

CHAPTER 5

USING READING EVALUATIONS

Once the reading evaluation is finished and a report developed, the reading specialist usually meets with the parents and the child's teacher to discuss the evaluation's results and its recommendations.¹

No doubt you will have many questions about the evaluation. What does it mean? Is it accurate and complete? What do its technical terms mean? Will its recommendations work? What can you do if you're unhappy with it? The suggestions below will help you answer these questions and use the reading evaluation to plan a program to markedly improve your child's reading.

UNDERSTANDING AND EVALUATING THE EVALUATION

The key to understanding and evaluating the evaluation is asking questions and making requests, *before and after* the evaluation is finished. The previous chapter focused on before; this chapter focuses on after.

Suggestion 1: Try to Understand the Evaluation—What Does It Mean? Ask questions, lots of them, until you fully understand what the reading specialist found and recommends. For example, if he and other school personnel use abstract technical terms to describe your child's difficulties, ask for straightforward definitions and simple, concrete examples. This isn't a sign of ignorance; it's a sign of intelligence.

Why? It's unlikely that you have a graduate degree in reading disabilities. Furthermore, different professionals use different terms to describe reading disabilities (e.g., dyslexia, hyperlexia, auditory dyslexia, visual dyslexia) and stages of reading development (e.g., logographic stage, stage of controlled word recognition). No set is universally accepted. Often, terms used by reading specialists, such as automaticity and strategic reading, are foreign to teachers. Thus, it's quite possible that your child's teachers don't understand the reading specialist's terms, but won't ask questions for fear of looking ignorant. So ask questions—questions lead to answers, which lead to better understanding, decision making, and action.

Questions also give you an opportunity to see if the reading specialist can explain his findings and their implications in explicit, straightforward ways and can give you examples that clarify whatever you find abstract, difficult, or just plain confusing. If he can, great—it inspires confidence. If he can't, and if he talks in roundabout ways, throwing in lots of jargon, be suspicious. He may have lots of words, but little knowledge.

Suggestion 2: If Necessary, Ask the Reading Specialist for Straightforward, Written Answers to Your Original Questions. If the reading specialist's written report did not directly answer all your original questions, such as those listed near the end of chapter 4, ask for a written addendum that answers them. Asking may reveal that he failed to gather the necessary information or think about the questions, and needs to do so.

If the reading specialist wants to provide only oral answers to questions his report failed to address, politely, respectfully, and firmly request written ones. If answers are oral, everyone

will suffer from the natural inadequacies and tricks of human memory—they'll forget, they'll manufacture new memories, they'll act as if they listened to different evaluations. In all likelihood, this is not feigned or dishonest; it's just human memory expressing its limitations.

Moreover, you may eventually need a complete written report for other reasons, such as coordinating instruction with a private tutor, requesting special education eligibility, or, if your child becomes eligible for special education, developing an educational plan.²

Suggestion 3: If Necessary, Ask the Reading Specialist for a Chart that Lists Your Child's Listening Comprehension Level and Her Three Critical Reading Levels: Instructional, Independent, and Frustration. If you remember, chapter 4 recommended that before the evaluation you ask for a levels chart. Such a chart is critical. It's critical because it's a clear snapshot of what your child can do and what will frustrate her. In paragraphs, levels are easily overlooked; in charts, they stand out.

Thus, if, for any reason the reading specialist's report does not include a levels chart, ask him to revise his report to include one and to give you one at your meeting. Having the chart in hand at your meeting will help you to ask better questions and make better decisions.

Once you have a chart of your child's listening and reading levels, ask the reading specialist to explain their meaning. His explanations should conform to those below. The answers should inspire confidence or concern.

Generally, levels explain what your child can comfortably do and what frustrates her. If, for example, her instructional level for listening comprehension is 5th grade, she can usually understand 70% to 90% of 5th-grade materials read to her; probably, she'll understand 4th-grade materials even better. Sixth-grade materials, however, will frustrate her. In many respects, 5th-grade materials would be perfect for listening—they would challenge her just enough to interest her and advance her learning.

Similarly, instructional-level reading materials will challenge but won't frustrate your child. They're materials she'll succeed with and learn from—*if* her teachers provide direct instruction and ongoing support, and *if* she makes a moderate effort to succeed.

Independent-level materials are easier—they offer little word identification or comprehension challenge. Because they're easy, your child can focus most of her energy on the assignment's objective instead of struggling to identify words or unlock basic meanings. And, as the name suggests, when she has to work independently, doing homework or classwork, materials should be at her independent level.

In contrast, your child should not be asked to read materials at her frustration level. Frustration-level materials, as the name suggests, will frustrate her. Regularly assigning such materials to her will perpetuate struggle and failure, likely destroying her motivation, even if teachers provide frequent feedback and support.

Now comes a warning, one that sounds technical, unnecessary, and perhaps intimidating. As technical as it sounds, it's important. Here it is. When discussing the levels, make sure you get an answer to this question: Did the levels come from a norm-referenced test or an informal reading inventory?³

Here's the reason. Many reading and learning specialists find children's listening and reading levels by testing them on short, often unrelated items, to see how they compare to other children instead of seeing how well they've mastered common materials used in different grades.

The tests used to compare children to one another are usually standardized, norm-referenced tests; they report scores called grade equivalents. Although these tests produce other scores, grade equivalents are perhaps the most common scores reported, and also the most misleading. They appear to indicate what children can do—but they don't. They often exaggerate progress. For example, if your child earns a grade equivalent of 3.2 on a standardized, norm-referenced reading test, she may not be able to read 3rd-grade books. This is not a typo: We said she may not be able to read 3rd-grade books. In essence, grade equivalents fail to answer these questions:

- To make meaningful progress in reading, and to develop confidence (or self-efficacy) for reading, what level materials should teachers use to teach my child how to read (instructional-level materials)?
- What level materials should teachers assign my child when she works independently (independent-level materials)?

To answer these questions, reading specialists should administer tests that have children read graded passages, such as passages equivalent to those in the 3rd- and 4th-grade books used in your child's classes. In addition to administering such tests, called informal reading inventories (IRIs), the specialist should have your child read from books at different grade levels and observe her reading and completing assignments in class. With this information, you and her teachers will have a fairly good idea about materials that will moderately challenge, not frustrate her, that will strengthen her confidence, not destroy it.

So, ask for a chart of your child's listening and reading levels and ask how the levels were derived. To see if instruction is appropriate and to monitor her progress, to help her *beat the odds*, this information is critical.⁴

Suggestion 4: Ask How the Results of the Reading Evaluation Reflect Your Child's Response to Intervention (RTI) Performance. If your child was in an RTI program, she should have received several weeks or more of instruction that assessed her ability to gain from scientifically-based reading instruction. Moreover, her instruction should have been frequently monitored to accurately assess her progress so that you and school staff could see what did and didn't work.

When such instruction is well designed and well monitored, it can offer information that improves the value of an evaluation and the effectiveness of its instructional recommendations. RTI data may, for example, indicate that your child was motivated by frequent, positive comments that focused on her effort, but not by competitive games; that she liked reading and listening to stories, but not nonfiction; that she made good progress in word identification

when instruction emphasized word families (like /ack/: back, hack, lack), but poor progress when it emphasized the sounds of individual vowels (like the short sound of /a/) and vowel combinations (like /ea/ or /oa/).

Given the value of well-designed and well-monitored RTI instruction, you and school personnel need to know how the RTI results compare to the findings and recommendations of the reading evaluation. If the evaluation and RTI are in conflict, and your child made good progress under RTI, go with what's already working—the RTI instruction. But if RTI instruction proved ineffective, and if the evaluation addressed the factors and questions listed in chapters 3 and 4, its findings, conclusions, and recommendations deserve respect. Keep in mind, however, that an educational evaluation can produce only hypotheses, hypotheses that require frequent and careful monitoring. This is the subject of chapter 7.

Suggestion 5: Ask How the Results of the Reading Evaluation Relate to Your Child's Performance on the State's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Tests. The NCLB requires schools to test virtually all children in reading and mathematics in grades 3 to 8 and once in grades 10 to 12 and to use each child's test results to identify learning problems and improve instruction.

If your child does poorly on the NCLB tests, the National Center for Learning Disabilities recommends that you ask the first two questions below. The third is ours:

- What support and remediation will be provided?
- How will classroom instruction be adjusted?
- How does my child's NCLB test performance compare to the findings of her reading evaluation?

Often, data from another source, like an NCLB test, can strengthen your request for services. In the case of NCLB, the school will be judged “in need of improvement” if too many children have problems with reading and the school fails to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Many news media and politicians refer to this as “failing.” For schools, “failing” can have severe consequences. Thus, if your child performs poorly on the State's NCLB test, the school may have added incentive to help her become a proficient reader.⁵

But, like much about reading disabilities, complications abound. Here's one. Jennifer Booher-Jennings reported that many schools, especially poorer ones, deny extra reading help to children with severe reading difficulties. Instead, these schools limit extra help to children who will likely pass the NCLB test if they get extra help. Because passing requires them to improve their scores only a little, they're called “bubble kids.” The reasoning is flawed and heartless: The top students will pass without extra reading help; the bottom ones will fail, even with help, so don't waste money on them.⁶ The only exception might be children in special education. If a child's Individualized Education Program (IEP)—a legally mandated document that describes her special education needs, her educational goals, and the services she'll get—specifies extra reading help, by law, the school must provide it.

Here's another complication. In many States, children who fail the State's NCLB reading test must repeat the grade. In the long term, retained children—even if they repeat only one or two grades—continue to suffer academically; moreover, if they're retained in elementary school, they're likely to drop out of high school.⁷ Retention is so traumatic that many children report they'd rather go blind.⁸ Unfortunately, in many States, once a child fails an NCLB test, parents have little say about retention. Thus, your best solution is to get your child the quality services she needs, as quickly as possible, to avoid this senseless, devastating threat.

Suggestion 6: If Necessary, Ask the School to Systematically Evaluate Any Behavioral or Emotional Difficulties Your Child May Have. Some struggling readers frequently have trouble paying attention, cooperating, following class rules, following class routines, getting along with peers; others are depressed or highly anxious. Some combine several of these characteristics. So ask the reading specialist if he saw indications of behavioral or emotional difficulties.

If he did, quickly get help. A reading evaluation is not enough. Ask the reading specialist to make a referral for an evaluation to the school's expert in working *with* teachers to help children improve their behavior or overcome emotional difficulties. In schools, the most effective interventions for improving behavioral and emotional difficulties stress the systematic and ethical use of behavioral principles, referred to as applied behavior analysis (ABA).⁹ Typically, the school's ABA expert is a school psychologist or special educator.

If your child does have behavioral or emotional difficulties, and they're not evaluated and addressed quickly, they can frustrate efforts to improve her reading. Her behavioral or emotional difficulties might make her an outcast in school, trigger an unnecessary referral to special education, or rise to a level requiring intensive psychological or psychiatric help. Fortunately, early, knowledgeable, skilled intervention, built around ABA, can often improve the situation—markedly.

Improving the situation should begin with a relevant evaluation by an ABA expert, an evaluation that identifies the immediate, direct causes of the problem and sets the stage for remedying it. Usually, the expert examines the child's classroom to identify what might provoke the difficulties. Often, the solution focuses on changing some aspect of the class, like the difficulty of assignments.

Let's take the hypothetical but typical case of Luci. She "cuts up in class." During reading, she habitually calls out, taps her pencil incessantly, and talks loudly to her neighbors. She continually disrupts the class and exhausts her teacher. Her parents and her teacher know why: It's logical—she doesn't want to read. Logical? Perhaps. But what if they're wrong? What if she's highly motivated to read? Working to increase her motivation will waste precious time, energy, and hope. To avoid this common pitfall of erroneous assumptions, her behavior needs to be systematically evaluated to identify what's motivating her to "cut up."¹⁰

To find out what's causing Luci to "cut up," the school's ABA expert evaluates her behavior.¹¹ He systematically observes her in class; interviews her, her teacher, and her parents; and rates or quantifies her behaviors.¹² This may be all he needs to develop a highly probable, educated

guess, or hypothesis, about what's causing the inappropriate behavior. The next step for him, her teacher, and perhaps her parents, is to plan and carry out a program to test the hypothesis. If the hypothesis says Luci needs to read easier materials, and easier materials solve the problem, further behavioral evaluations and interventions are unnecessary.

If easier materials don't solve the problem, and the reasons for Luci's behavior remain a mystery, the ABA expert needs to evaluate her more scientifically. In collaboration with her teacher, the expert needs to temporarily change or "manipulate" a few things in her class to identify the immediate, environmental causes of her behavioral difficulties.¹³

Changes might include giving Luci even easier materials to read, giving her fewer materials to read, shortening the time she spends on seatwork, simplifying directions, moving her to the front of the room, seating her next to students she likes, visibly praising nearby children for cooperating, frequently praising her for cooperating, frequently giving her valued rewards for following the class rules, letting her eat a snack, letting her take a 5-minute break during seatwork, letting her pick a study-buddy to work with, teaching her socially acceptable ways of asking for help. This process—systematically making and testing changes to identify the immediate causes of behavioral difficulties—is called a functional behavioral assessment (FBA). It's a problem solving approach, an experiment that systematically uses what's known about learning to identify immediate causes of behavior and resolve problems.

If knowledgeable, skilled professionals use FBAs systematically, and if the ABA plans derived from them are carried out faithfully, monitored carefully, and revised as needed, children's behavior and emotions often improve.¹⁴ And sometimes dramatically. So, if you suspect that your child might be having behavioral difficulties or is emotionally distressed, request that an ABA expert systematically identify the reasons.¹⁵ Often, the reasons are right there, but they're invisible. Part of the ABA expert's job is to make them visible (and manageable), so teachers and parents can address the right cause and solve the right problem.

Notice that the suggestions we made, like giving your child easier materials and frequently praising her for cooperating, are positive. Most interventions can and should be positive, which is far easier to do when you identify and address problems earlier rather than later.

Fortunately, schools and teachers have a wide array of positive behavioral approaches they can use to help children improve their behavior, such as teaching them to replace socially unacceptable ways of asking for help with socially acceptable ways. By carefully implementing and monitoring evidence-based approaches that address immediate causes, and emphasizing feedback that praises children for good effort and the correct use of specific strategies, ABA experts and teachers can help children replace destructive with constructive behaviors.

Although ABA is generally our first choice for school-based problems, we believe that counseling—if responsive to what happens in the struggling reader's classes—can help identify and solve the behavioral and emotional difficulties of some struggling readers.

Counseling should occur twice weekly, for 40 minutes per session. Please note that we specified the amount and frequency of counseling. Although there's no magic about "twice weekly, for 40 minutes per session," we did this to emphasize that many schools schedule counseling as little as once monthly for 20 minutes. If world-renowned counselors like Carl

Rogers, Sigmund Freud, or Virginia Satir counseled Luci for 20 minutes a month, without a miracle, counseling would fail. With a miracle, it still might fail.

For the counselor to begin understanding Luci's problems and for counseling to work, not only must the counselor be knowledgeable, skilled, and liked by Luci, but the sessions need to be long enough and frequent enough for the counselor and Luci to get to know one another and to adequately discuss the issues, without losing continuity and momentum. Also, for counseling to work, both diagnostically and therapeutically, it will probably require the counselor to periodically observe Luci in class, help her teacher modify instruction, help her parents properly reinforce her, and consult with her teacher and parents to ensure that everyone responds to her in a consistent, supportive manner that strengthens her self-confidence and prevents confusion.

All that said, if you believe your child is having behavioral difficulties or her reading is causing her emotional distress, ask for an ABA evaluation. If the school refuses, ask for a counseling evaluation. If the school refuses both, and she's not eligible for special education under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004* (IDEA-2004), or you think their evaluation was poor, seek outside help from an expert, such as a clinical psychologist, clinical social worker, or special educator *with extensive knowledge of schools and applied behavior analysis*. If such an expert is unavailable, seek help from a counselor with extensive knowledge of schools, instructional modifications, and struggling readers. Don't wait.

INSTRUCTIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Instructional recommendations are a critical part of reading and learning evaluations. In fact, using evaluative data to develop precisely targeted recommendations is a main reason for evaluating children.

The recommendations should be practical and powerful. Practical means they can be implemented in a quality way. Powerful means they can markedly improve your child's reading.

Suggestion 7: Ask the Reading Specialist Why He Thinks His Instructional Recommendations Will Work. Using particular approaches or strategies to teach a child during an evaluation is called diagnostic teaching. If possible, reading specialists should engage in diagnostic teaching. Without such teaching, recommendations are often guesswork, guesswork that may well be wrong. Again, questions can help. They can help you determine if the reading specialist engaged in diagnostic teaching and, if so, the results.

To determine why the reading specialist thinks his recommendations will work, we recommend that you ask him these questions:

- Did you teach my child using the approaches or strategies you're recommending?
- If so, how well did she respond? If not, why do you think they're likely to work?
- What does the research say about them? Can you share copies of the research?
- How will daily or weekly progress be monitored?

- What will the school do if, after a month of implementing the recommendations, progress is poor?

Unfortunately, it's often difficult or impossible for reading specialists to adequately engage in diagnostic teaching. In such cases, it's especially important to monitor children's progress.

Suggestion 8: Ask the Reading Specialist and Your Child's Teachers to Demonstrate How They'll Use Their Recommendations to Instruct Your Child. Simply put, this will tell you a lot about your child's program and might give you ideas about supporting her at home.

Many teachers and reading specialists would welcome such a request. Usually, demonstrating takes little time.

But some will resist. Resistance is telling: It tells you whether they care about helping your child and truly believe in parent participation. It's also suggestive. It suggests that they might not have the knowledge and skill to implement their recommendations.

Suggestion 9: Offer Suggestions for Instructing Your Child. After fully examining the recommended materials, approaches, and strategies, and attentively watching the demonstrations, feel free to comment on whether you think they'll work. Avoid absolute statements: "This won't work." Instead, share your reasons: "I don't think this will work because she struggled with a similar program that made her sound out individual vowels. Trying to sound out vowels confused her."

If, in addition to commenting, you feel comfortable making suggestions, make them: "Perhaps there are ways other than teaching her to use individual vowel sounds. Perhaps it might be better to teach her to use spelling patterns or word families. I read in a book by Caldwell and Leslie, two highly respected professors of literacy, that spelling patterns help kids who struggle with individual vowel sounds."¹⁶

Your suggestions may be particularly helpful, as you probably know a great deal about your child that school personnel don't.¹⁷ You know her history. You probably know if she'll like books about polar bears, if she's likely to succeed on the type of homework they're recommending, and if she'll work hard for gummed stars. Share your information. Make suggestions. Your child's reading specialist and teacher may welcome your insight, knowing it may well save them and your child from the frustrations of trial and error.

Suggestion 10: Assess if the Amount of Instructional Time is Adequate. Ask *if* and *why* the amount of time planned for direct, explicit instruction and for easy, interesting reading is sufficient for your child to become a proficient reader. The following guidelines offer perspective on how much reading instruction and other reading is needed:

Schedule sufficient instructional time to enable students to make more than a year's progress each year in all areas in which they are behind. For children who are behind, we recommend a morning language arts period

of 150 minutes, and if at all possible a 30- to 60-minute afternoon period. In addition, after-school and summer instruction should be scheduled for children who need even more extra instruction to reach grade level.¹⁸

As part of this, and sometimes in addition, your child should have plenty of opportunity to read materials she finds easy and interesting:

Organize the classroom so that students have lots of time to read. The general guideline is that students should do 45-60 minutes of easy reading every school day. The time can be broken up, with 15 minutes during a designated free reading time, 7 minutes during a break in activities, and so on. But students do not learn to read unless they read a lot. And they cannot get better by reading difficult material. This is especially so for struggling readers. Therefore, students must have lots of time to read easy materials without interference from us and without focusing on skills or strategies.¹⁹

This is a lot of time. Many school personnel will say it's unrealistic. But without such time, it's likely that progress will be poor. Thus, for your child to make adequate progress in reading, additional reading instruction may have to be added before or after school or during other periods. Less time may have to be allocated to other parts of the curriculum. Reading might replace English. Subjects like social studies may have to be modified so reading instruction is emphasized—knowledgeably, skillfully, and systematically—through social studies books and discussions.

If the school personnel planning your child's program don't realize how much time struggling readers need to spend reading, show them the quotes above. If you need more support, show them Richard Allington's book, *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers: Designing Research-Based Programs*. Chapter 2's title says it all: *What Really Matters: Kids Need to Read a Lot*.²⁰

Suggestion 11: Examine How Your Child's Program Components are Coordinated.

Unless the instructional recommendations and the other components of your child's program are coordinated, they're unlikely to work nearly as well as they should. Therefore, it's important to ask school personnel how everything will be *coordinated*, so that each part reinforces the others and gives your child sufficient practice, without prematurely introducing new strategies and concepts that might confuse her. A common acronym for coordination is ROCC: Struggling readers need a **R**ich, **O**rganized, **C**onsistent **C**urriculum.

When listening to their responses, listen for specific, concrete information, like "We meet every other Wednesday morning to jointly plan the upcoming two weeks." Be wary of vague generalizations, like "Oh, we follow the same curriculum, so we always know what's being taught."

If you get vague generalizations, ask specific questions, like these:

- How do you know if something was taught?
- How will you know if she mastered it?
- If she hasn't mastered it, how will you quickly coordinate efforts to help her catch up?

Remember that your questions have at least three purposes: To help school personnel develop a more appropriate and responsive program. To help you understand it. To help you gauge its potential effectiveness and, if necessary, influence it.

Suggestion 12: Ask School Personnel to Show You How to Reinforce at Home What Your Child is Learning in School. As we explain in the next chapter, at home you can help your child in many ways without becoming her teacher or tutor. For example, you can help her find pictures of ancient Rome, take her to story-hour at the library, read her a *Garfield Fat Cat* book, or praise her effort to complete homework.

In the long term, these actions can help your child immeasurably. They provide a foundation for a strong vocabulary and a positive attitude toward learning. In the short term, however, they're unlikely to help her unless they're carefully coordinated with what her teacher will soon teach or what's just been taught. So, it's important to ask her teacher what he'll be stressing over the next few weeks, and what he's just taught. It's also important to ask him to show you—not just tell you—how you can work with her at home to practice what he's already taught, in ways she finds enjoyable and motivating. Practice should emphasize knowledge, skills, ideas, and strategies that she's just about mastered. Although challenging, such practice should not prove frustrating.²¹

Reinforcing at home what your child is learning in school can also involve simple routines that over the years have proven effective. One is Topping's Paired Reading, a method that avoids teaching words or particular word identification strategies; instead, it focuses on practicing straightforward reading by having you and your child orally read together from the same easy reading material, such as a book that she's selected.

Here are a few more details. You stop reading aloud when she signals you to stop and you start again when she makes an error or hesitates on a word for five seconds. At this point, you say the word correctly, ask her to, and again begin reading together.

For Paired Reading to succeed, your child must select reading materials she can read successfully. With her teacher's help, this should be easy. Because Paired Reading creates success, your child is likely to find it enjoyable, therapeutic, and confidence-building.²²

As you might suspect, learning how to implement Paired Reading requires school personnel to discuss it with you, demonstrate it, role play it, and answer your questions. Fortunately, many schools know that it's highly effective in improving word recognition and fluency; therefore, they hold Paired Reading workshops for parents.

AN INADEQUATE EVALUATION

If you think your child's reading evaluation's inadequate, you probably won't sleep well at

night. So before you lose too much sleep, read the suggestions below. They suggest that you have the evaluation evaluated, request to observe your child in class, request an independent evaluation, or get a private evaluation.

Suggestion 13: Ask a Private or University-Affiliated Reading Specialist, One Without Financial Links to the District, to Evaluate the Evaluation. If you're unhappy with the answers you're getting—they're evasive, vague, contradictory, illogical, or dismissive—you may need to have the evaluation evaluated by a private, doctoral level reading specialist. You can find such a specialist by asking parents whose children have had reading problems, by asking your physician, or by searching the yellow pages. You can also search university websites for special education or reading faculty who regularly teach courses in reading disabilities or supervise the university's learning or reading clinic.

Fortunately, some university faculty are often quite generous with their time—they're often willing to volunteer an hour or so reviewing records and discussing your child's needs. For a modest fee, university clinics may be willing to review records (or evaluate your child), if they don't have conflicts of interest, such as contracts with your child's school.

A disadvantage of working with university faculty and clinics is that they may not be able to devote more than an hour or so to reviewing your child's records and evaluating the evaluation. Moreover, they're unlikely to meet with the school to discuss their findings.

In contrast, private reading specialists can usually devote whatever time is needed as they charge by the task or hour, which can be quite expensive. Once the private specialist finishes evaluating the evaluation, it may be a good idea for him to meet with you, the school's reading specialist, and your child's teacher to discuss his findings and recommendations. If he understands the law, as well as reading disabilities, and understands how to listen, develop trust, build rapport, negotiate, and problem solve, this may dramatically improve your child's program, her chances of succeeding in life, and your chances of getting a good night's sleep.

Suggestion 14: Ask to Observe Your Child in Reading and Related Subjects. Such an observation may provide you with critical, concrete information about your child's program and her reaction to it. Seeing and hearing gives you information you can't get from discussions or written reports. After your observation, ask yourself three questions:

- Did my child behave like she usually does?
- Did my child's reading and behavior match the findings of her reading evaluation?
- Is her teacher implementing the evaluation's recommendations in ways that will likely work?

Sometimes, school personnel don't want parents to observe their child's class, thinking their presence would dramatically change their child's behavior. If this is the case, ask the school to video her in reading and related subjects. Then together, in the school, you, the school's reading specialist, and your child's teacher can watch the video, with the specialist and teacher explaining what was happening.²³

If the school refuses to let you observe your child's class or observe videos of her in reading, it's not paranoid to ask yourself, What are they hiding? What are they afraid of? After all, your child's future is in their hands. Schools argue, even plead for parent involvement. But how can you be knowledgeably and intelligently involved if you can't see what's happening? In this situation, words without pictures don't suffice.

So, if this is your situation, consider asking the superintendent of schools for permission to observe, or having a private expert, whom you hire, observe. If the district is evaluating your child for special education eligibility, or if she's already eligible and you're involved in developing an Individualized Education Program (IEP), observations are usually allowed.²⁴

If, however, the district denies all observations, you have four options. One: Check with your State Department of Education. Ask them to send you the actual laws and portions of the State codes that govern parent observations. Two: Check your district's written policies; despite denial of your request, district policy may allow you to observe. Three: Hire an expert to evaluate your child. Often, schools will allow experts to observe as observations are critical to evaluations. Four: Hire an attorney who specializes in special education. But be careful: Some attorneys specialize in ten or more areas, meaning they don't specialize.

Suggestion 15: Ask the School to Pay for an Independent Evaluation. Independent evaluations are paid for by the district. They're a formal part of IDEA-2004, the Federal law that governs most of special education. Under IDEA-2004, you may formally request the district to pay for an independent evaluation—one conducted by a reading specialist, an ABA specialist, a school psychologist, or any other qualified professional who is not an employee of the district—if your child is being evaluated or reevaluated to determine her special education eligibility or to plan her program under IDEA-2004.

Under IDEA-2004, obtaining an independent evaluation is a formal process requiring you to show why the district's evaluation is inadequate. If you have solid reasons for thinking it's inadequate, and your child's being evaluated or reevaluated for special education, requesting an independent evaluation makes sense. It also makes sense if she's been receiving special education services for more than a few months, her progress has been poor, you requested an evaluation to identify barriers to progress, and you have solid reasons for thinking the evaluation is deficient.

The good news for both you and school personnel is that a highly competent professional evaluation can help everyone—it can improve everyone's understanding of your child's educational needs and the programs and strategies she needs to succeed in school. This can make school more productive and satisfying for her, for you, and for school personnel. In the long run, it can save schools lots of money by improving the effectiveness of instruction, thereby preventing the need for additional services.²⁵

Nevertheless, districts may challenge your request by filing for an impartial due process hearing. This is court—it can be bewildering, frightening, expensive, and labor intensive. Because a request for an independent evaluation can trigger a legal challenge, and because such evaluations can be critical to a child's academic, behavioral, and emotional success, you should carefully balance the pluses and minuses of pursuing this course. If it looks as if a

hearing will be required, it may be cheaper for you to pay for the evaluation. If you do, you can select any expert you want, not one the State or district must approve.

Suggestion 16: Have Your Child’s Reading Evaluated Privately by a Doctoral-Level Reading Specialist. This can be expensive, very expensive, especially if the specialist interviews teachers, observes your child in school, tests her, conducts diagnostic teaching, and meets with school personnel to discuss the evaluation’s results and plan the program.

So, if you have little trust in the school’s evaluation, including its recommendations, and if the school refuses to pay for an independent reading evaluation, should you have your child privately evaluated? If there’s no guarantee that your child’s school will do a good job implementing or even trying to implement the recommendations of a private evaluation, should you have your child privately evaluated? If there’s no guarantee that the private evaluation’s recommendations, if implemented well, will result in excellent progress, should you have your child privately evaluated? To all three questions, our answer is absolute—*yes*.

Here’s why: A good evaluation will help your child become a proficient, highly motivated reader. Without it, she has little chance. Moreover, many schools will do their best to implement the evaluation’s recommendations in a quality way. And if they resist, and your child is sinking or making little headway, at least you have information that might compel them to create an adequate program. Lastly, the evaluation will help to guide tutoring, any other help you provide her, and your future decisions.

Sounds reasonable, but what if you don’t have the thousands of dollars needed for a quality evaluation from a doctoral level specialist?

You have several options. One, seek an evaluation from a university reading clinic. They’re usually inexpensive. Two, seek an evaluation and tutoring from a graduate program that requires its graduate students—usually teachers studying to become reading specialists—to evaluate and tutor struggling readers as part of their coursework. Three, seek the help of a charitable service organization, like the Masonic Lodges, who have dedicated themselves to helping struggling readers.²⁶ Four, seek out an expert, tell him what you can afford, and ask for help. Asking for help is powerful, especially with many reading specialists, who entered the field because they want to help. You may be positively surprised by their caring and generosity.

We recognize that not having enough money to get what your child needs is stressing and, in our eyes, unfair. No doubt the educational system is unfair and hurts untold millions of children. We know the options in the previous paragraph are not as good as having the money to easily pay for a comprehensive, high-quality evaluation from a doctoral-level reading specialist. But they’re options, and they can work.

For more information on reading evaluations, we suggest you review chapter 4 and go to www.reading2008.com.

MONITORING

Recommendations from the best of evaluations are only educated guesses as to what will work with your child. They don’t always work; sometimes they backfire. Thus, it’s critical for you,

the reading specialist, and your child's teacher to think of ongoing monitoring of her progress as an integral part of her evaluation.

As we said in chapter 4, before the evaluation, request that its report include a monitoring plan. After the evaluation, when you, the reading specialist, and your child's teacher meet to discuss the report, definitely, definitely, definitely discuss how and how frequently monitoring will occur and how you'll be informed of progress. Monitoring is so important that all of chapter 7 is devoted to it.

The following suggestions focus on your meeting to discuss the evaluation's findings and recommendations.

Suggestion 17: When Discussing Your Child's Evaluation Report, Ask School Personnel How and How Frequently They'll Closely Monitor Her Progress in Reading.

Sadly, once programs get underway, monitoring is often ignored. This is a big mistake, as no one will know if the recommended program is succeeding. If it's not, if progress is poor, the longer she stays in the program the lower her chances of becoming a highly proficient, motivated reader.

Poor progress means two things. First, the obstacles to progress must be identified. Second, to eliminate them, her program must be modified or replaced by a new one, with perhaps a new teacher. But identifying and eliminating obstacles is unlikely to occur unless her program is carefully and continuously monitored.

Careful and continuous monitoring does not mean daily or weekly standardized testing. Instead, it means probing children's progress by sampling their performance once or twice weekly and charting it over time. Depending on children's reading problems, reading levels, and ages, probes might stress oral or silent reading. What's critical is that the school has good reason, reason based on research, to believe that the probes accurately measure small increments of progress and quickly indicate difficulties. In other words, the probes for monitoring progress are valid.

Here's an example of a valid, simple, quickly administered, twice-weekly reading probe that teachers can use to evaluate progress: Count the number of words the child reads correctly in one minute of oral reading, from new, slightly easier than instructional-level reading passages. Graph the information. If, after four weeks of instruction and eight oral-reading probes, the graph's progress line falls or slants below the expected-growth line, investigate what's blocking progress.²⁷ Instructional changes are probably needed. On the other hand, if the graph's progress line rises above the expected-growth line, enrich the program and increase the challenge. Although comparing progress and expected-growth lines may sound complicated, it's not. Pamela Steckler, Erica Lembke, and Laura Saenz illustrate—in clear, simple ways—how to do this. You can download their document for free. It's from the 2007 U.S. Office of Special Education Programs' Summer Institute on Student Progress Monitoring.²⁸

Here's another example of a valid, easy-to-administer reading probe that can be administered to groups of children: Have them silently read a passage with words missing and circle the missing words from short lists of words.²⁹ Calculate the percentage of correctly circled words.

Although simple, valid probes cannot fully diagnose problems, they can quickly warn of poor progress. Thus, this first step—frequently monitoring progress—is critical for ensuring progress.³⁰

Once the “how” and “how often” of monitoring have been agreed to, it’s time to ask “When will you send me the reports?” A satisfactory frequency is once weekly or twice monthly, depending on your child’s needs and progress. The report can be a simple form, with spaces for teachers to provide the necessary information.

Suggestion 18: When Discussing Your Child’s Evaluation Report, Ask Her Teachers to Send You Weekly Preparation and Progress Notes. Weekly preparation and progress notes can help you to coordinate your in-home support with your child’s in-class instruction.

For example, if the teacher e-mails you a *preparation* note saying that your child’s class will soon study ancient Rome, you and your child might watch and discuss videos about Rome. This gives you an opportunity to help her develop the background and vocabulary she’ll need to identify words and comprehend text. If the teacher sends home a *progress* note saying that your child focused and persevered for 35 minutes in reading, you might tell her that you’re proud of her effort. Your actions and comments—when tied to specifics—can add greatly to her success.

In an informal and non-threatening way, such notes help you to monitor progress. Usually, meetings to discuss the results and recommendations of a reading evaluation are a good opportunity to request preparation and progress notes.

If, however, you don’t know what’s happening in school, you’re unlikely to show the right videos or link encouraging comments to your child’s efforts. And making the link is not trivial—it’s critical, because it gives you credibility with your child, shows her that everyone is working in concert, and tells her that she’ll get the support she needs.

Fortunately, newspaper reports and self-serving politicians who paint teachers as lazy, uncaring hacks are usually wrong. Most teachers are dedicated professionals who strive to help children. Frequently sending preparation and progress notes home is an easy, efficient way for teachers to help you prepare your child for upcoming lessons and to monitor progress.

Suggestion 19: When Discussing Your Child’s Evaluation Report, Ask School Personnel to Schedule Monthly Meetings to Discuss Her Progress and How You Can Help at Home. These meetings should last from 20 to 50 minutes and should focus on your child’s progress, any difficulties she’s having, how the school can help to overcome them, and how you might help at home, without becoming her teacher or tutor.

To ensure all the important points are covered, distribute a list of your most important questions a week or so before the meeting. Everyone who will attend should have the list, which might look like this:

- How did Elly do on her twice-weekly reading probes? What is the trend?
- Is Elly having difficulty with anything? If so, what is the immediate cause?

What can be done to help her overcome this difficulty?

- Is Elly having success with anything? If so, why? What can be done to ensure that her success continues? What can be done to extend her success to other areas?
- Recently, what has Elly found motivating?
- Recently, what's been weakening Elly's motivation?

Yes, the list looks short. But it's not. Because a list like this can take a long time to discuss, limit your questions to what's most important. If the list is too long, you'll probably get frustrated by the rush to squeeze lots of information into little time. Ironically, a long list guarantees one thing: superficial, incomplete answers.

As we previously said, monitoring is so important that all of chapter 7 is devoted to it. It provides lots of suggestions for how you and the school can work together to effectively monitor your child's progress.

KEEP IN MIND

Keep in mind that, to a large extent, evaluating your child's needs in reading, planning her program, monitoring it, and requesting changes requires you to seek answers to practical questions. Basically, the questions we keep recommending you to ask fall into four broad categories:

- At what levels is my child functioning?
- What does she need to learn?
- To learn, what services and instructional approaches does she need?
- How do I know if progress is adequate?

But as we pointed out, you may not always have the knowledge to know if the school's answers are accurate and complete. This puts a tremendous burden on you, one that you can't escape, and one that you'll probably never fully satisfy, given the complexity of reading disabilities.

The burden: To learn all that you reasonably can about reading disabilities—how to instruct children with reading disabilities, how to monitor progress, how to quickly adapt or change ineffective practices and programs, how to support your child at home, and if she's eligible for special education, how to use the special education laws to meet her needs: academic, social, emotional, vocational, and recreational. To adapt one of diabetes education's main sayings, "the more you know about reading disabilities, the more likely your child will prosper."

Keep in mind that your burden is not unlimited. We described it as *all that you reasonably can* learn. We do not recommend that you study reading and learning disabilities 24 hours a day, sacrifice your family to it, or use this knowledge to become your child's key teacher or tutor. Instead, use your knowledge, and possibly the assistance of private professionals, to work with your child's school to plan her program, monitor it, make more informed and focused decisions, and perhaps get outside services, such as tutoring. And if necessary, use it respectfully—in an informed and rational way—to challenge poor or unsupported practices and recommendations.

To learn more about reading disabilities, visit our website, www.reading2008.com. It frequently updates information about the causes of reading disabilities, how to instruct struggling readers, how to motivate them, and how to monitor their progress.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ If your child is eligible for special education under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004* (IDEA-2004), the procedures are more formal and prescriptive. Other people, identified in the law, will attend the meeting. This is discussed in later chapters.
- ² If your child is found eligible under IDEA-2004, the plan is called an Individualized Education Program or IEP; if she's found eligible under *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973*, it's often called a 504 Plan.
- ³ Informal reading inventories are often called IRIs.
- ⁴ Although IRIs are important, they, like any test, only sample behavior. They need to be supplemented by the observations of knowledgeable teachers, and progress needs to be continuously monitored. As Marjorie Lipson and Karen Wixson so aptly said of IRIs, "In the hands of a skilled specialist, IRIs can provide a great deal of valuable information... [However], the key to successful placement ... is the use of multiple indicators of performance on materials comparable to those in which the student is to be placed (Lipson, M. J., & Wixson, K. K., 2003. *Assessment and Instruction of Reading and Writing Difficulty: An Interactive Approach* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon, p. 373).
- ⁵ Like all group-administered tests, NCLB tests have many problems; as such, they fall far short of what is needed to fully evaluate a child's reading difficulties. Thus, we recommend that you place more faith in a quality reading evaluation, planned and administered by a reading specialist, than in your State's NCLB test for reading.
- ⁶ Booher-Jennings, J., 2005. Below the bubble: 'Educational Triage' and the Texas Accountability System. *American Education Research Journal*, 42 (2), 231-268.
- ⁷ Shane Jimerson is one of the nation's leading experts on the effects of grade retention. In summarizing the research on retention, he and Amber Kaufman noted that long term, retention did not improve academic progress of retained students. Moreover, "retained students are between 2 and 11 times more likely to drop out during high school than non-retained students" (Jimerson, S. R., & Kaufman, A. M., 2003. Reading, writing, and retention: A primer on grade retention research. *The Reading Teacher*, 56 (8), 622-635, p. 626).
- ⁸ In their review of the literature, Shane Jimerson and Amber Kaufman reported, "By the time they were in sixth grade, children reported only the loss of a parent and going blind as more stressful than grade retention. This study was replicated in 2001 and it was found that sixth-grade students rated grade retention as the single most stressful life event, higher than both the loss of a parent and going blind" (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003, p. 627).
- ⁹ Many parents are afraid of the word behavioral, thinking it means mechanistic or uncaring. We agree with Paul Alberto and Anne Troutman that applied behavior analysis is strongly supported by research and if correctly and ethically implemented, emphasizes the humane: "Teachers who learn and practice the principles of applied behavior analysis can help their students master functional

and academic skills in a systematic and efficient manner and can document their students' progress for parents and other professionals. They can manage behavior positively so that their focus remains on learning. They can teach students to get along with peers and adults and to make good choices. By providing learning environments that are safe, joyful, and successful, they can make enormous differences in students' lives" (Alberto, P. A., & Troutman, A. C., 2006. *Applied Behavior Analysis for Teachers* (7th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall, p. 22).

- ¹⁰ Although this is an example of "cutting up," a child who is extremely quiet and passive in a class can have just as many problems. Quiet children, however, are often ignored, as they don't disrupt class. They too may need the kind of help discussed in this section.
- ¹¹ Some school systems have such specialists on staff; others hire them as consultants. As with any evaluation, if you think it's inadequate, you can request an independent evaluation of your child's behavior.
- ¹² An expert can have a degree in school psychology, special education, or a related area. But be careful: Few States have certification in applied behavior analysis. You want to be sure that the person has the proper training and a history of success in using applied behavior analysis. Listen carefully to his vocabulary and examples. If possible, compare his vocabulary and examples to books on applied behavior analysis.
- ¹³ This is often referred to as manipulating variables, or manipulating educationally-relevant variables.
- ¹⁴ Faithfully carrying out and monitoring the effects of an ABA plan is often referred to as fidelity.
- ¹⁵ At the sake of being repetitious, we want to emphasize that extreme shyness, passivity, and disengagement are behaviors that must be addressed by knowledgeable, skilled professionals. Just because the behavior is not disruptive does not mean it should be ignored.
- ¹⁶ Caldwell, J. S., & Leslie, L., 2005. *Intervention Strategies to Follow Informal Reading Inventory Assessment*. Boston: Pearson Allyn & Bacon, p. 59.
- ¹⁷ And they probably know a great deal about your child that you don't. After all, they have much greater opportunity to see how she responds in class and how she compares to her peers. Together, you and your child's teachers have clues to the mystery—how to help your child become a highly proficient, highly motivated reader who, with moderate effort, can successfully read more difficult books and complete more difficult assignments.
- ¹⁸ Carnine, D. W., Silbert, J., Kame'enui, E. J., & Tarver, S. G., 2004. *Direct Instruction Reading* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall, p. 320.
- ¹⁹ Duffy, G. G., 2003. *Explaining Reading: A Resource for Teaching Concepts, Skills, and Strategies*. New York: The Guilford Press, p. 6.
- ²⁰ Allington, R. L., 2005. *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers: Designing Research-Based Programs* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon/Merrill.
- ²¹ This means that you should not have the primary responsibility for teaching her new, complicated concepts, like understanding paragraph patterns or using study strategies, and that you should not be teaching her concepts or skills that she's struggling with in class, like dividing words into syllables.
- ²² For an excellent description and discussion of Topping's Paired Reading, see Tierney, R. J., & Readence, J. E., 2005. *Reading Strategies and Practices: A Compendium* (6th ed.). Boston: Pearson, Allyn & Bacon, pp. 245-248. Earlier, less expensive editions of this book also discuss Paired Reading.

- 23 Many schools would reject your request, arguing that videoing violates other students' privacy. We don't understand this logic; these are the same students you would see if the class put on a play for parents or you visited the class. Moreover, the school, not you, has the video; you're watching it for only a short time. Nevertheless, the school may be right. The laws vary by State. In New York and New Jersey, for example, Howard was unable to get a clear answer on the legality of videoing volunteer graduate students teaching in their classes. The best answer we can give to our suggestion—as non-lawyers—is that you make the request of the school and check with your State Department of Education. The reason for checking is that this may be a gray area and schools may give you the wrong answer.
- 24 Every child found eligible for special education must have an Individualized Education Program (IEP), a written plan with mandated components, including these: “(a) a statement of the child’s present levels of academic achievement and functional performance; (b) a statement of measurable annual goals; (c) a description of how the child’s progress toward meeting the annual goals will be measured and when periodic reports on the progress ... toward meeting the annual goals ... will be provided; (d) a statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services ... to be provided to the child, or on behalf of the child” (Public Law 108-446, IDEA-2004, Section 614). In order to accurately gauge “the child’s present levels of academic achievement and functional performance”—which is the foundation for everything else—assessment principles require observations. If the school prohibits observations, you might want to share with them these two quotes that emphasize the importance of observations: (1) “As part of an initial evaluation (if appropriate) and as part of any reevaluation ... the IEP Team ... must ... review existing evaluation data on the child, including ... classroom-based observations; and ... observations by teachers and related services providers” (IDEA-2004, 34 CFR § 300.305); (2) “Although much information can be obtained through talk and testing, no other single tool can provide such in-depth information about the learner’s actual use and application of knowledge and skill as observation. No other tool can demonstrate so clearly whether the reader is both skilled and motivated” (Lipson & Wixson, 2003, p. 100).
- In the preceding paragraph, we gave you the reference 34 CFR § 300.305. This refers to the regulations for IDEA-2004; 34 CFR stands for Title 34 of the Code of Federal Regulations; § stands for section, which in this case is section 300.305. You can download a copy of the regulations from our website: www.reading2008.com.
- 25 Over the years, ineffective instruction causes academic problems, or intensifies them, forcing districts to spend money on expensive remedial or special education services, services that children would not need had instruction been effective. For example, each child placed in special education because of ineffective instruction may cost districts an extra \$12,000; likewise, each child retained may cost an extra \$12,000.
- 26 The Masonic Lodges use the term dyslexia to describe struggling readers. Don't be upset by the word; it's ill-defined.
- 27 In this example, we used our own terms. Generally, what we call a progress line is called a trend line; what we call an expected-growth line is called a goal line.
- 28 Pamela Steckler, Erica Lembke, and Laura Saenz present a sophisticated and highly valuable set of procedures and decision rules for monitoring a child's reading and deciding if program changes

are needed. They illustrate, using simple terms and simple graphs, how to collect valid information about a child's progress, how to compare it to her annual goals, and how to quickly decide if program changes are needed. Their document, which is well written, easy to read, and illustrates numerous measures of progress as well as oral reading rate, can be downloaded for free and is worth studying. Here's the information you need: Steckler, P. M., Lembke, E. S., & Saenz, L., 2007. *Advanced Applications of CBM in Reading: Instructional Decision-Making Strategies*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Office of Special Education Programs; retrieved 8/20/07, from http://www.studentprogress.org/summer_institute/2007/Adv%20Reading/AdvancedCBMReading2007.pdf.

²⁹ This is called a maze or maze-fluency procedure.

³⁰ In the first edition of her excellent textbook, *Classroom Assessment for Students with Special Needs in Inclusive Settings* (2002, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall), Cathleen G. Spinelli clearly explains how to use and interpret these and other monitoring procedures. Spinelli's book is an excellent reference that you should keep handy. To save money without sacrificing quality, we suggest that you buy the first edition rather than the second. Although the second is more current, the first has what's needed.