

Introduction

We all know that there are many different ways to catch something. Sometimes we stand in one place and hold our arms up because we expect something to fall. Other times we turn quickly and catch something that is thrown at us, just in time. We might even dive for an object that appears to be falling rapidly, or we simply jump up and try to make the catch. Even though we try to make a catch, there are times when we may miss it. In these instances, we usually bend down and pick it up anyway. What I am actually describing is what many of us have experienced with children who struggle to learn to read. The main point is that we must not give up in our attempts to catch these kids. They must be caught, taught, and let go!

Catch a Falling Reader is a “timeless” resource for educators because it will still be relevant 20 years from now, no matter which way the educational pendulum swings. It was written for the purpose of confirming, instructing, supporting, and inspiring those who teach children to read. The foundation for this work stems from research-based strategies along with decades of observation and instruction with children of all ages, training from some of the best teachers and researchers in the world, and years of teaching teachers around the globe. Who is this book mainly for? It is most useful for teachers and reading specialists who teach children who struggle with reading and writing, no matter what grade they may be in.

The ultimate challenge comes from knowing *how* to recognize when a child is falling, *when* to make the catch, and *what* to do about it. What can this book do for those who seek to catch a falling reader?

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1. Offer ideas in a format that is easy to read and understand. This is not a textbook. Ideas and suggestions have been gathered from actual experiences in the field, in combination with research-based findings.
2. Create a conscious awareness of common behaviors in young readers that often become habits.
3. Recommend research-based strategies and methods for preventing falling readers from continuing to fall.
4. Provide opportunities for readers to confirm, reflect, and enhance their current knowledge of how to help falling readers.

The best way to read this book is simply to make it a daily practice—reading, reflecting, and perhaps trying one or two strategies each week. You may also want to allow the book to serve as a springboard for teacher book club discussions and debates. *Catch a Falling Reader* is divided into three specific sections: motivation, instructional strategies, and reflection. These three areas were selected as a way of organizing the information into manageable chunks. Segments within each section do not need to be read in any particular order. Teachers of students with special needs as well as those learning a second language will benefit from many of the strategies offered, but with modification and differentiation. Reflection is a key to understanding the craft of teaching falling readers. As educators and parents, we all struggle to find enough time to actually “think” about our teaching practices and theories. This book was created with that reality in mind.

For the purposes of this book, a *falling reader* refers to any child who is not where he or she needs to be in order to feel successful with text levels and literacy challenges that are expected at any given grade level. Falling readers can be spotted if we, as teachers and parents, become acutely aware of red flags that often present themselves in the early stages of reading development. The tricky part is that red flags come in a host of different shapes and sizes. These flags often appear during the preschool and kindergarten years but don’t always manifest themselves fully until Grade 1.

Some early warning signs among falling readers appear to be more common than others. Teachers and reading specialists who are aware of these behaviors will want to begin where the learner

is and build on strengths in order to move the reader forward. This awareness leads us to search for contributing factors and ultimately a plan of action.

Listed below are the most common early warning signs that we should watch for while teaching and guiding young learners. They include, but are not limited to the following:

(*Note:* Early warning signs do not necessarily appear in this order for any given child.)

- Delayed speech and language skills
- Frequent ear infections during toddler and preschool years
- Word retrieval difficulties (trouble “finding” words when retelling, explaining, or describing things, stories, or events)
- Phonemic awareness issues (limited letter and sound knowledge)
- Alphabet identification inaccuracy or inconsistency
- Rhyming difficulties or confusions
- Limited prior knowledge, vocabulary, and background experiences
- Directionality issues (right-left, top-bottom, front-back, before-after)
- Limited book-handling skills
- Unusually short attention span when listening to books or coloring
- Little or no interest in books
- Little or no attempts at attending to print (doesn’t understand that print carries meaning)
- Little or no memory for patterned text
- Limited writing vocabulary
- Little or no instant recognition of basic sight words (“yes,” “no,” “Mom,” “a,” “I”)
- Blinking, yawning, frowning, wiggling, or other unusual behaviors during reading group lessons or while reading to someone
- Looking up and waiting for someone to tell them the word
- Sounding out and/or distorting every letter on new and difficult words
- Guessing at words (based mainly on the first letter or letters)

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- Skipping words often as a way of avoiding new and/or difficult words
- Frequently asking, “What’s that word?”
- Reading painfully (word-by-word reading with little or no blending of words into phrases)

The power to catch a struggling child is at the heart of this book. Imagine the academic and social opportunities that exist for kids who are caught before frustration, bad habits, and low self-esteem take root and grow. Good teachers, therefore, continually strive to become better teachers by searching for what works and doesn’t work in the struggle to help children become independent readers, writers, and thinkers. This continual pursuit requires commitment, patience, flexibility, skill, and sheer will!

It is my sincere hope that this book will inspire each reader to catch every falling student along the universal path to literacy. I firmly believe that, when we teach children how to fly as readers and writers, we save them. We must strive to prevent each and every falling reader from a lifetime of frustration, low self-esteem, anxiety, and disappointment. For, if we are not about catching kids and teaching them how to fly, then what are we really about?

Catch a falling reader and never let one get away!