

Reading Help for Struggling Gifted Visual-Spatial Learners: Wholes and Patterns

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Most young gifted children, whatever their major learning style, have a burning desire to learn to read. Quite often, they manage to teach themselves on their own or to learn with a minimum of parental input. Before or during kindergarten, they are off and running along a fast reading curve that continues to amaze. While there may be a myriad reasons why some gifted youngsters do not follow this early reading pattern, two important ones need airing.

The possibility of vision deficits should be considered if an obviously advanced child is struggling with beginning reading skills. The field of behavioral optometry can help here. Young children are naturally far-sighted. The passions of gifted children—puzzles, identifying dinosaurs, Lego construction, etc.—often involve near-point work and visual stress. An examination by a behavioral optometrist who will review eye teamwork, visual perception, coordination of involved musculature, and eye-hand coordination (all of which are teachable skills) can rule out or document vision-related problems as well as evaluate visual acuity. Vision exercises, which should be done daily at home as well as weekly at the optometrist's office, can ready young eyes for the important task of turning print into adventure.



“VISION THERAPY”

Another consideration may be a visual-spatial learning style. Visual-spatial learners want to know at the beginning “all about” something that’s new. They need an overview or framework into which to fit new material, or the details just zing past, noticed but not sticking because there is no relational pattern into which to fit them. Because of this innate need to work with relationship, significance, and wholes, many struggling visual-spatial readers have a difficult time mastering phonics, the major way that reading is taught at this time.

Research has shown the efficacy of a phonetic approach to reading, but that does not mean that children who are visual-spatial do not sometimes slip through the phonics cracks. Gifted visual-spatial learners may be able to learn “the sounds” of all the letters, but their difficulty comes with the sequential task of blending sounds together to form words. The process is often too slow for their minds, which are used to forming rapid assumptions (a picture—which is quickly scanned—is worth 1000 words!). They benefit from a process that uses the recognition and comparison of whole words. Such children can be readily identified with a teacher-made informal blending test: given the sounds of the letters of several words (including words beginning with blends), what word do they make? Or Subtest #4, “Sound Blending,” of the *Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Cognitive Abilities* may be used to provide a normed score.

A better way for these children is a personally meaningful Whole Word approach. Struggling visual-spatial learners do better learning sight words—a large number of sight words—before approaching phonics analytically. Because their feelings are strong, they most readily learn words that have personal meaning. The work of New Zealander Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963), half a century ago, which she called “organic reading,” still holds up in Whole Word teaching. She had each of her students choose words they were eager to learn, keep their words in a box, and do exhilarating things with them. These sight vocabularies grew out of each child’s interests and feelings. They “owned” them and learned them readily. No effort was made to keep the words short or phonetically regular. What mattered was that the child wanted them.

Here are some ways to bridge the gap between sight reading and phonics:

- Be sure the child can retain a visual image. Many visual-spatial children, especially those with AD/HD tendencies, perceive in a blink but have a poor visual memory. They never actually look at words the few nano-seconds extra that will store them in the memory bank. These children need to play visual memory games. One such game is Concentration, where cards are spread face down and children take turns finding matches. Advantage goes to children remembering where the various cards are. To ensure success for children who are initially poor at this, begin with a small set of cards (six or eight pairs) and build up to a full set of cards as the visual memory increases.

Another example is “Kim’s Game” from Kipling’s book. Here, assorted objects on a tray are viewed briefly, then, when children turn their backs, one object is removed. The children then turn back and view the tray to see what is missing. This can be expanded to switching objects or to taking turns describing (while their backs are turned) three adjacent objects on the tray. The goal is to sharpen observational skills and that all-important visual memory. There are activities of seeing “What’s Missing in This Picture?” that can be collected from children’s magazines. Also, encourage children to take “memory snap shots” of favorite words.

Importantly, these activities benefit all children, not just visual-spatial learners.

- Build a **large** sight vocabulary. Create books with photographs of their favorite people and pets, with the name written under each picture. Label things around the house or classroom: door, couch, chalkboard. Buy lots of picture dictionaries and let the children browse through them. Create a gorgeous Treasure Box for words each child wants to learn (don't balk at "barf" or "stegosaurus"). Glue words to magnetized cards and post them on the fridge or file cabinet. These are great fun to play with.
- Play games with Treasure Box words. Draw out 2-3 words and make up silly sentences. Draw out a dozen words and sort into categories, such as "Foods, Toys, Yucky Things" or "Real and Imaginary." (Labels chosen by the child can be printed to provide still more learnable words.) This teaches thinking skills as well as providing a review of words. Don't use Treasure Box words as flash cards; that places a young learner on the spot and takes away the fun of learning. A better way to review a large number of words is spread them out in a wide Word Well, from which the child can proudly fish out all the words she knows.
- Parents should continue to read aloud to their children. Use this wonderful together time to quietly run your finger under the words as you read and invite your young listener to join in whenever she or he recognizes a word or phrase. Especially helpful are books that have rhymes or repeating phrases, where a pattern helps in anticipating what word comes next. After the story is finished, go back and play Word Hunt on 2 or 3 pages. Choose long, exciting words, with lots of "memory hooks" for the child to find. Even though they are new words, if they are interesting, your youngster is likely to find them. Such activities should always be done lightly and for fun. Any sense of pressure will set back the entire process. A teacher can also do this in a one-on-one situation, if feasible.
- The Dolch Words (little words that children are often asked to memorize) are difficult for visual-spatial learners to learn. They have few "memory hooks" and are hard to visualize. Make pictures for **phrases** that contain these words, such as "over the moon," "into the dragon's mouth," "the King of Slobs," "for ME!" etc. and hang them in full sight. A general principle for teaching visual-spatial learners is that when a child stumbles over something small, make a larger whole of it.
- Words that are not easy to visualize (e.g., most adverbs, the ubiquitous *the*, abstract words like *true*) can be put into phrases in the same way as the Dolch words or can be paired with a known, easy-to-visualize word that rhymes.

- Have the children make their own books. They can cut out or draw pictures, then dictate captions. Staple a few pages together into “books.” Have fun reading these books. (Now little words are used in context.)
- Lay out a number of words (10-20) and look for patterns. Anything a child discovers is fine: words that begin the same, words that end the same, words that rhyme, words with an *e* at the end. Help build word families: *art* and *part* and *chart* and *start* and even *partner*. Create a ridiculous “book” about a “mumble, fumble, bumble bee who used to stumble over crumbs.” Play “Stinky Pink,” the rhyming game with silly definitions (“a humongous pet” is a *fat cat*, “a T-Rex cart” is a *dragon wagon*). Pattern recognition enables the analysis of the phonetic structure of words. It leads to recognizing enough about the way phonics works to aid the decoding of unfamiliar words.
- Take analysis farther. On the board, play games substituting beginning or ending sounds. Rather than teach short vowel sounds (which are hard for VSLs to learn) teach a rhyming word or the same word “family.” Remember that these children are good at recognizing patterns, love seeing relationships, have a superb sense of rhythm, but are poor at rote memorization.
- Consonant blends are often a stumbling block. Teach blends by constructing memorable tongue twisters: “Please play on Planet Pluto,” “Greedy Greta grabs green grapes,” “Spray the spruce with sprinkles in the spring.” When a child is trying to figure out how the word “thrill” sounds, recite, “Throw three threads at the throne!” Read the Dr. Seuss alphabet book to the children, and then have them make up tongue twisters of their own, the sillier the better.
- Next, provide word analysis through teaching Greek and Latin roots, prefixes, and suffixes. Work from easy affixes, like “non” and “tion” up through “tele” and “able” to “poly” and “helio.” Recognizing roots helps children see the natural syllables into which words fall. Gifted children like the challenge of taking words like the additives listed on cereal boxes and learning to read them by their parts: “poly-un-saturate-d fats” See if they can find these parts of words in field guides with Latin names of animals and insects, in medical books, at the zoo or botanical garden.
- Accompany reading with visualization techniques to assist children in learning to spell words they want to learn in their creative writing. They are likely to spell well the words they care most about. These words can then serve as anchors to compare new words against. Help them to see whether their spelling of a word “looks right” or not. They should be taught that the way to remember how a word should be is to “look up.”

Visualization and imagination are two extremely important tools of visual-spatial learners and should be cultivated early.

Visual-spatial learners love to read books with strong visual images, fantasy, and quirky happenings. They also are attracted to books with significant underlying themes of danger and courage, the struggle of good against evil, and the triumph of ingenuity and pluck. Sometimes they will put great effort into reading a fascinating book someone has begun for them even though it is difficult. Although they may not be reading every word, they are getting enough from the story to stick with it.

On the other hand, don't feel that the children should always be reading at an ever higher level. Reading fluency is greatly aided by reading and rereading easy, familiar books that are fun. Broader phrasing, anticipating what may come next—as good readers do—and using context are all aided by reading many easy-to-read books.

In closing, I want to acknowledge that many of these ideas about Whole Word learning came not only from the remarkable work of Sylvia Ashton-Warner but also from the tutelage of Blanche (Betty) Royce, major reading instructor of mine at the University of Vermont, as well as from her major professor, the well-known Dr. Lyman Hunt, Jr., a valiant battler of phonics-only reading instruction.

Visual-spatial learners learn best through teaching to their strengths, and Whole Word reading, with its use of visual memory, pattern recognition, valuing the emotional impact of words, and utilizing playfulness and humor, uses those strengths well. Whether or not the school teaches in this way, parents (and venturesome teachers) have the ability to build a bridge for children into the realm of successful reading by having fun and success with the Whole Word reading approach.

Reference

Ashton-Warner, S. (1963). *Teacher*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

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