be scarier than school, and such kids might feel a rush of excitement getting attention from peers, even if it is negative. What's interesting to note, however, is how behavior can be dramatically different in school from what parents witness at home. I am in seventh grade. I have no interest in school. Nobody understands me. When I get home from school, I hide in my room playing video games and texting with other kids who also feel like they don't fit in. I am just getting by in some classes while failing English and Spanish. Why do they make us take another language when I can't even read in English? I just daydream about being finished with school. My English teacher caught me drifting off and called on me to read an excerpt from one of the classics. Of course, I couldn't read it. I just lost it and told her to go F%&* off!

I am in eighth grade. I started to find some friends who like to cut school and get high. Forget school. What's the point? I hate all the teachers. I'm sick of my parents. This is just one big waste of time. To get through the day, I smoked a joint in the bathroom. One of the smart kids told someone, and I was sent to the principal's office. When will this end? I've had enough.





Academic and social demands peak during adolescence and frequently negatively affect student self-esteem. Students with literacy problems are more likely to be disengaged in school, act out, and become involved in self-destructive activities. Many turn to drugs and alcohol. These kids are the ones pegged as having "bad attitudes." Non-teaching personnel such as custodians, office staff, and aides should learn how to identify struggling students and report observations to the principal or guidance counselor.



I am in ninth grade. I wear black clothes from head to toe. I can't stand my life, and I really hate living. My drug use is now daily from morning until night. My mother has had it with me. We are going to a therapist to see what is wrong with me. I can make this easy. Everything. Just about everything is wrong with me. I can't read, write, spell, or figure out math problems. I never was a good athlete, and I have nothing good in my life. When I tried hard, it didn't matter. What's the use?

The child, feeling sad and despondent, inadequate, and not worthy of love will often choose "friends" with similar feelings. Community members can easily spot such kids who might feel ostracized. Some become part of the "Goth" scene and choose to wear all black clothing because it is symbolic of darkness, a place that is familiar to those kids struggling to live in their own skin. But not all kids will gravitate to groups wearing clothes that represent rebellion and anger. Some kids will hide their loneliness and try to self-isolate, playing computer games and engaging on social media sites that give them a sense of belonging. How can religious and community organizations and business owners get involved?

I am in tenth grade. I was sent to a rehab facility for three weeks. Does anyone really think that this will work? I don't need rehab. I need to get out of here. Nobody wants to listen. They just want to tell me what I should and shouldn't be doing. They just see a dumb drug addict. They don't see that I tried to be a good student. I am just a disappointment to my family. I am one big loser. My only friends are drug addicts, too. They can stick rehab!





Illiteracy can be a root cause of substance abuse. Could learning to read be part of the treatment plan in a rehab facility? The boost to self-worth engendered by acquiring literacy can have a dramatic impact on rehabilitation and give hope to recovering addicts that they can be employable.

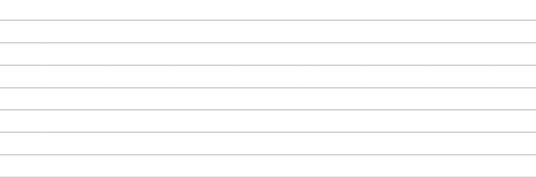


I am banging on the walls inside a jail cell. I got caught trying to steal computers to get money for drugs. My habit is now an addiction, and I will do anything to keep it going. I can't even tell the difference between truth and lies. My whole life is based on a pattern of lying to get what I want. Funny, I always felt like I was a prisoner even though the bars weren't there before. Honestly, it doesn't feel much different. I just want to die.

We must look at the connection between illiteracy and incarceration to inform our decisions about literacy curricula. The school-to-prison pipeline is full of kids who were often sent to the principal's office in elementary school. They are likely the ones who can't read or write well.Yet, some incarcerated juveniles are taught to read in correctional facilities! In the UK, there is a charity dedicated to inspiring and training prisoners who can read adequately to tutor the prisoners who can't. If those kids are able to learn to read in prison, taught by inmates without teaching degrees, what does that say about the educational system?



One Month



Three Months



Six Months



Nine Months



One Year



Faith Borkowsky is the founder of High Five Literacy and Academic Coaching and is a Certified Dyslexia Practitioner with thirty-five years of experience in literacy instruction - as a classroom teacher, reading and learning specialist, regional literacy coach, administrator, and tutor. Ms. Borkowsky provides professional development for teachers and school districts, as well as parent workshops, presentations, and private consultations, on science-based literacy practices. She is the author of the award-winning book, Failing Students or Failing Schools? A Parent's Guide to Reading Instruction and Intervention, and the "If Only I Would Have Known..." series of books, conceived as a roadmap for literacy readiness and success for parents of young children. In 2021, Ms. Borkowsky was a finalist for the World Literacy Foundation award for her significant contributions to literacy.

