

Perseverance

Tina Hollenbeck

Shortly after my older daughter started learning to read, I noticed something unusual about her “word attack” skills. She quickly mastered initial consonants and many blends and digraphs, but she seemed unable to remember short-vowel sounds in the context of words, even though she could recite them in isolation.

I fretted about this for months, all the while plugging away with her at both phonics and “real reading” . . . and trying to hide my concern. I didn’t want Rachel to have reading problems, but I didn’t want to bury my head in the sand if she did.

Then, shortly after Rachel turned 6, I took her younger sister for an eye exam. Rachel had passed her recent vision screening, but I was prompted to get her tested, too. And, *voilà!* Rachel is far-sighted, so she had a hard time making out what letters she was supposed to decode. But on her first day with glasses, she breezed through a book that had been impossible the day before. And then she steadily progressed all throughout that fall.

But early the next winter, she hit another wall, seeming unable to consistently apply some other basic phonics rules. Conversely, she used picture and context cues to figure out all kinds of undecodable words. But I still worried. So I attended a seminar that described a method commonly used with dyslexic and dysgraphic students. Some—though not most—of the presenter’s descriptions fit Rachel. So I was in a quandary again. But that night I tried to figure out how we could afford a tutor.

The very next day, though, Rachel picked up a book that, as before, had been impossibly hard the previous day. And—bam!—she read through it beautifully, which I took as a sign to put tutoring on the back burner. And we marched on through good and not-so-good days alike.

Rachel has always loved to look through books, and I know she makes up stories to go with the pictures; she’s got a great imagination. However, even as her decoding skills improved, she rarely chose to actually try reading them. Which, of course, brought more angst my way! But then out of the blue she recently fell in love with Amelia Bedelia and Junie B. Jones. And one day she gleefully pulled out a Stepping Stone chapter book and announced, “I want to read this to you!” At a 2.5 reading level, that was a challenge for her, but one she was thrilled to accomplish.

Through all of this, I’ve recognized two principles that, in teaching and life in general, have usually been mere “head knowledge” for me. First, learning to read—and all learning—is a *process*. And it happens in fits and starts. Second, one must *persevere* through roadblocks and bumps to emerge on the other side of a challenge.

Even today, you may have a child who struggles with something you are teaching. It seems that he’ll never learn his math facts, she can’t master her flute fingerings, or he’ll forever fail to grasp the basic format of a three-paragraph essay. As a parent-teacher, it’s hard in the midst of the

storm to see the possibility of a clear day on the other side. But, barring major learning difficulties, progress will come in fits and starts . . . *if* both your child and you persevere.

Biographical Information

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