

YOUTH SUCCESS MOVEMENT • FOR PARENTS

The Home Reading Check

Ten minutes that show you whether the problem is the words or the meaning

You run it. No training, nothing to buy, and your child is never told they are being checked.

What this shows you

When a child struggles with reading, almost everyone assumes the same thing — that the words are too hard. Sometimes that is right. Very often it is not.

A child can read every word on a page perfectly and have no idea what it said. Another child can follow a story beautifully when you read it aloud, and fall apart the moment they have to read it themselves. Those two children have completely different problems, and they need completely different help.

This shows you which one you have, and it works because of one simple comparison. You read one story to your child. Your child reads another one to you. Then you compare.

Why nobody else does this

The tests your child takes at school measure reading. Which sounds obvious — but it means every question is asked through print. If the print is the problem, everything above it looks broken too, and nobody can tell which.

Reading a story aloud to your child takes the print out of the way. Whatever they understand then is understanding, plain and simple. That is the whole idea, and it costs you nothing but ten minutes.

Be clear about what this is

This is not a test. It has no score, no norms and no cut-off, and it cannot tell you that your child has anything.

It is not a validated instrument and it does not replace anything your school does. If the school has already tested your child, their data is better than this and you should ask for it — including the detail underneath the headline number.

What this is, is a way of seeing it for yourself. Most parents of a struggling reader are told the child needs more practice, and have no way of knowing whether that is right. Ten minutes with two stories shows you whether the difficulty is with the words or with the meaning — and those need completely different help.

It works for adults too

If you are an adult who struggles with reading, or you are helping one, this works exactly the same way. Use Level 3, and have someone read the first story to you. For an adult there is usually no school data and never will be. This is often the only way to find out where the trouble actually is.

Before you start

Pick your moment

- Somewhere quiet, no screens on, nobody else needing you.
- Not when your child is tired. After school is usually the worst time. A weekend morning is usually the best.
- Ten minutes is plenty. If it starts to feel long, stop and finish another day.

What to say to your child

"I've got two short stories. I'll read one to you and you read one to me, and then I'm going to ask you a few things about them. There are no trick questions and it's completely fine to say you don't know."

Then mean it. If this turns into a test, you will get a different child and different answers.

Four rules while you do it

Wait	Count to ten in your head before you say anything. Most of us wait about one second. Most of the good answers arrive at around six.
Do not help	No hints, no rephrasing, no finishing their sentence. If they ask what a question means, say it again exactly the same way and wait again.
Do not correct	Not the answers, and not the reading. Note what happened and carry on. You can go back another day.
Write down what they said	Not whether it was right — what they actually said. The wording is where most of the information is, and you will not remember it in an hour.

Which level to use

Level	Use this if...
Level 1	Your child is just starting to read — simple sentences, sounding words out, roughly kindergarten to first grade.
Level 2	Your child reads, but it is hard work — roughly second to third grade.
Level 3	Your child reads fairly easily — roughly fourth grade and up. Also the level to use with an adult.

If you are not sure, start one level below where you think they are. An easy story tells you plenty; a story that is far too hard tells you nothing at all.

Why the two stories at each level are a fair comparison

At each level, the story you read and the story your child reads are the same length, use words of the same difficulty, and are built the same way — somebody wants something, it does not happen, and the story shows how they feel without ever saying it.

That is what makes the comparison mean something. If one story were harder than the other, a difference would tell you about the story rather than about your child.

Level 1 • Just starting

Two short stories, matched.

STORY ONE

You read this aloud. Do not show it to your child.

Sam had a red ball and he took it to the park every day. One morning the ball was not in the box where he kept it.

Sam looked under his bed and then he looked behind the door. He looked in the closet too but the ball was not there.

Then he heard something out in the garden behind the house. His little sister was sitting on the grass holding the red ball.

Then ask, in this order:

First	"Tell me what happened."
Then	"Why do you think Sam was looking everywhere?"
Last	"What would you say to his sister?"

What to listen for. Whether they understood that the ball was missing and Sam was looking for it. "Because he wanted it" or "he lost it" is a good answer.

STORY TWO

Your child reads this. Hand them the page.

Mia had a new hat and she was very happy about it. On the way to school one morning the wind began to blow.

The hat came off her head and went flying over the fence. It came down high in a tree and she could not reach it.

Mia stood under the tree and looked up for a very long time. Then she went back home and told her mother she did not want to go.

Then ask, in this order:

First	"Tell me what happened."
Then	"Why do you think Mia did not want to go to school?"
Last	"What would you have done?"

Also note how the reading itself went — whether they got the words right, and whether it took a long time. Both matter, and they are different things.

Level 2 • Reading, but it is work

Two matched stories. Both hide a feeling behind an action.

STORY ONE

You read this aloud. Do not show it to your child.

Maya's grandmother was coming to visit them on Saturday. Maya had been waiting all week, and she cleaned her bedroom twice.

Then she put her best drawings on the wall beside the front door. A car pulled up outside and Maya ran out to meet it.

But the lady who got out was the neighbor from across the street. Maya went back inside and did not say a word to her mother.

She took the drawings down off the wall one by one. Then she put them away in the bottom drawer of her desk.

Then ask, in this order:

First	"Tell me what happened."
Then	"Why do you think Maya put the drawings away?"
Last	"What would you say to her if you were there?"

What to listen for. The story never says Maya was disappointed — it shows it through what she does. If your child only describes the action, without reaching the feeling behind it, note that. It is the most useful thing on this page.

STORY TWO

Your child reads this. Hand them the page.

Devon's baseball team had just one more game left to win. He had practiced throwing every day after school that month.

He threw the ball at the garage door until it got dark. On Saturday he put on his uniform and packed up his glove.

Then he looked outside and saw the rain coming down hard. He could not even see the houses across the street.

Devon sat down on the front steps with his glove in his lap. He stayed out there a long time after his mother called him in.

Then ask, in this order:

First	"Tell me what happened."
Then	"Why do you think Devon stayed on the steps?"
Last	"What would you say to him if you were there?"

This story is built the same way as the first one — waiting for something, then a disappointment shown through what somebody does. That is why comparing the two is fair.

Level 3 • Reading fairly easily

Two matched stories, a little longer. Both hide the real reason behind something a person says. This is also the level to use with an adult.

STORY ONE

You read this aloud. Do not show it to your child.

Theo had been the fastest runner in his grade for three years. Everybody knew it, and nobody had come close to beating him.

His name was at the top of the list for the fall race. That summer a girl named Nadia moved in with her family down the street.

She started at his school in the fall and did not say much to anyone. At the first practice she ran the mile well ahead of him.

She did not seem out of breath at the end of it either. Theo told his father that night he was thinking about quitting the team.

His father asked him why, and Theo said the schedule was too much. He said he had far too much homework to keep going to practice.

Then ask, in this order:

First	"Tell me what happened."
Then	"Why do you think Theo said he wanted to quit?"
Last	"If you were his father, what would you say next?"

What to listen for. The strong answer is that the homework is not the real reason. If they say "because of homework," they have taken the story at face value and not worked out what is going on underneath. That distinction is the thing to notice.

STORY TWO

Your child reads this. Hand them the page.

Priya had played the same piece at every recital since she was eight. Her teacher called it her own piece, and everyone at the school knew it.

She could play the whole thing without ever looking down at her hands. She liked the part near the end where the room always went quiet.

In the fall a boy named Oscar joined the class, two years younger than her. At the winter recital he played the same piece faster than she did.

He did not miss a single note in the whole long piece. Then her mother asked if she wanted to go out for ice cream.

They always did that after a recital, every single time, for years. Priya said that she had a headache and wanted to go straight home.

Then ask, in this order:

First	"Tell me what happened."
Then	"Why do you think Priya wanted to go home?"
Last	"If you were her mother, what would you say next?"

Same shape as the first story: somebody good at something, somebody new who is better, and a stated reason that covers the real one.

What you noticed

Fill this in straight afterwards, while it is fresh. Ten minutes from now you will have lost half of it.

The story you read aloud

Could they tell you what happened?	Yes, easily ☐ Yes, with prompting ☐ Not really ☐
Did they answer the “why” question?	Gave a reason ☐ Just described what happened ☐ Did not know ☐
What did they actually say?	

The story your child read

Could they tell you what happened?	Yes, easily ☐ Yes, with prompting ☐ Not really ☐
Did they answer the “why” question?	Gave a reason ☐ Just described what happened ☐ Did not know ☐
How did the reading itself go?	Smooth ☐ Words right but slowly ☐ Struggled with the words ☐
At a word they did not know?	Carried on ☐ Stopped and stayed stopped ☐ Worked at it a long time ☐
Did they seem tired afterwards?	Yes ☐ No ☐
What did they actually say?	

One more question, at the end

Ask this casually, once you have finished and put the pages away. It takes ten seconds.

"When you read, what are you trying to do?"

What they said	

What it points to

Find the row that looks most like your child. There is no score here and none of this is a diagnosis — it is a direction to look in.

What you saw	What it points to	Where to start
Understood the one you read. Struggled with the one they read.	Getting the words off the page — not understanding. Their understanding is fine and was never really being measured at school.	Word-level work. And keep reading aloud to them — that is where their real level shows.
Struggled with both, even the one you read aloud.	Something above the words. Vocabulary, knowledge of the world, and joining up what they hear.	Read aloud daily above their level, and ask questions they cannot answer just by looking.
Got the words right but very slowly, and was tired afterwards.	The words are there but cost too much. Nothing is left over for thinking about the meaning. This one is very often missed.	Volume of easy reading — books below their level, lots of them. Not more phonics.
Stopped dead at words they did not know.	Getting past a gap, rather than understanding. Every text has words a reader does not know.	Tell them plainly that carrying on past a word they do not know is allowed. Most children have never been told that.
Both went fine.	The engine is running. If school still says there is a problem, look at longer texts, at knowledge of the world, and at the test itself — whether they finish it,	Keep going. Check again in three months.

What you saw	What it points to	Where to start
	and whether they last the hour.	

And the last question

If they said	What it means
“To say the words right” · “Not to make mistakes” · “To finish”	Your child has learned that reading means saying the words correctly — because that is what has been praised and corrected. More phonics practice makes this worse. What helps is changing what gets asked about: what happened, what did you think, rather than whether it was right.
“To find out what happens” · “To learn something”	They know what the job is. Whatever else is going on, this part is intact — which is genuinely good news and worth telling them.

Two things worth checking whatever you found

An eye exam. Not the school vision screening, which checks distance. Reading is a near task. If your child has not had a proper exam, get one — it belongs to an eye doctor and it is quick to rule out.

How the page looks to them. Different from whether the eyes work. Ask whether the letters ever seem to move, blur or swim, whether they lose their place, and whether a page becomes uncomfortable after a few minutes. Try a colored overlay over the page and watch what happens. This takes five minutes and nothing is lost if it shows nothing.

Do it again

Once is a single snapshot and children have bad days. Do it again in three months, with the same level, and compare.

Movement over time tells you far more than any one attempt — and you will be the only person who ever sees it.

If something worries you

You can ask for a free evaluation yourself, and you do not need a doctor's note or anyone's permission. Before your child turns three, call your county's early intervention program. From age three, contact your local school district and ask for the special education office — even if your child does not go to school there.

Most children who are evaluated turn out to need nothing at all. The ones who do need something get years back.

And one thing to tell your child

“That was really helpful. Thank you.”

Nothing else. No feedback, no correction, no explanation of what you found. They helped you with something and that is all they need to know.

This is not a test and not a diagnosis. It shows you something; the people you take it to make findings. Youth Success Movement · youthsuccessmovement.org