

Affect and Adolescents with Severe Reading Disabilities

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Putting ourselves in the shoes of our “learning disabled” students is the only way we can begin to appreciate how they feel and why they might occasionally act out.

Welcome to school, Billy! Are you ready for another day of failing? Excellent!! At 9:00 you'll fail at reading. At 10:30 you'll fail at language arts. At 11:00 you'll fail at social studies, and at noon you'll hit a kid on the playground who teases you about failing and then spent the afternoon in the principal's office.

Motivation and emotion are perhaps the most important aspects of working with students with moderate to severe reading disabilities (especially adolescents), yet they seem to be given the least amount of attention. Motivation is related to the desire to read and the emotional components of reading (or not being able to) **AUTH: SOMETHING MISSING HERE?.** This article describes the impact of affect and delineates fourteen strategies that can be used to help adolescents with severe reading disabilities.



Emotions

We think, learn, and emote with the same brain. Thus, it's silly to think that emotions would not be a factor in students' ability to learn. Positive emotional experiences can enhance and promote learning, while negative emotions can disrupt and prevent learning (Hinton, Miyamota, & Dell-Chiese 2008; Machazo & Motz 2005; Sousa 2011).

Understanding

Try to understand what it must feel like to be an adolescent with a reading disability. These students have no choice but to go to school where they experience failure, frustration, and humiliation every day. Since they were in first grade they have failed in a very public way. Every class for their last six to ten school years that had a required read-



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ing assignment was a reminder of what they were *not* able to do.

Students with severe reading disabilities are often given the not-too-subtle message that they were not very smart or that they were unable to learn. This is certainly not the case. All humans can learn. Learning is part of the human condition. This is what helped our species evolve. Without the ability to learn we would still be walking around trying to poke woolly mammoths with pointy sticks. Students with severe reading disabilities *can* read; they just can't read very well. Their brains have more difficulty processing certain types of information; in this case it is the squiggly symbols on the page. In the same way it is very difficult for some people to sing in tune or match pitches. Their brains also do not process certain types of information, in this case sounds.

We all have trouble processing certain types of information. (In my case it would be my wife's nonverbal cues.) This does not mean we are not smart or capable of learning. In fact, I am uncomfortable with the term, "learning disability" because it's not at all accurate. All humans can learn. Human brains naturally try to make sense out of the data presented to it. A more accurate term would be, "learning-certain-kinds-of-things disability" or "learning-the-way-schools-want-you-to-learn disability" or "learning-school-things disability," or in this case, reading disability.

Try to imagine what it must feel like to have a reading disability. Think of a time in your life when you were a less able learner, where you just could not learn something. It may have been a sport, music or a musical instrument, tap dancing, algebra, statistics, physics, a foreign language, philosophy, or art. What did it feel like when everybody else seemed to catch on and learn easily while you did not? Were you motivated to come to class? Did you want to continue? Were you inspired to practice outside the teaching session? Did you enjoy doing what you could not do? Only by putting yourself in this situation can you begin to understand what students with reading disabilities feel like and why they might occasionally act out in class.

What do you do when you are frustrated? Image a time when you tried to do something but could not. Now try to imagine not being able to do that every

day with people watching and recording how much you could *not* do what you were trying to do. You can begin to understand why it is that students with reading disabilities shut down and sometimes put forth minimal effort and why they sometimes hate school. Who wouldn't? It is called *downshifting* and it is done for the protection of one's emotional stability. It's not that these students don't want to learn; rather, it's that they don't want to fail. And when failure is the only option available to them, they will do everything possible to avoid the activity or show you how stupid the activity was in the first place.

Before You Do Anything Else

In my work with adolescents with reading disabilities I have found that addressing the emotional component of reading and failing is essential before you can make any progress. And it should be reinforced every session. You need to say very directly to the student, "You have trouble reading. Not a big deal. It doesn't mean that you are dumb or cannot learn. It just means that you have trouble reading. Lots of people have trouble reading. We're going to see what we can do to make it better." This takes some of the pressure off.

Students also need to trust you. That means you have to establish some sort of relationship with them. Establishing supportive trusting relationships between teachers and learners has been shown to enhance all learning, including learning to read (Johannessen & McCann 2009; Roger, Peck & Nasir 2006; Van Ryzin 2011). Writing and sharing your own stories with your students is one way to begin to establish such a relationship. Relationships are also formed by listening. Pay attention to your students' interests so that you can create literacy activities that have meaning to them.

Value-Expectancy Theory

Theories do not predict behavior; rather, they help us understand behavior. The Value-Expectancy theory is one that can help us understand student behavior in terms of motivation (Anderman & Wolters 2006). This theory posits that students' motivation and achievement behavior is a result of their assessment of the value of the activity and their expectation of success. Put this theory in a mathematical equation and it looks like this: value x expectancy =

motivation. And just as in any multiplication equation, if one of the factors is zero, the product will be zero.

Value

Is the activity or skill perceived to have value by the students? Do they find it of worth? Do they see themselves as using the skill in their everyday life? Is it enjoyable? Is it meaningful? Are we doing anything to de-value the skill? There are four dimensions to value: attainment value, intrinsic value, utility value, and cost/benefit [ANDY, "benefit? --- ALSO NO DISCUSSION BELOW] (Schunk & Zimmerman 2006).

Attainment Value

Attainment value looks at the importance of doing well with the task. What is the value of attaining this skill? For example, students most likely have a sense of the utilitarian value of reading. They would like to be able to read and understand things. They also have a strong desire to use email, texting, and other forms of social media to interact and socialize using the printed word. This is of high importance to adolescents. We can enhance learning by aligning our curriculum to students' natural inclinations, curiosities, and developmental tendencies. For example, since communicating with their peers is very important, it would make sense to use this as the basis for adolescent literacy instruction.

Intrinsic Value

Intrinsic value is the amount of enjoyment derived from the task or skill. Do students find reading class interesting? Is reading enjoyable? It is very hard to value something that is meaningless, boring, and repetitive. Take a look at what often goes in the reading instruction of students with reading disabilities. It seems as if we do everything possible to make it uninteresting and painful. Reading instruction for students with reading disabilities is often a series of meaningless drills on reading sub-skills. This makes reading abstract and disconnected from the human experience — and incredibly boring.

In addition, it is hard to expect students to be motivated to read if they do not have something enjoyable and interesting to read. In working with adolescents with severe reading disabilities I have found that comic books and graphic novels make excellent

texts. The pictures make it interesting and help to carry the story. There is a lot of action, and there is minimal text to read on each page. And they can be downloaded to a computer, Kindle, iPad or other devices. You can find these online for minimal costs; however, make sure you preview comics or graphic novels first, as many are not kid-appropriate.

Students enjoy hearing what other students have to say. Student writing can be a good source of reading material. Students with severe reading disabilities often have trouble writing as well. You can use a language experience approach where students dictate their stories to you. Print these off or create a computer document that leaves room for students to illustrate each page. As well, there are many speech-to-print programs in which students speak into a computer to get written text. Save these stories. After a year you will have a library of interesting reading material for other students to read.

Utility Value

Utility value is the perceived usefulness of the tasks for other goals. Do students need to use the skill? Is it useful in any way? This is why in literacy classes we need to have students engaged in authentic literacy experiences in which students read and write for real purposes, just like we do in the real world. Authentic literacy experiences include reading for enjoyment or to get specific information or writing to record, organize, or convey one's thoughts and have real conversations about the books students have read and stories they've written. This is what we do as adults. We very rarely complete comprehension worksheets.



Expectancy

What do you think adolescents with severe reading disabilities have learned after six to eight years of reading instruction? I will tell you: Too often they have learned to fail. They have learned this lesson so well that they fail in most things related to literacy. Failure is not a great motivator. Nobody wants to do what they cannot do. Very few people want to be frustrated or embarrassed. Can you imagine a coach telling his or her team before a big game, "Okay team, let's go out there and fail miserably! Let's re-

ally embarrass ourselves in front of everybody this time! We can do it!"

So in terms of reading, do students with reading disabilities expect to ultimately succeed? We have a special term for this: self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief that you can accomplish what you set out to do. It is like the little train who said, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can..." before going up the big hill. Research supports the notion that self-efficacy is strongly related to achievement (Schunk & Zimmerman 2006; Sternberg & Williams 2009; Wigfield, Byrnes, & Eccles 2006).

Frustrating students is a sure way to extinguish any remaining motivation they may once have had to read. The theory of classical conditioning helps us understand why this is so. Pavlov's dog was conditioned to associate a bell with meat powder. Thereafter, every time the dog heard the bell it salivated whether or not the meat powder was present. In the same way, students learn to associate reading with frustration, failure, and humiliation. Thereafter, every time they encounter reading, they react negatively. Thus, you must keep instruction proximal, help students experience success, and make reading instruction as enjoyable as possible.

Strategies

Described below are fourteen simple strategies that can be used at home, in a general education classroom, or in a special education setting.

Teach Students about Reading Disabilities

A learning disability is not a thinking disability. Let students know from the start that having trouble learning to read does mean that they're dumb or cannot learn. There are many ways to be smart. (This is a good place to refer to Gardner's multiple intelligence theory.) They just have trouble reading. It's no big deal. This should be reinforced often.

Engage in Proximal Instruction

Too often, students with reading disabilities get frustrated by instruction that is too difficult for them. The result is that learned helplessness sets in like rigor mortis. Instead, instruction should be proximal. This means it should be in close proximity to their ability to do it independently. This instructional area, called the zone of proximal development, is just

ahead of students' independent level, where they can accomplish a task with a teacher's help. However, in order to be proximal you have to first get a sense of students' independent reading level. The San Diego Quick Assessment of Reading Ability¹ is a simple and pragmatic way to do this. This individually administered assessment is in the public domain assessment. It will provide a very general sense of students' reading level.

Experience Success

Every student needs to experience success. Experiencing success is a research-based strategy that serves to promote self-efficacy which is linked with student achievement. One way to do this is through various repeated reading activities (Johnson 2008). For example, find a short paragraph that is close to the students' independent reading levels. Students read the paragraph through three times. Their time is recorded after each attempt. Students are able to see their times improve with each successive reading.

Language Experience Approach (LEA)

The language experience approach is one of the best strategies to use for early readers and students with reading disabilities. Here the students uses the students' existing language and prior experiences to develop reading, writing and listening skills. You use their dictated work to practice reading. This enables students to practice reading using words, concepts, and experiences with which they are very familiar. Because it is built directly on their own personal experiences, LEA helps students make personal connections to what they read.

LEA can be used individually, in small groups, or as a class. Ideally, students should be able to see the words as you write. In a small group you may want to use a front board, overhead, chart, or a word processor with a projector. The last one is ideal because you can save these stories. For example, you might have a student tell you about what he or she did over the weekend. You write down what they tell you using words that are as close as what they actually say as possible.

Do you correct for grammar? Yes, in a very subtle and positive way. For example if Johnny said, "Yesterday we seen three deer in the backyard." You'd say, "Yesterday we saw three deer in the backyard."

You can also explain your use of grammar and punctuation as you write. For example, "This is the end of the idea. I need to tell the reader to stop. I better put in the period to use as a stop sign."

In the beginning stories should be from two to three sentences to a short paragraph in length. Again, you do not want to frustrate students. Students then read their LEA story through until they can do it fluently. It usually takes two to three attempts. This is a also good time to teach or reinforce letter sounds. For example, "I see a word with the *buh* sound at the beginning. Who can come up and point to that word?" Or, "Find the Long A word in the first sentence." (Instruction doesn't have to be complicated to be effective.)

You can create books to practice reading by collecting these LEA stories over time. Save them from year to year, or put them on a Powerpoint presentation. Students love to read the stories written by others their same age.

Choice

In the real world, when you and I go to a library or a bookstore nobody tells us what book we have to read. We get to choose. Why would we not want to offer students this same opportunity? Think about it: If a librarian or bookstore manager were to assign us the books we had to read, do you really think we would come back? Just like you and me, adolescents should be able to choose the books they want to read. In the classroom, this does not mean total choice all the time, but neither does it mean no choice any of the time. The goal is to provide as much choice as possible while still maintaining academic and curricular goals.

Choice also means enabling students to choose to stop reading a book that doesn't hold their interest. We do not force ourselves to read a book that we find boring, irrelevant, or too hard to read. If we really don't like a book, we go find another that we do like. This is what keeps us coming back. If we were forced to read what we did not like to read, very few of us would ever read. This also means that you must have high quality reading material available for students to read. For adolescents reading at the first or second grade level, this becomes something of a challenge. High/low books² can be used with these students. These are books that are high interest with a low

reading level. These books are usually written at the second or third grade level but with topics that might interest somebody in 6th through 12th grade.

Scaffolded Oral Reading

Scaffolded oral reading (ScOR) enables students to access books that may be too advanced for them. This strategy helps students develop reading fluency and word recognition skills. First, find an interesting book. Always ask students after the first page or so, "Do you want to keep reading this one, or should we find another?" This empowers the student and helps you get a sense of the types of books students like.

If the book has illustrations or pictures (comic books and graphic novels) ask the students to look at these first. This provides a sense of context and makes reading easier. If you are working with one student, watch their eyeballs as they scan the page to see when they're ready to start reading.

Then, both you and the student (or students) should read aloud. You should strive to push the pace slightly. Do not worry if a student mispronounces a word or demonstrates other reading miscues. The goal here is to enjoy the book, develop neural pathways, and enhance word identification skills using the three cueing systems (phonological, semantics, and syntax).

Finally, pause occasionally and engage the student in conversation related to the book. Ask appropriate questions and try to make personal connections to the student's life or experience.

Reading Comic Strips

Look for comic strips that can be used to practice reading. The advantage of comic strips is that they are short (look for three to four panels), visual (students can use the pictures to help them recognize words), and they tend to be entertaining. Look for an ongoing series in the newspaper. You can also find comics online to read on an iPad or computer. I use a lot of Beetle Bailey, Garfield, Wizard of Id, and Family Circus. We use ScOR for these. At the end students are asked, "Why do you think this is funny?" This is a very quick way to informally assess comprehension. It also allows you to explain the joke if they do not get it. Finally, I have students numerically rate the humor value of the comic strip. This is a simple way to extend the conversation around the comic

strip and it empowers students to be able to not like something. You'll know you are having success when students start reading comics on their own.

Dear Abby

Dear Abby or other advice columns can be good for reading practice and motivating students. These are generally short and deal with real life issues. Use ScOR with these and always ask students what they think before reading Dear Abby's reply.

Goal Setting

Set some goals that are small and attainable at first. You can extend these later, but students need to experience success early on. They need to see that their effort has some sort of results. Some examples of initial goals you might use for students with severe reading disabilities might include the following:

- Ask students to send two weekly emails.
- Do five timed reading activities during the week with a parent or friend.
- Practice sight words with a parent or friend five times during the week.
- Find one interesting comic strip to share each day.
- Find one interesting website to share each week.
- Listen to a recorded book while following the printed text for ten minutes at least five times a week.

Practice

You learn to play the piano well only by daily practice. This is the way you develop those neural pathways and create new neural networks. You get better at playing tennis, baseball, dance, or whatever by daily practice. Let students know that it is the same with reading. However, keep reading practice short. It is much better to have a 10-minute practice five times a week than a 30-minute practice twice a week. Keeping it short makes it more likely students will come back. Home practice sessions could involve LEA, ScOR, practice on sight words, or a scaffolded writing activity.

Scaffolded Writing Activity

Reading helps you write better. Writing helps you read better. Students are motivated to write when they can select writing topics and express their ideas. Scaffolded writing activities (SWA) are short easy ways for students to express their ideas that can be used as part of home reading practice. First, talk with students about what they might want to talk or write about. Initially students often have trouble selecting topics initially so you may need to help them. Ask something like, "What do you want to tell me about what you did this weekend?" When they say something, respond with something like, "Great. Let's get that down on paper."

Next, ask students to say outloud the first sentence they will write. This reinforces a sense of syntax. Then ask them to write the first sentence in a notebook. Have them skip every other line. Tell them not to worry about spelling as they write, just get the ideas down.

When they complete the sentence, ask them if there are any words that do not look right. Here you are reinforcing spelling and letter patterns. Students usually have a pretty good idea which words aren't spelled correctly. As you identify the words, write the correct spelling on top of the word. Ask students to then write the correct spelling underneath the word. Cross out the misspelled word.

Finally, when their paragraph or series of sentences is complete, ask students to read what they have written. Use your finger to help guide them. They should read their paragraph or sentences through until they can do so fairly fluently. Students usually need between two and three attempts here.

SWA enhances phonological awareness, awareness of letter patterns, syntax, writing skills, and word recognition. Keep it simple. Initial paragraphs should be two to three sentences long. Gradually expand the length when students are ready.

More Short and Less Long Readings

Keep individual reading activities short and briskly paced. You are more likely to keep students motivated and engaged if you do a series of short activities rather than one long one. Remember, like athletes and physical stamina, that students need to build their cognitive stamina. For home practice ses-

sions, have parents use one or two activities for ten minutes a day four or five times a week. This can be expanded slightly as the student's stamina increases.

The same is true for in-school practice or tutoring sessions. Instruction should be brief and quickly paced. A series of shorter activities is better than one or two longer ones. When I work individually with adolescents, my weekly sessions last from 40 and 50 minutes. If improvement is to occur, there must be practice and reinforcement during the week at home or as part of that student's wider curriculum.

Social Interaction

Students, especially adolescents, are motivated when they can work in groups, communicate with each other, or have some sort of social interaction as part of instruction. Instead of doing everything we can to keep students silent, isolated, and passive, our students would be better served to step into the energy. Adolescents naturally want to talk, interact, and push boundaries. Teaching is much easier and learning is greatly enhanced when we plan learning experiences that are aligned with students' natural tendencies and interests. Use text messaging, Facebook, and email to reinforce reading and writing. Create cooperative learning activities in which readers who are struggling can still be successful.

Try to create conversations around books and writing. A quick and simple way to create a conversation is to evaluate a book, story, comic strip, or comic book. You can have students simply provide an overall rating (like a moving rating). Doing this in a small group and then also having students explain their ratings further expands the conversation. You might also identify three or four criterion and ask the students to rate the story by each criterion. With adolescents who are struggling readers I find it helpful to start with movies and then move on to text.

Harmony

Learning is effortless when we are able to create experiences that align with students' natural desires and inclinations. First, adolescents want to communicate. Go with the flow. Encourage emails, tweets, text messaging, and other forms of social media that use writing. Even if students spell the words incorrectly, they are practicing listening for letter-sound associations as they write and they are reading and

responding to the messages of others. Second, look for games and videos that have small amounts of text in them. And finally, practice reading using online comic books. These can be very effective resources to entice adolescent students with reading disabilities to read. They usually have very interesting illustrations, lots of action, and minimal dialogue. (Make sure you preview comic books before you use them with students.). And even if students are not able to recognize all the words, they can use the sequence of pictures to help them carry the story along. Eventually they will begin to use more letter- and word cues than picture cues.

Final Thoughts

Research has shown that there is no single program that works best for all students who are struggling to learn to read (Allington 2012; Wharton-McDonald 2011). However, all programs or approaches must attend to the affective element for students to achieve their highest levels of success.

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Notes

1. The San Diego Quick Reading Assessment is available online at www.senia.asia/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/San-Diego-Quick-Reading-Assessment.pdf.
2. High/low books are available online at www.capstonepub.com/category/LIB_PUBLISHER_CAP.

Caring for people with severe mental and physical limitations becomes vastly harder as they get older. Some parents believe medically stunting them is the answer " but is it ethical? To begin to understand why a parent would choose to disrupt the growth of a child, it helps to know what goes into caring for someone with severe disability. Sandy Walker was a member of the Seattle Growth Attenuation and Ethics Working Group, a panel of concerned parents, medical experts, scholars and bioethicists who developed ethical and policy guidelines for health professionals. Children and adolescents with reading disabilities experience a significant impairment in the acquisition of reading and spelling skills. Given the emotional and academic consequences for children with persistent reading disorders, evidence-based interventions are critically needed. The present meta-analysis extracts the results of all available randomized controlled trials. The aims were to determine the effectiveness of different treatment approaches and the impact of various factors on the efficacy of interventions. Adolescents are vulnerable to emotional and physical issues. Learn the common problems during adolescence and how parents can help their children solve them. 11. Aggression and violence. Aggression is especially a concern with adolescent boys. Young boys start to develop muscles, grow tall and have a coarser, manly voice. In addition to that, they are moody and vulnerable and can let others get under their skin. Adolescent boys can get into fights at school. Worse, they could start bullying others, which is a major problem that adolescent boys and girls have to deal with. Boys may fall into bad company and be drawn to acts of violence, vandalism, and aggression. They could be easily swayed to own or use a firearm or a weapon too. Mental Retardation Social Skill Intellectual Disability Intellectual Disability Developmental Disability. Emotional and behavioral problems in children and adolescents with and without intellectual disability. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 43, 1087-1098. PubMedCrossRefGoogle Scholar. Promoting the social acceptance of young children with moderate-severe intellectual disabilities using cooperative-learning techniques. American Journal on Mental Retardation, 107, 352-360. PubMedCrossRefGoogle Scholar. Reading difficulties occur on a continuum, meaning that there is a wide range of students who experience reading difficulties. There are those students who are diagnosed with a reading-related disability but there is an even larger group of students (without diagnoses) who still require targeted reading assistance. When a student has a reading-related difficulty " whether he or she has been formally identified as having a disability or not " the key is to