

Enhancing Literacy Instruction for Students With Intellectual Disabilities

TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS



Current research in reading instruction indicates that children with intellectual disabilities (ID) can obtain higher reading levels than previously believed. Improved reading abilities can lead to independence, employment, and an improved sense of well-being in adults. The following 10 research-based tips are ideas educators and IEP teams should consider as they are planning literacy instruction for students with ID.

The content for this tip sheet originally appeared in *10 Research-Based Tips for Enhancing Literacy Instruction for Students With Intellectual Disability*.*

Read the full article with more detailed information on the tips listed below, and access a practical planning tool for literacy instruction here:

<https://tinyurl.com/10tips-literacy-instruction>

Ten Tips for Educators

1. Keep big-picture goals in mind

Starting even in early elementary education, consider long-term outcomes for students when planning reading instruction. Instruction should focus on building students' independence as readers and on providing opportunities to apply and generalize reading skills. Increasing access to reading materials that are of interest to students and providing instruction on how to gain meaning from texts is key to improving motivation and skills.

2. Set meaningful, measurable goals

When planning instruction, be sure to have a clear picture of the student's strengths and challenges in relation to essential reading skills. In selecting skills on which to focus, prioritize those that are most likely to affect a student's overall reading abilities, and to have a direct benefit—including immediate and longer term—on the student's life. Regularly monitor progress and goals. Adjust as necessary.

3. Provide explicit, systematic instruction

Teachers often are not provided with an appropriate instructional program and may be pulling from multiple sources. It is best to use one reading program as a base in an effort to provide instruction in a more systematic way. Teachers should use an "evidence-based program that provides explicit models, corrective feedback, scaffolding, reinforcement, and cumulative review as well as a focus on systematic instruction in phonological awareness and phonics skills." The instructional approach should be adapted to meet individual student needs.

4. Provide instruction with sufficient intensity to accomplish goals

Students should receive a sufficient amount of time participating in direct instruction in reading provided by highly qualified, trained interventionists. The instruction should be engaging and should align to the student's academic needs. A plan should also be in place for monitoring the students' response to instruction. It should be acknowledged that it can sometimes be a challenge to provide this level of intensity within the general education classroom.

5. Seek professional development opportunities

Teachers should understand what skilled readers do, how reading skills develop, and theoretical models of reading development. Schools have limited resources, but professional development opportunities are key to effective instruction. Universities are great places to connect with opportunities. Auditing courses, connecting with reading instruction researchers, and forming professional learning communities among teachers are low-cost options.

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6. Remember that language abilities are the underlying foundation for reading skills

Reading is simply the process of translating print into language. A student's language abilities should be considered when planning for instruction. "Good readers make links between print and meaning; therefore, instruction should support students with ID in making these connections as much as possible." Speech language pathologists are excellent resources for identifying and intervening when language has an effect on reading challenges. English as a second language or bilingual education programs will be beneficial for students whose first language is not English.

7. Scaffold working memory

Working memory can be a challenge for students with ID and can affect response to instruction. Teachers can provide various forms of scaffolding to assist students in manipulating phonemes even if a student's working memory limitations make the task difficult. Often, phonemic awareness is taught without letters, which is appropriate for very young students who are typically developing; however, in our experience, students with working memory limitations find that the addition of letters makes the task much easier.

8. Target specific parts of a scope and sequence to focus instruction

Teachers should take care when choosing the amount of instruction on which to focus and planning how to proceed through the scope of instruction. Use assessments to choose a limited amount of items (for example, letter sounds) to target at once. Some students may make progress on as few as five items at a time, while others can focus on more. Students may need to repeat entire lessons or continue to review some items while learning new material.

9. Use data to guide instruction and adaptation

Using data to monitor progress and to adapt instruction is one of the most important factors in improving reading outcomes. Early-grade curriculum-based measures provide one way to track progress. Be sure measurements capture even small advances and share improvements with staff, families, and the student.

10. Involve service providers and family members

Enlist support staff, including assistive technology specialists, behavior specialists, and school psychologists, to support reading instruction. Involving family members is crucial. Families can provide definitions of new vocabulary words and can encourage discussions of stories—both those read aloud and ones a student may read independently. It is vital that school personnel encourage parental participation and important that necessary supports are provided for families of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and for those of lower socioeconomic status.

*Lemons, C. J., Allor, J. H., Al Otaiba, S., LeJeune, L. M. (2016). 10 Research-Based Tips for Enhancing Literacy Instruction for Students With Intellectual Disability. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 49, 18-30.

Resources

This podcast features researcher Chris Lemons, author of 10 Research-Based Tips for Enhancing Literacy Instruction for Students With Intellectual Disability, who discusses the tips listed in this publication that will help improve literacy outcomes. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/new-heights-in-literacy-instruction-for-students-with/id1510141313?i=1000472631155>

Vanderbilt Kennedy Center

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