

Why children struggle in reading: environmental factors

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In a nutshell

- There are many different environmental factors behind reading disabilities.
- Many parents have low education, which might affect

their ability and opportunity to support their children's learning and school work. If parents are illiterate, it is difficult for them to provide support for their child in learning to read.

- The reading environment at home (are parents or siblings reading, are there books at home, etc.) for young children is strongly linked to their emergent literacy skills before entering school.
- Also, an inadequate educational system in the country together with how well teaching is organised in the classroom and what is the quality of learning interaction between the teacher and the learners, have an impact on learning to read in school.

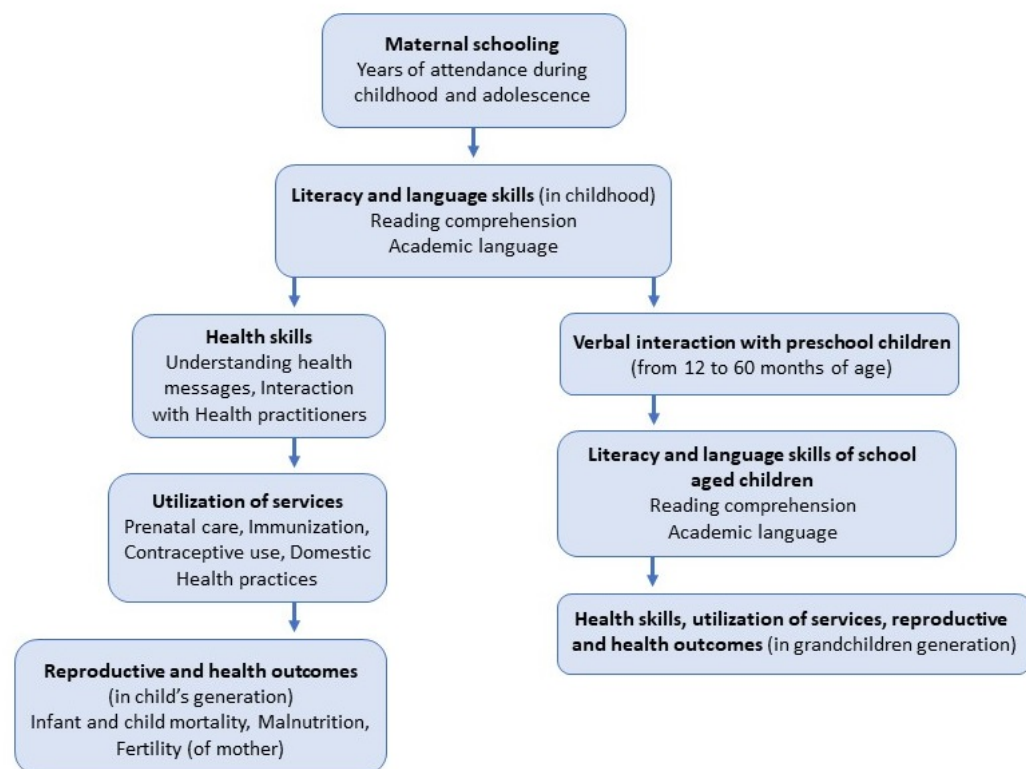
Why children struggle in reading: environmental factors

Many studies identify a significant association between children's social class and their reading skills with more poor readers among the highest level of social deprivation. It seems unlikely that social class is a cause of poor reading; therefore, there must be many intervening variables. Social disadvantage is associated with a number of adverse factors that can affect educational opportunity. These include living in an area not well served by good schools; living in poor housing, which is associated with increased likelihood of poor health; and absence from school. Intergenerational disadvantages (such as parental education) may also have an effect. These factors may converge to affect educational attainment; however, whether they are causally related (reasons) to reading is unclear¹ Snowling, M.J. (2019) Dyslexia.

A very short introduction. New York: Oxford University Press..

Parental literacy skills

In African countries, many parents have problems with their own education, which might affect their ability and opportunity to support their children's learning. If parents are themselves illiterate, it is difficult for them to provide their child with support learning to read. It is important to note that people who have never been to school and have not learned to read are not necessarily dyslexic, but would be considered illiterate. The term illiterate refers to being unable to interact with others through print. Parents' schooling and literacy (especially mothers) provides many positive consequences in terms of development, health, and wellbeing, for the whole family as well as that of the child. Literate mothers have better health skills and they know how to use health services, which affects their reproductive and health outcomes. Mothers' reading skills and literacy affect their interaction with their preschool children²LeVine, R.A., LeVine, S. E., & Schnell, B. (2001). "Improve the women": Mass schooling, female literacy, and worldwide social change. Harvard Educational Review. Spring 2001; 71, 1.. They also affect the literacy and language skills of their school-aged children and the future health skills of their grandchildren. These intergenerational effects of maternal schooling are described in Figure 1.



(Modified from LeVine, LeVine & Schnell, 2001)

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[Why Are Home Literacy Environment and Children's Reading](#)

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Home literacy environment

The role of environmental factors can be explored by analysing various aspects of the child's early literacy-related experiences at home. The reading environment in the home for very young children is strongly linked to their emergent literacy skills before entering school. Parents' attitudes to reading, parents' reading habits, the number of children's books in the home, the child's own interest in books, sharing reading with the child, and how often they read to them are all factors that have been associated with later success in reading. The problem in many African countries is that in addition to parental illiteracy, there is a lack of interesting reading material for children in local languages³Snowling, M.J. (2019) Dyslexia. A very short introduction. New York: Oxford University Press. ⁴Elliot, J.G. & Grigorenko, E.L. (2014). The Dyslexia Debate. Cambridge University press..

Inadequate educational system

Children benefit from having a literacy-engaged family and an effective school; however, when one is not available, the other can sometimes compensate. From research in developed countries, it is evident that children who begin their formal schooling with a substantial cognitive disadvantage are quite often also from the worst schools. Schools with a high concentration of children from poor backgrounds may be unable to support learning due to a mismatch between need and resources, just as for poor families. Consequently, they are unable to fulfil their social mandate to provide a level playing field in which all children—irrespective of their family circumstances—are given a fair chance to succeed.

Professor Deborah Stipek⁵ Barbarin, O.A., & Aikens, N. (2015). Overcoming the educational disadvantages of poor children: How much do teacher preparation, workload, and expectations matter. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, Vol 85(2), Mar 2015, 101-105. has argued that obvious differences in school and classroom resources contribute to and magnify poor school achievement. Accordingly, schools may increase rather than decrease the adverse effects of family economic disadvantage for poor children.

Differences in learning of poor children do not arise entirely from inequitable facilities, teaching materials, and books. They may also result from the low quality of instructional interactions and ineffective teaching practices. Better academic outcomes occur in classrooms that are not only rich in learning materials but also have teachers with high expectations of students, warm teacher–student interaction, adequate preparation to teach, and possibilities of in-service training or professional development. Experiences in these classrooms are characterised by opportunities for active engagement with materials—particularly opportunities for

practicing reading and writing. It is possible to put many of these things into practice despite the limited resources of a school. In a 'dyslexia-friendly' school, everyone (from the principal to the teachers and teaching assistants) is aware of the issues surrounding reading disability⁶Snowling, M.J. (2019) Dyslexia. A very short introduction. New York: Oxford University Press..

The quality of teachers' practice

The quality of learning interaction between the teacher and students together with how well teaching is organised in the classroom both affect children's motivation to learn and educational attainment. Systematic and well-structured reading instruction and reading interventions improve children's reading skills and support those who struggle with their reading⁷Elliot, J.G. & Grigorenko, E.L. (2014). The Dyslexia Debate. Cambridge University press.⁸Fletcher, J.M., Lyon, G.R., Fuchs, L.S. & Barnes, M.A. (2019). Learning disabilities. From identification to intervention. Second edition. New York: The Guilford Press..

Reading instruction used in the classroom

The systematic reading instruction and teaching methods used by the teacher are very important for children's reading skills development⁹Fletcher, J.M., Lyon, G.R., Fuchs, L.S. & Barnes, M.A. (2019). Learning disabilities. From identification to intervention. Second edition. New York: The Guilford Press.. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers are

aware of the best classroom practices.

Challenges in orthographic structure of the language

Every language has its own orthographic structure that affects learning to read¹⁰Aro, T. & Ahonen, T (eds.) (2011) Assessment of learning disabilities: Cooperation between teachers, psychologists and parents. African edition. University of Turku and Niilo Mäki Institute, Jyväskylä, Finland.¹¹Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K. (2018). Ending the reading wars: Reading acquisition from novice to expert. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 19, 5–51.. What differs between languages is the nature of the visual forms and their phonological forms. The mappings that need to be created are at different levels of ‘grain size’ in different languages. In languages with transparent orthography (such as Bantu languages, Italian, and Finnish), there is a regular connection between letters and sounds. We can say that these languages are fine-grained in alphabets that connect letters and sounds. In deep orthographies such as in English these are the least regular and coarse-grained, particularly for spelling. In more irregular languages it takes longer to become a reader because of the complexity of letter–sound connections. In transparent orthographies, children usually learn to decode accurately in quite short practice periods. It is also well recognised that in regular orthographies, reading difficulty tends to focus on the speed of reading instead of decoding in the sense that reading fluency does not automatise (or the child remains as slow reader). (Read more about this topic ‘Learning to read in different orthographies’).

References

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Additional reading

[The Home Literacy Environment in an African Context](#)