

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Millions of American children struggle with reading. Many read so poorly that by ninth grade they've been held back one or more times. Politicians have called this an "educational recession." We call it a tragedy.

Parents are worried. They don't understand reading disabilities. They don't recognize its signs until it's too late. And, by third grade, it's often too late. More than 70% of third graders with reading problems continue to struggle with reading in high school.¹ In despair or anger, many give up and drop out of school.²

Most reading authorities assert that prolonged reading difficulties cause children great emotional and social anguish. As Jules Abrams observed:

It is almost inevitable that a child who is experiencing severe difficulty in reading will develop intense feelings of frustration. As the reading failure continues, many symptoms of social and emotional maladjustment will appear. Children, increasingly bewildered by their inability to meet the expectations of their parents, their teachers, and their peers, develop a kind of hypersensitivity to the possibility of failure. This fear of further wounding to their pride exacerbates the problem simply because children cannot take the chance of risking any further humiliation. Instead, all too often, the child acts out aggressively, withdraws, becomes depressed, or chooses any one of a number of other maladaptive solutions. These problems certainly do not terminate with the onset of adolescence. It has become increasingly clear that many of the serious problems that are found in both adolescents and adults in our society today have had their roots in early academic failure.³

This does not have to happen to your child!

REASONS FOR HOPE

For many reasons, you should have hope. Here are several.

Reading Disabilities Can Often be Identified at an Early Age. Moreover, in many cases, early intervention can prevent, minimize, or eliminate reading disabilities.⁴ If you suspect that your child has or is at risk for reading disabilities, get her evaluated as early as possible. The earlier her reading disabilities are identified and addressed, the better chance she has of succeeding in reading and avoiding emotional scars. Chapter 2 will help you determine if your child is at risk for reading disabilities. Chapters 3 and 4 will help you determine if your child is showing definite signs of reading disabilities. Chapters 4 and 5 will help you to get a quality reading evaluation. They will also help you to understand the nature of your child's reading disabilities.

Research Has Identified Many Ingredients of Successful Reading Instruction. By understanding these ingredients, you're more likely to get your child the right program of instruction and supports. This can prevent, minimize, or eliminate reading disabilities.

If you suspect that your child has or is at risk for reading disabilities, seek out educators who have studied the research on effective instruction and supports. They know that effective instruction provides relevant, precisely focused, intensive, and consistent coursework, based on each child's unique needs. They also know that struggling readers need daily instruction that emphasizes moderate challenge, explicit strategy instruction, frequent modeling, individual and small-group instruction, high rates of correct student responses, ample practice learning new skills, interesting activities, student generated questions, and lots of opportunities to listen to and read interesting materials.

You Can Influence Your Child's Success. Parents can do many simple things at home and in the community to help their children develop the background, abilities, and motivation needed to succeed in reading. Activities include reading books to children, listening intently when they speak, playing rhyming and sound games, visiting and talking about different places, labeling new experiences with relevant vocabulary, and helping them create elaborate sentences. Parents can also strengthen their children's motivation to read, despite children's difficulties. In chapter 6 we suggest simple but effective activities for you to help your child develop the background, abilities, and motivation needed to successfully learn to read.

Federal Laws Can Provide Extensive Opportunity and Support. Parents can often use the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004* (IDEA-2004)⁵ and *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973* (Section 504)⁶ to get children services needed to prevent, minimize, or eliminate reading disabilities. Similarly, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB)⁷ can help. Although far less personalized and far more limited than IDEA-2004 and Section 504, NCLB can often provide parents with the leverage needed to get additional reading services.

If your child qualifies for services, and you understand the essence of problem solving, conflict resolution, and Federal special education laws, you can often get whatever educational services your child needs, at no cost to you, even if your child has yet to reach kindergarten age. Chapters 7 through 13 discuss how to work effectively with school personnel, problem solve, resolve conflicts, and use special education and related laws to get your child a quality reading program.

You Can Develop an Insightful Advocacy Plan for Your Child. As you progress through *Beating the Odds*, you will quickly realize that parents *alone* have little chance of remediating serious reading disabilities. Once your child enters school, her success in reading may depend—almost entirely—on the school's resources and the skill and willingness of school personnel to provide quality programs and make logical adjustments to classwork and homework. This means that you must collaborate and advocate effectively.

Chapter 13 will help you develop an advocacy plan that puts everything together. By studying the first twelve chapters, which focus on the intricacies of reading disabilities, the complexities of schools, and the critical laws, you have a good chance of using the information in chapter 13 to develop a plan that can prevent, minimize, or eliminate reading disabilities.

READING DISABILITIES

Before studying *Beating the Odds*, you need to understand that professionals disagree about the definition of “reading disabilities.” The term lacks scientific rigor. As Deborah Speece and Lesley Shekita found:

Children with reading disabilities vary in their response to treatment, their area of difficulty, and possible co-occurring disabilities [There is] uncertainty among experts on what criteria should operationalize a definition of reading disabilities.⁸

The issues of definition and identification are important for researchers and clinicians. For parents whose children struggle to read, however, it’s more important to have a functional, practical definition to which teachers and other school personnel can relate. Thus, in *Beating the Odds*, we will use a broad, global definition of a child with reading disabilities that is inadequate for research purposes, but adequate for you to help your child:

A child with reading disabilities is any child who struggles more than the average child to learn to read. Usually, such a child cannot, with typical instruction, successfully read grade-level materials or complete grade-level reading assignments; if she can, she often reads in a slow, laborious manner or has difficulty understanding the materials. The terms reading disability and struggling reader do not suggest any particular cause for the child’s struggle with reading.

Although parents and teachers should find our definition useful, a more precise, more technical definition is required for special education classification. Practically speaking, this definition is developing through a Federally supported instructional and diagnostic process called Response To Intervention (RTI), which we discuss in chapter 9.

Personally, we don’t like the term *reading disabilities*; we prefer *reading problems* or *reading difficulties*. The word disabilities implies a permanent inability within the child, an inability that can perhaps be compensated for but not cured. Initially, however, many reading difficulties have temporary, external causes, like poor instruction—a cause that has nothing to do with permanent inabilities within the child. So why do we use the term reading disabilities? It’s part of the language, it’s a major term in the professional literature, it’s what people respond to, it conveys the seriousness and pervasiveness of the problem, it conveys the need for intensive, knowledgeable, skilled instruction, and it often has legal implications.

As you encounter the term reading disabilities in this book, be careful; don't fall into the trap of assuming it means a permanent, unalterable, or incomprehensible inability. Remember—it's only a label. With the right instruction and the right supports, many children labeled as having reading disabilities can make meaningful strides in reading. Many can become proficient readers.

READING AND USING THIS BOOK

Reading Disabilities: Beating the Odds aims to help you understand the complex nature of reading disabilities and maximize your child's odds of becoming a proficient reader. To achieve these aims, we discuss many important topics and issues. Some, however, may be irrelevant for your child. Each child is unique and, therefore, has different needs. One child may need intensive instruction in phonemic awareness. Another may need intensive instruction only in reading comprehension. Giving this child intensive instruction in phonemic awareness diverts instruction from her primary need—reading comprehension—wasting her time and squandering her chances of success.

Therefore, in first reading this book, we suggest that you skim the chapters to determine what's most important for your child. Then, study—underline, highlight, take notes, think about, talk to others about—sections and chapters relevant to her immediate needs.

Beating the Odds endeavors to accommodate individual needs. As such, we highlight important points, occasionally repeat them in different chapters, and discuss them in detail. Because you may want additional information, we provide extensive endnotes. Because you may need to understand and use Federal education laws and case law, we often quote relevant portions for you to reflect upon and, if necessary, share with school personnel. For similar reasons, we provide valuable quotations from distinguished scholars.

Any book explaining a complex and often contentious subject like reading disabilities has two major limitations. One is content. Serious authors who have devoted decades to a subject can always cover more topics and elaborate on more points. But this can overwhelm readers. To keep *Beating the Odds* manageable for you, and to give you options about what you want to learn more about, we developed a website—www.reading2008.com—with even more resources to help you help your child *beat the odds*. We encourage you to visit it, read and study the information relevant to your child's needs, and share this information with parents and teachers.⁹

A second limitation is expertise. No expert is all-knowing; none is infallible. You may disagree with some of our conclusions. That's okay. You might be right. But make sure to base your disagreement on good science, not ideology, not the colorful advertisements and grandiose claims of publishers or the zealous beliefs of parents, school personnel, or professors who love a particular program that lacks a critical ingredient: adequate research support.

Throughout the book, we name and discuss many struggling readers. They're composites. What's important is not their fictitious names, but their stories and the points they illustrate.

KEEP IN MIND

Although we discuss education laws, we're not attorneys. We *do not* offer legal advice. Instead,

we offer the views of an educator and a psychologist who have each worked with education laws for decades. If we're not attorneys, why have we worked with and interpreted special education and related laws? Because they strongly influence schools' policies and practices and define the rights of children. They often define our roles. And Howard had to interpret and apply the laws as a State Hearing Officer who ruled on special education issues.¹⁰

For many years, Howard taught reading and special education to children from some of the poorest and wealthiest districts in New York and New Jersey. In addition to becoming a professor of both reading disabilities and special education, coordinating graduate programs in these areas, and editing the *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* and the *Reading & Writing Quarterly: Overcoming Learning Difficulties*, he earned numerous certifications requiring him to understand Federal and State education laws and related policies and practices. In New Jersey, for example, his certifications include Reading Specialist, School Psychologist, Teacher of the Handicapped, and Learning Disabilities Teacher-Consultant. He's helped many school districts and families deal with both reading and special education issues.

Gary has practiced school psychology and clinical psychology for more than 35 years. Thus, he had to master the intricacies of special education and related laws, as well as policies and practices designed to implement them. In addition, as a professor of psychology Gary has published a great deal of research that directly affects the lives of children with reading and learning disabilities. He has published twelve books on psychology and education and was recently honored with the State University of New York Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Scholarship.

Both of us have children and grandchildren and spouses. Nothing is more important to us. Clearly, this influences our opinions about children's needs and the roles and responsibilities of parents, schools, and society.

Please keep our backgrounds in mind as you read this book. They help to explain our values and the basis for our views.

 ENDNOTES

¹ G. Reid Lyon, former Chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, reported that "Longitudinal studies show that, of the youngsters who are identified in the third grade, approximately 74% remain reading disabled through the ninth grade. This appears to be true even when special education has been provided. It should be made clear, however, that interventions applied *after* a child has failed in reading for two or three years may not be effective for several reasons, including the student's declining motivation and impaired self-concept" (Lyon, G. R., 1996. Learning disabilities. *Special Education for Students with Disabilities*, 6 (1), 54-74, p. 66, italics added). Thus it's critical to intervene as early as possible, before the child begins to think of herself as a hopeless failure.

² In 1996, Benita Blachman summarized the chronic, devastating nature of the problem: "The tragic consequences of early reading failure are well documented. From research supported by

NICHD [the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development] ... we know that 74% of the students who are unsuccessful readers in third grade are still unsuccessful readers in ninth grade. These early literacy problems lead not only to low literacy rates among adults but also to a host of devastating problems including high dropout rates in schools and unemployment” (Blachman, B. A., 1996. Preventing early reading failure. In S. C. Cramer & W. Ellis (Eds.), *Learning Disabilities: Lifelong Issues* (pp. 65-70). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes, p. 65). Today, with work requiring greater literacy abilities, and with struggling readers’ scores on high stakes tests frequently preventing promotion and graduation, their situation has gotten far more difficult and stressful.

- ³ Abrams, J. C., 1991. Introduction to the theme, Reading disabilities: The affective component. *Journal of Reading, Writing and Learning Disabilities International*, 7 (3), pp. iii-iv, p. iii.
- ⁴ For an excellent discussion, you might want to read Torgesen, J., 2004. Preventing early reading failure—and its devastating downward spiral: The evidence for early intervention. *American Educator*; retrieved 1/3/08, from http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/fall04/reading.htm. As a leading researcher on the topic and a Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Education at Florida State University, Torgesen’s expertise on the topic is outstanding.
- ⁵ The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, Public Law 108-446.
- ⁶ Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Public Law 93-112.
- ⁷ The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Public Law 107-110.
- ⁸ Speece, D. L., & Shekitka, L., 2002. How should reading disabilities be operationalized? A survey of experts. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 17 (2), 118-123, pp. 118, 122.
- ⁹ Local and county libraries are also good sources of information on reading and learning disabilities. Their electronic databases are vaults of valuable, downloadable information. By helping you design your database search, their librarians can often save you hours of work.
- ¹⁰ To be consistent with the Federal regulations for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, we will capitalize the words State and Federal.