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Why Can't Johnny Read Better?

by

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During recent years there has been considerable concern among the public with regard to the reading ability of school children. A great deal of unreasonable and some justified criticism has been leveled against the public schools for their purported inability to teach children to read well. Simple causes and simple solutions have been offered. Actually the problem is an exceedingly complex one, and the more we learn about factors related to reading retardation, the more we are becoming conscious of how little we know.

Before discussing reading retardation, it may be helpful to define and describe what reading retardation means. A child is generally regarded as retarded in reading when his level of reading is two or more years below what can be expected on the basis of his age and intelligence or mental age. Thus a ten year old boy with average intelligence who reads on the eight-year level is considered retarded. However, if his intelligence was that of an eight year old, he would actually be at a level that is normal for his ability. On the other hand, a ten year old boy with the intelligence of a twelve year old would be in the group of retarded readers if he reads like an average ten year old. In other words, before one describes a child as being a retarded reader one must know what his general mental ability is.

CAUSES OF READING RETARDATION

The causes of reading retardation can be divided into several groups.

Physical Defects

Some children have difficulties in reading because of poor hearing or vision. There are many instances in which remarkable improvement

in reading occurred after such defects had been corrected. Some studies indicate that there are many children in school who fail to learn because of undetected sensory disorders. Thyroid imbalance has been found to be the cause in some instances, and startling progress was observed in reading after the children were given thyroid extracts. Some studies have found a much higher frequency of malnutrition, infections, heart disorders and general lack of good health among the poor than among good readers. Thus it appears that good medical care is one of the prerequisites for progress in reading.

A relatively recent area of research is connected with the learning problems of brain-injured children. Damage to some area of the brain may affect some learning capacities. A typical disability of many brain-injured children is their difficulty in perceiving forms, such as letters and words, and in giving meaning to them. Some have impaired capacity to abstract and generalize, which is one of the corner-stones of reading.

The problems of the brain-injured are similar to those of another group of children who have been described as having primary reading disabilities. These children are either complete non-readers or learn with great difficulty to read on the first or second grade level. Considerable research on this problem has been conducted in Michigan, particularly by Dr. Rabinovitch at the Hawthorn Center, a children's psychiatric hospital. This writer has worked with some such children who in spite of good intelligence, high motivation, excellent teachers and special tutors have failed to learn to read properly. It is the responsibility of the school to help these children to learn their subjects through other media than the written word.

In some instances overindulgent or over-demanding mothers are at the root of a child's learning problems.

Some of the children who react to their adverse home environment with basically hyper-aggressive behavior find it difficult to concentrate on learning to read. A very high percentage of young people who come before the juvenile courts have severe reading problems.

Adverse Cultural Conditions

The relationship between socio-economic circumstances and reading ability is high. Children from educated, well-to-do homes where there is interest in books, reading, and cultural discussions, do vastly better

than children from homes and neighborhoods where there is little cultural stimulation and interest. As a matter of fact, a child's reading ability is quite highly related to the number of books found in his home.

One of the greatest challenges of the public schools is to counteract the adverse impact of cultural deprivation among our pupils. This takes planning, effort and dedication, and much more can be done in any school system.

Emotional Problems

A considerable number of studies have shown the close relationship between emotional disturbances and reading retardation. It is common knowledge that among children who are severely emotionally disturbed and treated in psychiatric clinics or hospitals reading retardation is far more common than among the normal population. Sometimes the inability to read is related to a general impotence in all areas of learning. Severe neglect, mishandling, or rejection may leave the child with no motivation to perform in school. These children can be divided into two typical groups: the fearful, anxious and withdrawn and the aggressive, hostile and negative ones. As an example of the first type, this writer once worked with an eleven year old boy of superior intelligence who only read on the second grade level. He was a fearful, frightened boy, who was extremely afraid of his father and of asserting himself in any area. This had spread to reading, and he was scared of "attacking" words. By his tutor the boy's self-esteem was built up. He lost his fear of words, and in a few weeks he improved several grades in reading.

Another boy, 17 years old, was also referred because of a reading problem. All his life he had done very poorly in school, and on routine intelligence tests he had scored on the low average to borderline level. Finally, a clinical psychologist discovered that he had superior mental ability. This boy's father, a successful and wealthy surgeon, was a brutal man who, since the boy was a child, had used the whip and his fists on him for the slightest disobedience or inability to do what the father told him. The boy's fear and negativism were so deeply imbedded, that he did not respond to his school's or his tutor's attempts to help him.

Inadequate Reading Readiness Programs

Today Johnny starts school when he is five years old, and before long he is confronted with the task of learning to read. Abundant research shows that children actually are ready to learn to read at widely differing ages. This is not only due to differences in intelligence, but also other maturational factors, such as perception, muscular coordination, emotional maturity, and previous learning experiences. Unfortunately, many well-meaning but over-eager parents and teachers are not aware of these individual differences. It is believed that many children, pushed beyond their capacity in the early grades, get discouraged and develop attitudes that are detrimental to learning.

SUMMARY

The causal factors in reading retardation mentioned above are only some of the many conditions that prevent children from learning up to their ability. Often there is a combination of factors that lead to their handicaps.

Competent teachers do a great deal to help children overcome their handicaps. Alert and understanding parents and other citizens can do even more. Maximum results will, of course, be achieved when the teachers and the community work together with mutual respect and appreciation of the magnitude and complexity of the problem and the responsibility each has to carry.

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