

THE EDUCATIONAL, EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL EFFECTS OF READING PROBLEMS

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Excerpts from Dr. Lyon's Statement to the Subcommittee on Education Reform, Committee on Education and the Workforce, U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C., March 8, 2001.

As we follow thousands of children with reading difficulties throughout their school careers and into young adulthood, these young people tell us how embarrassing and devastating it was to read with difficulty in front of peers and teachers, and to demonstrate this weakness on a daily basis. It is clear from our NICHD research that this type of failure affects children negatively earlier than we thought. By the end of first grade, children having difficulty learning to read begin to feel less positive about themselves than when they started school. As we follow children through elementary and middle school years, self-esteem and the motivation to learn to read decline even further. In the majority of cases, the students are deprived of the ability to learn about literature, science, mathematics, history, and social studies because they cannot read grade-level textbooks. Consider that by middle school, children who read well read at least 10,000,000 words during the school year. On the other hand, children with reading difficulties read less than 100,000 words during the same period.

Poor readers lag far behind in vocabulary development and in the acquisition of strategies for understanding what they read, and they frequently avoid reading and other assignments that require reading. By high school, the potential of these students to enter college has decreased substantially. Students who have stayed in school long enough to reach high school tell us they hate to read because it is so difficult and it makes them feel "dumb." As a high school junior in one of our studies remarked, "I would rather have a root canal than read."

It is important to note that this state of educational affairs describes an extraordinary and unacceptable number of children. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (1998), 38 percent of fourth graders nationally cannot read at a basic level-- that is, they cannot read and understand a short paragraph of the type one would find in a simple children's book. Unfortunately, reading failure is disproportionately prevalent among children living in poverty. Indeed, in many low-income urban school districts the percentage of students in the fourth grade who cannot read at basic level approaches 70 percent.

The educational and public health consequences of this level of reading failure are dire. Of the ten to 15 percent of children who will eventually drop out of school, over 75 percent will report difficulties learning to read. Likewise, only two percent of students receiving special or compensatory education for difficulties learning to read will complete a four-year college program. Surveys of

adolescents and young adults with criminal records indicate that at least half have reading difficulties, and in some states the size of prisons a decade in the future is predicted by fourth grade reading failure rates. Approximately half of children and adolescents with a history of substance abuse have reading problems. It goes without saying that failure to learn to read places children's futures and lives at risk for highly deleterious outcomes. It is for this reason that the NICHD considers reading failure to reflect a national public health problem.

On the basis of a thorough evidence-based review of the reading research literature that met rigorous scientific standards, the National Reading Panel (NRP), convened by the NICHD and the Department of Education, found that intervention programs that provided systematic and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, guided repeated reading to improve reading fluency, and direct instruction in vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies were significantly more effective than approaches that were less explicit and less focused on the reading skills to be taught (e.g., approaches that emphasize incidental learning of basic reading skills).

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