

“I Never Get Enough Turns”

The Response to Intervention (RtI) Model of Instruction: An Explanation for Parents of Struggling Readers

by Nancy Alemian Telian, MS, CCC-SLP

On a hot, summer morning in early July, at 7:00 A.M., a car pulled into the driveway of my home office. After sitting in the car, politely waiting for their scheduled 7:15 appointment, a young mom and her six-year-old son walked hand-in-hand to my doorstep. Nervous and apprehensive (not the boy, but the mom), red-eyed from an early morning cry (again, not the boy, but the mom), and armed with a box filled with several 20-page evaluation reports, school progress reports, worksheets from school, and other collectibles that would be easily recognized by other parents working through the special education system, she hesitantly knocked on my door.

Prior to coming she had explained that her son (to conceal his identity in this article I'll refer to him as Noah), had a history of speech and language problems and had repeated kindergarten. She was very worried about Noah because he was now entering first grade and was behind in his reading skills. Although he had already received instruction in a research-based, clinically proven program in school, Noah was not making sufficient progress. Through talking with his mom, I learned that his reading group each day was comprised of six children. We both agreed that he was not getting enough intensity of instruction, and that he would benefit greatly from a temporary period of individualized (one-to-one) instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics.

After I led them into the office where I regularly provide reading therapy to struggling readers, Noah began settling in and playing with the toys on the table while this mom shared some insight regarding her feelings. She said that she had been very worried about bringing Noah to me for therapy. She didn't want him to feel like something was wrong with him or that he was different from other kids, because he was such a sensitive child. She then relayed a conversation she and Noah had had in the car on the way over, one that made her feel better about the decision.

Here is the conversation between Noah and his mom:

Mom: “Honey, I'm taking you to a nice lady who'll be helping you with your reading. She's like your speech teacher in school, but she does reading, too. She's the lady who drew all those funny little pictures on the letters you've been using in school.”

Noah: “Like King Ed? I love King Ed!”

Mom: “Yes, honey, like King Ed. This will be so much fun and you'll get even better with your reading, too.”

Noah: “How many other kids are gonna be there for reading?”

Mom: “Oh, honey. Oh, I'm so sorry. There won't be any other kids there for you. It will only be you and the lady, honey. You'll be the only one this time, but it'll be....”

Noah: “Oh good, cuz I never get enough turns!”

If your child is struggling with reading, it's important to find out if he or she is getting “enough turns” during reading instruction time. I know this may sound like an odd suggestion, but if your child isn't getting enough turns, it may be one of the reasons he or she is not progressing. Even if a research-based, clinically proven method of instruction is being used, as in Noah's case, if your child is not getting enough practice with the skills being taught, he or she may not progress fast enough to meet important goals or benchmarks that predict continued success in reading.

To ensure that your child is receiving the level of intensity of instruction he or she needs, you should ask his or her teacher the following questions:

1. What program is being used in the classroom, and what program is being used as the intervention program if your child is receiving extra support?
2. Are the programs research-based and clinically proven for struggling readers?
3. Is the intervention program being implemented purely, or are the teachers using various methods with my child? If so, what other methods or programs are being used?
4. Has the instructor implementing the specialized reading intervention program been officially trained in the program?
5. How much time is being devoted to my child's reading instruction in the classroom, and how long (in minutes) are the intervention sessions?
6. How many times per week is my child receiving extra help?
7. Is my child receiving small group instruction or individual (one-on-one) instruction?
8. If my child is in a group, how many other students are in this group and are they at the same approximate skill level?
9. What method is being used to regularly assess my child's progress?
10. How long (years, months...) has my child been receiving specialized support in reading?

These questions, and the answers you receive, will help you to make better decisions regarding planning of instruction for your child.

In many schools across the country, the Response to Intervention (RtI) model of instruction is being used successfully to help make informed decisions for students. With RtI, using what is known as a universal screening tool, such as DIBELS or AIMSWEB, all students are tested three times per year to see if they are meeting important reading benchmarks. Research-based reading instruction, as part of the regular education curriculum in the classroom, can lead to less referrals for intervention and special education services. The regular education, core classroom instruction is referred to as Tier One instruction. Students are not tested or labeled as reading impaired or learning disabled until they have failed to succeed with Tier One instruction in the classroom.

If they are not making sufficient progress on skills that have been shown to predict future reading success, students may be moved into Tier Two instruction. The level of intensity of instruction is increased with more time spent on reading, smaller groups with more targeted instruction, and maybe even a different approach. In Tier Two, progress monitoring sessions (quick assessments) are often performed twice per month to find out if students are making enough progress.

For students not making enough progress with Tier Two instruction, Tier Three instruction may be recommended. This entails the highest level of intensity of instruction, many times involving only two students in the group, or even individual (one-on-one) instruction. Progress monitoring is often performed once per week, at this level, to ensure that progress is being made. Everything should be done to ensure that students are making progress, and the tiered system used in RtI has been shown to be very effective at this.

Noah had been receiving Tier Two instruction in school. Despite the fact that he was not showing sufficient progress with this Tier Two instruction, he had not yet been moved to Tier Three instruction. This was the level of intensity he needed in order to make progress. Seen alone for three (one hour) sessions per week throughout the summer, Noah finally received the intensity he needed to succeed with the same research-based program he'd been using in a large group setting in school (Lively Letters). He went up several years in his phonemic awareness and phonics skills in a matter of two months of this tutoring. Due to this temporary period of intensive instruction, Noah was better able to perform in instruction settings that were less intense. Noah was able to enter first grade as a reader, on the path of reading success.

It is very important that the kinds of skills being tested during progress monitoring are those that have been shown in the research to predict reading success or failure. Some of these early predictive skills are how quickly

students can accurately naming letter names and/or sounds given individual printed letters, sounding out nonsense words (involving the phonemic awareness skill of sound blending), and breaking spoken words into individual sounds (another phonemic awareness skill). Although not as predictable as the above mentioned skills, for first grade and older students, oral reading fluency (how accurately and quickly a student can read out loud) should be measured, as well.

Although it is sometimes difficult for administrators and teachers to arrange for students to be seen intensively in school settings, it can be, and is being, done successful through the RtI model in many school districts throughout the nation. If parents “know what they need to know” about RtI, they can help make this happen for their children. All students in our schools should be given the opportunity that Noah had that summer – the chance to develop the skills and hit important benchmarks that will enable them to become successful readers. Simply “having enough turns” can be a life- changing opportunity for many children.

Nancy Telian, MS, CCC-SLP, has been a practicing speech language pathologist for 32 years, with 20 years specializing in literacy. As a result of her reading therapy sessions, Nancy has changed the lives of hundreds of students over the years. The author of the Lively Letters, Nancy is co-founder and co-director of Reading with TLC with Penny Castagnozzi, who is also the author of Sight Words You Can See. With its roots beginning in Massachusetts twenty years ago, Reading with TLC is recognized internationally for helping students of all ages develop the critical skills of reading. For parents interested in tutoring, and for those who would like more information on the programs and trainings, there is a very informative website at www.readingwithtlc.com.