



Tips to Support Reading and Writing for Children with Significant Disabilities

Research has been done on how best to support learners with significant disabilities so that they can improve their reading, writing, and communication skills. The tips shared here are based on this research and will offer ideas on how to encourage your son or daughter to read and write.

1. Read to your son or daughter.

Read to your child as if they can understand you and have the ability to learn from the language you use with them. The only way any learner with significant disabilities, including children, will learn language is if they are exposed to it.

“One of the greatest predictors of literacy success is time spent actually reading. Simply said, the more a learner reads the better readers they become.” (Allington, 2006; Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988)

This means you should read to your child as much as possible, even more than you think they need. Children with significant disabilities are often behind in reading, writing, and communicating because of the amount of time given to their many medical and physical needs. To bridge the gap, they need an environment in which people are reading to them and talking to them about the things going on in their world.

2. Ensure children have a method to communicate.

Everyone needs a voice. This is especially important for children with significant disabilities. In order to develop language, learners need to have a way to express themselves. There are many tools to help children communicate. Contact PACER’s Simon Technology Center to learn about what options are available to help your child (PACER.org/stc/library).

Once you identify a communication system or device that works, show your child how to use the device. This will help your son or daughter become better at using it and develop his or her voice. A simple strategy you can use is called **C.A.R.**

- Comment – Make a comment and then wait five seconds.
- Ask – Ask a question and then wait five seconds.
- Respond – Respond by adding more details.

3. Every child needs a way to write.

For some children, a traditional pen or pencil will work. For others, an electronic pencil or a keyboard makes more sense in today’s technological age. Children with significant disabilities may need to find a different way to compose and write. There are many devices that can serve as alternative pencils, including an eye gaze alphabet system, a word prediction program, or a portable keyboard. Check with PACER’s Simon Technology Center for more information on a variety of alternative pencils at PACER.org/stc/library.

“Every learner needs to write about something that is personally meaningful to them.” (Allington, 2012)

Have your son or daughter write for concrete reasons. Set them up with an e-mail pen pal, have them write books for family members, or use another creative idea for writing on a subject your son or daughter is passionate about. Try not to become sidetracked by correcting what he or she has written. Instead, let your child see positive models of what good writing looks like and help develop enthusiasm for writing in general. Once the learner has written a whole page of text, then begin working on the mechanics of writing, which can best be taught in mini lessons.

Be positive and have high expectations. Children with significant disabilities can gain important skills to improve their ability to read, write, and communicate.