

Tests help us understand why a child struggles with reading

We spend a lot of time traveling around the state visiting with schools and parents. The subject of testing comes up over and over again. Many people feel like children spend a lot of time taking tests.

There are assessments called Curriculum-Based Measures (CBMs) that test student knowledge of the learning standards. These are also called General Outcome Measures (GOMs). There are also assessments that screen and progress monitor the discrete skill required for mastery of the GOMs. For example, a student needs to know what letters make what sounds (skill-level) in order to read a passage (GOM). A student needs to know multiplication tables (skill-level) to demonstrate mastery of word problems requiring long division (GOM).

The US Department of Education requires that states “administer high-quality, annual assessments that are worth taking and provide meaningful data about student success.”

In Wyoming, this test is called the WY-TOPP. The WY-TOPP assesses student performance vs. the Wyoming Content and Performance Standards (WYCPS). The only required WY-TOPP test is the Spring Summative assessment. According to the Wyoming Department of Education website, the fall and winter interim tests are optional though “both assessments are intended to support instruction.” There are also WY-TOPP assessments called Modular assessments that may be administered throughout the year and, according to the WDE are “short, standard-specific assessments for grades 1–10 that are focused on a discrete scope of grade-level skills or knowledge.” Students also take various district and classroom-specific assessments throughout the year.

Since our focus is reading, we want to talk a little bit about assessment related to reading.

As we discussed in a recent article, reading comprehension requires two main buckets of skills. The first is the ability to read the words on the page. This is decoding. The second is the ability to understand the words being read. This is language comprehension. There are a number of sub-skills that fall into the decoding and language comprehension buckets. When a child struggles with reading, there are almost always very specific skill gaps in one or both of these buckets that need to be carefully identified and remediated as early as possible. It's kind of like a Jenga Tower - enough missing pieces and the tower falls apart.

When a child struggles with reading there are several big picture questions that can be asked to help uncover the source of the difficulty:

1. Can the child accurately and efficiently read the words on the page?
2. Can the child comprehend grade-level vocabulary and text?
3. Can the child self-monitor when reading? In other words, can the child read for a specific purpose? Can they use the information they have read?
4. Can the child do 1, 2, and 3, but hasn't been exposed to books of interest to them?
5. What role do things like trauma play in this child's life?

Each of these questions deserves attention. In this article, we will focus on question #1 because it is the one that seems to be the most misunderstood and overlooked.

In order to understand why a child struggles with reading, decoding skills and language comprehension skills must be carefully assessed. The data from those assessments can then be used to determine what kinds of intervention will move a child forward. Some children present with primarily decoding difficulties, others with primarily language comprehension difficulties, and others with both decoding and language comprehension difficulties.

According to Yale reading researchers Dr. Sally Shaywitz and Dr. Bennet Shaywitz, about 85% of all people with a learning disability have a reading disability. According to Yale reading researchers Dr. Sally Shaywitz and Dr. Bennet Shaywitz, about 85% of all people with a learning disability have a reading disability. Haskins Laboratories President and Director of Research, Dr. Kenneth Pugh, did a study showing that the most common cause of word reading difficulty is a lack of connectivity between the areas of the brain that map speech sounds with their letters; difficulty with phonics. In

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In other words, a child's vocabulary and background knowledge are solid but they have not mastered the skills needed to read unfamiliar words.

One simple way for parents to get a sense of whether a child's comprehension problem is decoding or language comprehension is the following: Ask the child to read a grade-level passage and then read and answer questions about that passage. Then, read a grade-level passage and related questions to the child and ask them to answer the questions orally. If there seems to be a discrepancy between their reading comprehension and their listening comprehension, you may be looking at a decoding problem.

If screening determines that a student does, in fact, have a decoding problem, more diagnostic assessments can be done to understand which specific skills need more practice.

This is not to say that strong instruction in vocabulary and the development of background knowledge and book discussions are not important. They are critical and schools generally do a good job developing these skills. We see children who clearly have decoding difficulties whose intervention is focused on comprehension strategies like "Main Idea" or "Summarizing." These kids don't need comprehension strategies, they need skills to read unfamiliar words so they will be able to comprehend the text.

The percentage of students reading proficiently does not improve between 3rd and 10th grades. We believe that this is, at least in part, due to the fact that our reading assessments do not always identify specific skill gaps in decoding. If we are going to test children's reading skills, let's be sure to use assessments and progress monitoring tools that provide skill-level data that can be used to drive instruction.

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