

Technology can help rewire the reading challenge

How an online reading aid can build confidence and help your child to master an essential skill

COMMENT



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READING is not a natural ability – it needs to be developed through lots of practice and a great deal of encouragement. For many, this process is painless. But for others, it is fraught with difficulty and struggles.

Acquiring this essential skill can be a frustrating experience for some. Education experts do not all agree about what percentage of the population has a diagnosable reading disorder such as dyslexia, but it is clear that while kids all read at different ages and stages, some otherwise average intelligence people find reading an unusually hard slog.

However, not being able to read isn't what it used to be. New technologies are revolutionising education for those who struggle with the written word, whether this is reading it, writing it or organising thoughts into a coherent and logical sequence – they are all connected.

These technologies are widely available and often inexpensive. Most people have access to these tools, known as assistive technologies, on their smartphones or computers, without even being aware of it.

As reading is at the core of your child's learning experience and academic progress, intervention must be intensive to

develop what Norton and Wolf (2012) refer to as “the reading circuit” of the brain.

The ability to read fluently with good comprehension, at an appropriate level, creates more connections in the language centres of the brain so a lot of reading at an appropriate level will yield the best results.

How best can you help if you have a child who is struggling with reading?

You should get your child a tablet or access to a computer.

Our children are “digital natives”, technology is part of their lives and many are adept at working at the keyboard, word processing, researching on the internet, multimedia production, social sharing and navigating interactive e-books.

It is a no-brainer to tap into these skills and allow technology to be the game-changer educators, researchers and some parents say it can be in how we teach and how children learn.

To be successful, an online reading aid for the delayed older reader should incorporate the following:

- A reward system that builds confidence: Delayed readers are generally anxious about reading because of the pressure exerted at school and at home to learn to read. Setting goals and celebrating every small success is

important.

A system tailored to the reader's needs:

Each delayed reader has their own set of reasons for struggling with reading. Technologies that can cater for these needs and reward children for working on errors, tend to be much more efficient in improving reading skills.

- The intervention needs to be intensive and accessible:

Look for a programme that involves repeated reading as a technique with an incentive to re-read. By repeating passages, children become fluent, learning from their own errors and becoming less anxious as the material becomes more familiar.

However, the content must be interesting and language-rich as we do want our children's language skills to improve through reading. Learning behaviours should be rewarded – points, graphs, certificates – all of these work well.

- The programme must work on the meaning of words:

Steadily building vocabulary should be a distinct aim as vocabulary is one of the strongest predictors of later academic success. There must be a way to check that the programme can measure understanding of the text.

- Technology gives flexibility but it must be monitored:

Parents who leave a delayed and reluctant reader alone in front of a screen are not doing much to encourage reading. It is important for parents to make using these tools a collaborative and fun time. We need to choose the best person for the job. This must be a person who has time to devote to the exercise, is patient and has good reading skills. The reading partner can be anyone older than the reader – an older sibling, an aunt, a grandparent, an aftercare teacher at school or an older peer.

In this case, online tools allow parents the flexibility of knowing that the reading is being done – especially if they are involved and can check on the records. Technology has become portable so your child can keep up his/her reading even during the holidays.

Our objective should be to create readers who are happy to read alone and understand what they are reading. With a bit of commitment and interest, parents can wire up their children's brains for reading – setting the stage for future learning and academic success.

- *Elizabeth Nadler-Nir, Executive Director and inventor of the Virtual Reading Gym*