

LITERACY

Question: What should be the role of the speech-language pathologist in reading for children and adolescents?

Answer: Dr Nickola Wolf Nelson (USA)



Some people question whether speech-language pathologists (SLP) have a role in reading and written language, but there are three key reasons why our role is essential and varied. They relate to the **nature** of language and literacy, the **needs** of children and adolescents, and the **number** of ways we can contribute. First, consider the **nature** of literacy. As Pamela Snow (2016) wrote, “Language is literacy is language.” Spoken and written language are reciprocal processes. That is, spoken language provides the foundation for written language learning; each feeds growth in the other; problems of reading and spoken language frequently co-occur; and instruction in one can result in growth in the other (ASHA, 2001). Second, consider the **needs** of children and adolescents with language disorders, spoken or written. Problems with the phonological and morphological structure of spoken language tend to be associated with problems of reading decoding and spelling encoding, which need to be treated together. Likewise, problems with understanding and expressing language using higher level vocabulary, syntax, and discourse structure tend to be experienced similarly whether language is spoken or written (Nation, 2019). Children and adolescents who experience either or both of these patterns of difficulties need inter-modality interventions to build associations across systems. Finally, consider the **number** of ways SLPs can contribute to meeting the needs of children and adolescents with language and literacy disorders. In addition to direct service roles, SLPs can consult with school districts about spoken-written language connections and can collaborate with teachers to integrate language intervention and language instruction using classroom-based approaches (Nelson, 2014). Additionally, SLPs can perform comparative assessments of spoken and written language (Nelson et al., 2016) that can inform inter-professional teams, including parents, about the best next steps, playing varied roles in the interventions that follow.

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Question: Are all reading problems dyslexia?

Answer: Dr Marleen Westerveld (Australia)

The ultimate aim of learning to read is to read for meaning. The Simple View of Reading (SVR; ref) poses that reading comprehension is the product of decoding and language comprehension, with the contribution of each component changing as children progress at school. During the early years, as children are learning to read, much of the variance in reading comprehension is explained by the child's ability to decode words. Once children have learned to accurately and fluently decode words, usually around the third or fourth year of schooling, language comprehension explains most of the variability in reading comprehension. Based on this SVR, children who struggle with reading comprehension can be classified into three main groups:

- 1) children with dyslexia (or specific word reading difficulties) are those who show significant decoding difficulties but show sufficient language comprehension skills. These children often have phonological processing difficulties (including phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming and/or phonological memory). It is estimated that 5-10% of children demonstrate dyslexia;
- 2) children with specific comprehension difficulties show adequate decoding skills but significant language comprehension difficulties. Children with this reading profile often demonstrate language comprehension weaknesses across vocabulary, grammar, and higher-order language skills such as oral narrative skills. Approximately 17% of children in school may show this type of reading difficulty.
- 3) children with a mixed reading difficulties profile are those children who show difficulties across decoding and language comprehension. Research indicates that about 30% of children who show difficulties in reading comprehension have this type of reading profile.

Detailed assessment of both spoken and written language skills is clearly required to better understand the nature of each child's reading difficulties. Gillon (2018) introduced the speech-to-print profile to describe the strengths and weaknesses in spoken and written language skills required for successful reading comprehension. Using this profile will promote collaborative practice and assist educators, speech pathologists and other professionals involved in the teaching of reading in creating a visual representation of a child's strengths and weaknesses to promote detailed goal setting and intervention planning to ensure reading success for all children. This process is described in detail in Westerveld, Armstrong, and Barton (2020).

References

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Question: Why is it important to focus on phonological awareness development in children who have speech and language disorders?

Answer: Dr Gail Gillon (NZ)

Children's phonological awareness ability (their awareness of the sound structure of words within their language) is critical to their early reading and writing success (Gillon, 2017), particularly in alphabetic languages. Children who enter school with speech and language difficulties are at heightened risk for persistent literacy difficulties (Lewis et al., 2019, McLeod et al., 2019). It is therefore important that these children's phonological awareness skills are developing in response to quality classroom instruction and speech and language interventions provided.

The aspect of phonological awareness that is most useful to focus on for children with speech and language difficulties is the phoneme level. For example, game activities that promote children's ability to identify the first phoneme in a word, to segment a word into individual phonemes, to blend phonemes to form words. It is more efficient in terms of treatment outcomes to integrate letter-sound knowledge within the phonological awareness activities. Culturally responsive approaches to phonological awareness interventions that acknowledge children's cultural identity through for example story and activity choices are encouraged (Gillon & Macfarlane 2017).

It is particularly important for children with speech and language difficulties that explicit instruction is provided to help these children transfer improved phonological awareness skills to the reading and writing process. Intervention trials have shown that is possible through an integrated intervention approach to improve speech, vocabulary, letter-sound knowledge and /or reading and spelling concurrently in young children that have speech and language difficulties (see references within Gillon, 2017). An integrated approach where children's speech or vocabulary target goals, for example, are included in phoneme awareness games helps maximise the efficiency of specific interventions (see the Better Start Literacy Approach website for video examples and free resources <https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/childwellbeing/betterstartliteracy/>)

A recent intervention trial in New Zealand (Gillon, et al, 2019) demonstrated the benefits of speech language therapist's co constructing phonological awareness and vocabulary interventions with class teachers in accelerating the early reading success of children who enter school with low levels of oral language ability. This study highlighted the important role speech-language therapists play in supporting preschool and junior school teachers strengthen the development of children's phonological awareness skills through quality language learning experiences.

References and resources

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University of Canterbury, Child Well-being Research Institute: Better Start Literacy Approach website <https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/childwellbeing/betterstartliteracy/>