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Reading Disabilities: Why Do Some Children Have Difficulty Learning to Read? What Can Be Done About It?

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The National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (NICHD) considers that teaching and learning in today's schools reflect not only significant educational concerns, but public health concerns as well. Our research has consistently shown that if children do not learn to understand and use language, to read and write, to calculate and reason mathematically, to solve problems, and to communicate their ideas and perspectives, their opportunities for a fulfilling and rewarding life are seriously compromised. Specifically, in our NICHD-supported longitudinal studies, we have learned that school failure has devastating consequences with respect to self-esteem, social development, and opportunities for advanced education and meaningful employment. Nowhere are these consequences more apparent than when children fail to learn to read. Why? Simply stated, the development of reading skills serves as THE major foundational academic ability for all school-based learning. Without the ability to read, the opportunities for academic and occupational success are limited. Moreover, because of its importance, difficulty in learning to read crushes the excitement and love for learning, which most children have when they enter school.

As we follow thousands of children with reading difficulties throughout school and into 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 their abilities than when they started school. As we follow children through elementary and middle school, 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. 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% of fourth graders nationally cannot read at a basic level – that is, they cannot read and understand a short paragraph similar to that in a children's book. Unfortunately, reading failure is disproportionately prevalent among children living in poverty. In many low-income urban school districts the percentage of students in the fourth grade who cannot read at basic level approaches 70%.

The educational and public health consequences of this level of reading failure are dire. Of the 10 to 15% of children who will eventually drop out of school, more than 75% 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. Approximately half of children and adolescents with a history of substance abuse have reading problems. Failure to learn to read places children's futures and lives at risk for highly deleterious outcomes. For this reason the NICHD considers reading failure to reflect a national public health problem.

