

YOUTH SUCCESS MOVEMENT · FOR FAMILIES

The Ten-Minute Screen

Five short activities that show you how the machinery underneath reading is working

You can do this yourself. It takes about ten minutes, it needs nothing but this document, and your child is never told they are being checked.

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Before you begin

Reading runs on machinery — memory, speed, the ability to hold a sound in mind and do something with it. When one part of that machinery is weak, a child can be taught well and still not move, and nobody can say why.

These five activities look at that machinery. Together they take about ten minutes.

This is not a test and it does not produce a score. What it gives you is a set of observations — how your child does on one thing next to how they do on another. Those are places to look. None of them settles anything on its own.

You can do this yourself

No training is needed. What is needed is following the wording exactly — the scripts are doing work, and changing them changes what you find out. Read them as written, even where they feel stiff.

If something goes wrong — you repeat a sentence you should not have, or lose count — do not worry. Note what happened, carry on, and treat that item as unknown. One imperfect item does not spoil the rest.

Three things it cannot tell you

It cannot tell you whether your child has an attention difficulty. Ten minutes of short, novel activities with an adult beside them is close to ideal conditions. A child who cannot hold attention for forty-five minutes in a classroom can look completely fine here.

It cannot measure everything. Sustained attention, long-term memory and reasoning all need more time or more breadth than this has.

It cannot tell a bad day from a real limit. A hungry, frightened or exhausted child looks cognitively weak. Run Check These First before this, and do not run it at the end of a long day.

And a fourth, added in version 2.0

It cannot tell you the cause of anything. Every activity here is an observation. Where something is worth noting, the next step is a conversation with someone qualified — not a conclusion you draw at the kitchen table.

“Could not tell” is a real answer. Write that down rather than choosing between the options in front of you.

Setting up

Where	Somewhere quiet, just the two of you, no other children in the room and nothing on a screen.
When	A weekend morning is best. Not after school. Not when anyone is tired or hungry.
How long	Nine or ten minutes. Do not spread it over two sittings — the comparisons only work within one session.
Where to sit	Beside them, not across a table. This is not an examination and it should not look like one.
Writing it down	Fill in the sheet at the back as you go. Do not trust your memory — the details are the finding and they fade in minutes.

What to say at the start

“I’ve got five quick games. Some are easy and some are meant to be hard — nobody gets all of them. There’s no score and I’m not marking you. Ready?”

Do them in this order

#	What it is	What it looks at	Time
1	Naming things fast	How quickly words come when they are needed	1 min
2	Numbers back	Holding things in mind, and doing something with them	3 min
3	Say the sentence back	Memory for language, and grammar	2 min
4	Take a sound out	Handling the sounds inside words	90 sec

#	What it is	What it looks at	Time
5	Find and cross out	Speed, and looking carefully	90 sec

Naming comes first because it is easy and it settles a nervous child. Crossing out comes last because it is the most tiring.

PART 1 · 1 MINUTE

Naming things fast

Why this one

How quickly a word arrives once a child needs it. This is one of the most informative minutes in the whole document — the same retrieval that fetches a color name is the retrieval that fetches a word from a page. If it runs slowly, the cost comes out of understanding.

What to say and do

You need two cards — one of colored blocks, one of letters, five items repeating across ten rows. Make them yourself or print the pair from our site.

“I’m going to show you a card with colors on it. Name them out loud, going across each row like this — [trace the first row with your finger] — as fast as you can without making mistakes. Ready?”

Start the timer on their first word. Stop on their last. Mark any mistake but do not correct it, and do not stop them.

“Now the same thing with letters. Name each letter out loud, across the rows, as fast as you can. Ready?”

If they do not know all five letters, stop and note that. It is itself worth knowing.

What to look for

Run both cards and look at the letter card. Letters are the one that matters, because letter naming is what reading actually runs on.

Run the colors card as well. It settles a nervous child and it shows you they understood the task — but the letter card is the one to record. Do not read the difference between the two as meaning anything.

Time it and write the number down. There is no table here to compare it against — timings belong to the exact test they were built on, and a figure from a published test does not transfer to a card you printed at home. The number is still worth

having: it is something concrete to give a professional, and it is what you compare against when you run this again in six months.

What is worth noting, without any number at all:

- They did not know all five letters. Stop there — that is the finding and nothing else in this part applies yet.
- More than four mistakes on the letter card.
- It looked effortful — hesitation before each item, or visible searching for a name they clearly know.
- Their own time is markedly slower than it was last time you ran this.

Worth noting if: any of those four. And write the time down either way — it is worth having even when you cannot judge it.

PART 2 · 3 MINUTES

Numbers back

Why this one

How much a child can hold in mind at once — and separately, whether they can do something with it while holding it. Those are two different abilities and this separates them.

What to say and do

Read the numbers at a steady one per second, in a flat voice. Do not group them into a rhythm — a rhythm hands them a shortcut and you stop looking at what you meant to.

“I’m going to say some numbers. When I stop, say them back to me in the same order. If I say two – five, you say two – five. Ready?”

Start at two numbers. Give both tries at each length. Stop when they miss both tries at the same length. The result is the longest length where they got at least one right.

Length	First try	Second try
2	4 – 7	6 – 2
3	5 – 8 – 2	3 – 9 – 6
4	7 – 2 – 9 – 4	5 – 1 – 8 – 3
5	3 – 8 – 2 – 9 – 5	6 – 1 – 7 – 4 – 9
6	4 – 9 – 2 – 7 – 5 – 1	8 – 3 – 6 – 2 – 9 – 4
7	5 – 2 – 8 – 1 – 9 – 4 – 7	3 – 7 – 1 – 6 – 2 – 8 – 5
8	9 – 4 – 1 – 7 – 3 – 8 – 2 – 6	2 – 6 – 9 – 3 – 7 – 1 – 5 – 8

“Now I want you to say the numbers backwards. If I say two – five, you say five – two. Let’s try one: three – eight.”

If the practice fails, show them once and try a second practice. If that fails too, note “backwards not yet” and move on — that is a finding, not a failure.

Length	First try	Second try
2	3 – 8	5 – 2
3	6 – 1 – 4	2 – 7 – 9
4	8 – 3 – 6 – 1	4 – 9 – 2 – 7
5	2 – 7 – 3 – 9 – 5	6 – 1 – 8 – 4 – 2
6	9 – 3 – 7 – 2 – 8 – 4	5 – 8 – 1 – 6 – 3 – 9
7	4 – 8 – 2 – 9 – 5 – 1 – 7	7 – 2 – 6 – 3 – 9 – 4 – 8

What to look for

Forwards is holding. Backwards is holding and working on it at the same time — which is much closer to what reading a long sentence requires.

Write both numbers down. As with the naming card, there is no table here to check them against — spans like these belong to the standardized tests they came from, and those figures do not carry over to numbers a parent reads at a kitchen table.

What this activity gives you:

- **Forwards against backwards, within your own child.** Backwards is normally shorter. If it is a great deal shorter, or they could not do backwards at all while forwards was comfortable, that is worth following up — it raises the question of whether holding is fine and working with it is not, which is a different and more common problem.
- **The same child, six months apart.** Run it again and compare. That comparison is yours to make and it needs no norms.
- **Something concrete to hand a professional.** “Forwards five, backwards two” is a real observation. Someone with proper norms can tell you what it means.

Worth noting if: backwards is a great deal shorter than forwards, or backwards could not be done at all while forwards was comfortable. One session does not settle either — both are places to look.

PART 3 · 2 MINUTES**Say the sentence back**

Why this one

This is the most useful two minutes in the document, and the one most likely to find something nobody has looked for. Repeating a sentence exactly needs both memory and grammar.

What to say and do

“I’m going to say a sentence. When I finish, say it back to me exactly the way I said it — all the same words, in the same order. Ready?”

Say each sentence once, at normal speed, with normal expression. Never repeat one, however much they ask.

Write down what they actually said, word for word, before moving on. This is the part people skip and it is the part that matters.

#	Sentence
1	The little boy dropped his cup.
2	My sister found a red ball.
3	The cat jumped off the chair and ran away.
4	We walked to the store before it started raining.
5	The window was broken by the boys next door.
6	The letter was mailed by my father on Tuesday.
7	The girl that the boy pushed was near the fence.
8	The book that my aunt gave me is on the shelf.

What to look for

Look for a pattern across all eight, not a verdict from any one. A pass means every word, in order — but what you are really collecting is the set of eight responses, written down.

Where a mistake falls in the sentence does not tell you what caused it. Write down what you hear and how often it happened. One pattern is worth acting on; everything else is information for someone qualified.

What you hear	What to do with it
Sentences come back shorter and simpler, meaning intact — “The boy pushed the girl and she was by the fence” — and it happens across several items	This is the one to act on. Raise it with your doctor and ask about a speech-language evaluation.
Anything else — the end lost, words dropping out, small words missing	Write down exactly what they said and how many items went that way. It is information for someone qualified. It is not something to interpret yourself.

Worth noting if: they miss both sentences at any length up to and including numbers five and six, or both of the last two from third grade onward. And separately, if the meaning-intact-grammar-flattened pattern showed up across several items.

PART 4 · 90 SECONDS

Take a sound out

Why this one

Pulling a sound out of the middle of a word means holding the word in mind, finding the sound inside it, removing it, and putting back what is left. It is the clearest window on the sound-handling that phonics runs on.

What to say and do

“This one is a word game. I’ll say a word, then ask you to say it again with a piece taken out. Let’s practice: say cowboy. Now say it without cow.”

The answer is boy. If the practice fails, show them once and try again with sunshine without sun. Then begin.

Say the sound, not the letter name. For number four, say the sound at the start of cat, not the letter see. Stop after four wrong in a row.

#	Say this word...	...now without	Answer
1	sunshine	“sun”	shine
2	baseball	“ball”	base
3	rabbit	“rab”	bit
4	cup	the /k/ sound	up
5	meat	the /m/ sound	eat
6	seat	the /t/ sound	see
7	sand	the /d/ sound	san
8	stop	the /s/ sound	top

#	Say this word...	...now without	Answer
9	blend	the /l/ sound	bend
10	plate	change /p/ to /sk/	skate

What to look for

The first three take whole chunks out and most children manage them. Items four to seven need a single sound. Eight and nine need a sound pulled out of the middle of a cluster, which is genuinely hard and is where reading difficulty often shows.

Worth noting if: they cannot manage the single-sound items from second grade onward, or cannot do either of the cluster items from third grade onward.

PART 5 · 90 SECONDS

Find and cross out

Why this one

A page of similar-looking symbols with a few targets hidden in it, done against the clock. It loads speed, careful looking and telling similar shapes apart, all at once.

What to say and do

You need the crossing-out sheet, printed. Rows of mixed letters with one target letter to find — print it from our site or make one yourself with about two hundred letters and thirty targets.

“There are lots of letters on this page. I want you to cross out every letter d, as fast as you can, going across the rows. Do not skip any. Ready?”

Ninety seconds exactly. Then stop them, wherever they are. Count how many they found, how many they missed, and how many they crossed out by mistake.

What to look for

What you see	Worth following up on
Slow, but accurate	Processing speed — the machinery working, and running slowly.
Fast, but inaccurate	Rushing rather than slowness.
Slow and inaccurate	Both, or something in the visual pathway. Look at the mistakes.
Mistakes clustered on d, p and q	Telling similar shapes apart. This one points at the visual side and it is worth noting separately.
Accurate at first, falling apart after a few rows	Staying with something. Note it — but ninety seconds cannot establish this, and do not treat it as a finding.

None of these is a cause

The left column is what you saw. The right column is where it might point.

Neither is an answer, and one ninety-second activity cannot separate speed from attention from vision.

Write down what you saw. That is what someone qualified will want.

Worth noting if: they miss more than about a fifth of the targets, or the mistakes cluster on d, p and q.

What to do with what you found

Look back over the five. Count how many things you noted.

What you found	What to do
Nothing noted, and your child is not struggling	Nothing. Keep the sheet, and run it again in a year if you want a comparison.
One thing noted	Worth a closer look. Mention it at your next doctor's appointment, and consider a full cognitive assessment — but check the conditions first.
Two or more noted	The same, and sooner. Two things together is more informative than either alone.
Nothing noted, but your child is struggling	Then the difficulty is somewhere else, and that is genuinely useful to know. Go to the Home Reading Check — it is more likely to be at the word level or in understanding than in the machinery.

Three things before you act on any of it

Check the conditions first if you have not. A child who cannot see the page comfortably, or slept five hours, will look weak on every one of these five activities. Correct that and run this again — you may get a different child.

Do it twice, on different days, before you believe a low result. A big difference between the two days points at a bad day rather than a real limit — and one session cannot tell those apart.

Nothing here is a diagnosis and nothing here names a condition. Where something is worth noting, the next step is a conversation with someone qualified to look properly.

And what you say to your child

Never tell them they did badly on any of this, and never give them a number.

If they ask, tell them the truth: you were finding out how they think, some of it is meant to be hard, and they helped you. That is all they need.

Recording sheet

Fill this in as you go.

Child	_____
Date	_____
Age / grade	_____
Done by	_____
Conditions checked?	Vision ☐ Sleep ☐ Food ☐ Visual comfort ☐

1 • Naming things fast

Colors card	_____ sec	Mistakes _____
Letters card	_____ sec	Mistakes _____
Noted?	☐	

2 • Numbers back

Forwards	_____	Backwards _____
Gap between them	_____	Noted? ☐

3 • Say the sentence back

Sentences right	1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐
Meaning intact, grammar flattened, across several items?	Yes ☐ No ☐ Could not tell ☐
What they actually said — write it word for word	

4 • Take a sound out

Items right	1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10 ☐
Where it broke down	Chunks ☐ Single sounds ☐ Clusters ☐

5 • Find and cross out

Found _____	Missed _____	Crossed out by mistake _____
Clustered on d/p/q?	Yes ☐ No ☐	Noted? ☐

Total things noted	_____
Anything I could not tell	
What I am going to do next	

Nothing in this document is a diagnosis, a test, or a measurement of a child. The activities direct attention; the professionals you take them to make findings. Youth Success Movement · youthsuccessmovement.org