



EXPERT ANSWERS

**Dr. Kevin Feldman** on  
Helping Older Kids  
who Struggle with Reading





## **Dr. Kevin Feldman on Helping Older Kids who Struggle with Reading**

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## The Expert Answers: Dr. Kevin Feldman

### Kids with Reading Problems in Middle and High School

#### SchwabLearning.org Asks:

Recently, there's been a lot of research and discussion about early intervention and teaching basic reading skills to kids before the age of nine. But what happens to kids with delayed reading skills when they enter middle and high school? Are accommodations in the classroom enough? Is it too late to teach reading?

#### Kevin Feldman, Ed.D., Answers:

While I certainly support and am whole-heartedly behind the whole notion of early intervention and prevention, the fast answer is it's never too late. It is only harder. We have very good evidence [of this] from a number of studies. Researchers like Louisa Moats and Barbara Foorman at the University of Houston Medical Center, Sally Shaywitz at Yale, and Don Deshler at the University of Kansas and his group have clearly documented that **adolescents, even adults, can dramatically improve their literacy skills.**

Kids who struggle with reading don't need a dramatically or categorically different approach [to reading instruction]. We've explored that issue, and they don't need to be walking balance beams, writing in the air, doing esoteric, strange things. What they need is what everyone needs — only they need more of it, with more precision, and with more careful adjustment because they find reading and writing more confusing. The good news is that with this increase in time and careful attention to the details of teaching — and that's really the "rocket science" [of teaching reading] that Louisa Moats talks about — what we find is that virtually all students can make tremendous growth in their literacy.

“It's very, very important that whatever approach folks use, that it's really done in partnership with adolescents.”

It doesn't happen overnight, but, for virtually all kids, we can close that gap. Now they may never be fabulous readers, but they can all get dramatically better and, therefore, become more independent and have more choice and agency in their lives. They [can] grow up and become contributing adults, meanwhile flying on their strengths. I think that's an important balance: We're working at shoring up those things that we're not so good at, but simultaneously really focusing on those things that we are good at. So we don't fall into the "Oh, I'm disabled across-the-board," but say, "I have challenges in reading and writing, and I'm working on them, but there are many other things I'm really good at."

Nobody's good at everything, but we can all get better at things that are important, through time, teaching, practice, and lots of support from those who love us.

**Improving adolescents' literacy skills is more difficult, and it's more difficult for a number of reasons. One major reason is this whole thing of attitude.** We find that a lot of adolescents — understandably, if they've been struggling with literacy — have really developed negative attitudes about reading, writing, the whole subject of dealing with improving their academic skills. There's no simple solution here. But it's very, very important that whatever approach folks use, that it's really done in partnership with adolescents. They [must] really understand that improving their reading and writing skills is not

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## Kids with Reading Problems in Middle and High School

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something that adults do to them. It's really something that is done with them. That means forging a partnership so that the kids and young people understand the specifics of what's going on — what we can do, how long it will take — so that they have ambitious but realistic goals.

The other part of the question is, are accommodations enough? And this is something that I've run into in schools all the time. By middle school or high school, for students who may be in special education or have been identified as having reading difficulties, the entire focus [of their programs] is on accommodation. And there's not a focus on really closing that literacy gap or accelerating literacy skills. It's almost as if people have tacitly given up and are saying, "You know what? You'll always read at, say, a third- or fourth-grade level. There's nothing we can do about that. So we're just going to focus on giving you books on tape, advanced organizers, and other things to accommodate your reading difficulty."

My recommendation is we need to work on both. These are not either-or options. **We can close that literacy gap by direct focus, instruction, and practice — at a student's instructional level and using age-appropriate materials — and work on appropriate accommodations simultaneously.** That really means that parents have to be educated and informed about these processes and not get caught in that either-or dilemma, either accommodations or direct instruction in reading. We can have both.



## The Expert Answers: Dr. Kevin Feldman

### How Parents Can Help Their Older Kids with Reading Problems

#### SchwabLearning.org Asks:

How can parents help their older kids who struggle with reading improve literacy skills?

#### Kevin Feldman, Ed.D., Answers:

As a parent of a 12-year-old who's behaving very much like a teenager, I can personally relate. I started my teaching career working with junior high school kids who had emotional and behavioral reading difficulties. Parents can help in all kinds of ways.

I think one fundamental way that parents help is by being vigilant in their encouragement. We're the ones who really hold out that vision for kids of a future that is different from today. Young people really live moment by moment; the weekend is just about as far into the future as they can project themselves. We, as parents, have to have this long-term picture in mind. So one area is to just really be encouraging all the time.

Now, specifically about literacy, I think one of the ways that we can be encouraging is to really work hard at finding **age-appropriate, but also level-appropriate, books and materials that our kids can read**. The good news here is there are more and more materials being published all the time for older kids, meaning fourth grade and above, who have literacy challenges. So there are a number of publishers, Scholastic, Don Johnston, National Geographic, a number of folks were putting out both expository or informational material — stuff about volcanoes, skateboarding, skiing, as well as storybooks or narratives, novels that are very appropriate for young people.

“They have to practice [reading by using] materials that they can actually read pretty well. That's how we get better at anything.”

I think one of the things we have to be sensitive to, as parents, is that reading grade-level material can be enormously frustrating. And while we have to work with our young people in regard to their academic assignments, we also have to be clear that they have to practice [reading by using] materials that they can actually read pretty well. That's how we get better at anything.

**Parents also need to maintain active involvement with schools.** Now that's an obvious one, but sometimes our tendency is to be either too trusting or too adversarial. And I'm really recommending sort of a middle ground, where we're informed and really advocates for our kids, but we're not approaching it from an adversarial point of view. And where we assume that we all want what is best for kids. But we also really follow up and make sure that the reading class has those age-appropriate reading materials and actual research-based curriculum materials for direct instruction in place.

To sum up, the main thing that parents can do is really twofold: First is to be active, encouraging, and involved. The second thing is [building] that real partnership with the schools to make sure that our kids are getting what they need.

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## How Parents Can Help Their Older Kids with Reading Problems

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**SchwabLearning.org: What about technology in that respect? Is there any role that it can play for parents who are helping their kids improve reading?**

I'm sort of a reluctant convert to the potential of technology, being inherently skeptical, and understanding that we live in a culture that is often seduced by the new. If it's new, [we think] it has to be better. Given that, I think that there are a lot of things that technology can do.

Certainly there's some wonderful assistive technology. And websites like CAST specialize as a clearinghouse for assistive technology in conjunction with Harvard University, which links to all kinds of other excellent assistive technology out there that can help kids. For example, what they call e-readers. When they do research on the Internet with an e-reader, they can have any website, the text or material, actually read out loud to them using an e-reader. And there are similar sorts of things that are relatively inexpensive and are pretty useful and effective.

There's also a burgeoning [educational] software market. So there are not only books on tape, but books on CD-ROM's with additional textual and graphic information. There are actual reading programs that have CD-ROM support. Now, there's also a lot of stuff out there promising the moon that could be very expensive and that doesn't necessarily have strong, empirical evidence [of effectiveness] behind it. So I'm always skeptical about these things; if they promise the moon and they cost a lot, watch out.



## The Expert Answers: Dr. Kevin Feldman

### Learning New Skills for Expository Reading

#### SchwabLearning.org Asks:

Will early intervention solve all reading problems, or are new skills needed after third grade?

#### Kevin Feldman, Ed.D., Answers:

No, we haven't learned everything that we need to learn by third grade. There's this dichotomy which is often utilized which is: you learn to read K-3 and you read to learn grades four and above. But reading people will tell you that's an oversimplification, that **you're literally learning how to read in ever more sophisticated and nuanced ways all the way through**. I mean, when I was working with graduate students — and these were people working on master's degrees — they were still learning how to read. Only now, they were learning how to read research articles and how to deal with abstracts and tables. What shifts, though, is the amount of vocabulary that you have to process and the way that books and texts are organized.

That fourth-grade-and-above kind of reading that we do, which is referred to as **expository reading — informational kinds of materials, whether they be articles on a website or classical textbooks — is tremendously more challenging than reading stories**. And students do need direct instruction in the kinds of strategies that are helpful in reading this more complex expository, or informational, material. For example, teaching them how to pre-read a chapter: How to look at the title and predict what kinds of questions will be answered and what kinds of topics will be covered; to read the introduction; to read the major boldfaced headings; to look at the pictures, the charts, and the graphs; to go to the very end, read the summary; to look at if there are any questions, and to read the questions before they read the chapter. To really orient their thinking about what they're going to be learning before they read is a very effective reading strategy that good readers utilize in this more challenging text and material. It's very different from, say, reading a chapter from *Harry Potter* or *Baby-sitter's Club*, which you just dive into and are swept away by the story.

**There is a lot to be learned and a lot that can be taught, and students who struggle, we find, often don't have these strategies**. It's not that they can't be taught. I mean, **Don Deshler and his group at the University of Kansas have 20 years of good research evidence that these specific learning strategies can be discretely taught and that adolescents can be very, very successful**. But they need good direct instruction in the strategies, and they need specific assistance initially in generalizing them to their science text, their history text, their math text. And then over time, they can really incorporate them into their own independent repertoires.

And it's really [a skill you develop] all the way through, as long as you're engaged in school or any kind of academic pursuit. If you're reading the manual for a new piece of software on the job, oftentimes that's a real different kind of reading than reading the newspaper. So it never ends.



## The Expert Answers: Dr. Kevin Feldman

### Improving Teen's Reading Speed and Comprehension

#### SchwabLearning.org Asks:

What can be done to improve reading speed and comprehension skills?

#### Kevin Feldman, Ed.D., Answers:

It is not done simply — like most complicated things in life. The recent report of the National Reading Panel had a whole chapter on reading fluency. And that's really what we're talking about is reading fluency and automaticity, which are directly linked to comprehension.

When you think about it, in order to comprehend, one must have all one's attention focused on the meaning. If you're reading slowly and struggling with individual words, sounding them out, even if you're sounding them out correctly, all of your mental attention is wrapped up in the actual decoding. So you're not paying attention to the point of reading, which is obviously the meaning. We find that fluency and automaticity are a very big deal.

#### SchwabLearning.org: How do we help increase their reading fluency?

You could sum it up in a phrase, and that is "**guided oral repeated reading** ." There's a notion of guided, meaning you're either reading with a prerecorded cassette, as in programs like Read Naturally, which you can visit at [readnaturally.com](http://readnaturally.com) and find out about, or you're working with a tutor, with programs like Great Leaps. You can visit [greatleaps.com](http://greatleaps.com) and find out about that. Or, you're just informally working with a partner, with a parent, with an older sibling. What's important is the notion that it's not just practice.

It's the old adage of Madeline Hunter's that "practice doesn't make perfect, practice makes permanent." It's good practice [that's needed]; that's why this guided practice issue, but it's the repeated reading. We find that we have to engage students in reading text that they can read accurately. But they have to read it oftentimes three, four, five, six times to be actually fluent. And what happens is, if they engage in that guided oral repeated reading regularly with short, say 150- to 200-word passages, over time that generalizes and their overall rate does increase.

“Reading fluency and automaticity ... are directly linked to comprehension.”

That doesn't happen overnight. It doesn't happen with just one session. But we find it is effective to use programs, for example, like the ones I mentioned, *Read Naturally*, *Great Leaps*, another program from Sopris West, called REWARDS, which is at [sopriswest.com](http://sopriswest.com). We have good examples of research validated programs that engage students in this guided oral repeated reading which indeed improves their fluency, which then improves their comprehension. There are no short cuts, but it absolutely can be done and is being done in classrooms and clinics across the country.

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## Improving Teen's Reading Speed and Comprehension

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### **SchwabLearning.org: How do we get a middle school or high school kid to read out loud to us?**

In silent reading we never know, Is it actual reading? Is it skimming? Is it spacing out? Who knows what's going on? And, on the issue about how to [approach it], there are a couple of things. One is reading materials that are actually of interest to the students. So what makes programs like *Read Naturally* or REWARDS so effective is that they carefully select short but coherent passages that stand alone, that actually communicate interesting information. For example, they'll read about the woman who invented the potato chip. Now that won't help them pass their SAT exams, but it is interesting. And it is legitimate information.

One element is reading short, coherent passages about information that is of interest to an adolescent, and the second is make it a game, much like a computer game. Have you ever wondered why students or young people or people of any age will play the same game over and over? And you ask them, "Gosh, why are you doing this?" And they say, "Oh, Mom — oh, Dad, I got to get to the next level," right? It's this issue of having a specific goal. Say I want to be able to read at 80 words a minute. And my first time through I'm at 45. Part of it is having something worth reading. The other part of it is making it a game, where we have a daily goal that we want to reach. And it engages students in making it a bit more playful.



## The Expert Answers: Dr. Kevin Feldman

### The Benefit of Peers and Professionals Helping Teens Learn to Read

#### SchwabLearning.org Asks:

When teenagers become resistant and won't listen to their parents, where can the family turn for help?

#### Kevin Feldman, Ed.D., Answers:

There are some things we can do. I think one thing is to partner with folks at the school or find local tutoring or clinics or other kinds of support other than the parent. The parent oftentimes can't really be the best tutor. We're so emotionally involved with our kids. We can be very supportive and encouraging, but oftentimes we really need to make sure that the tutoring is [performed by] an independent, third party who doesn't have that emotional overlay that we parents have with our kids.

Something else to do is connect our youngsters with others who are a little bit further down the line [in overcoming reading difficulties]. One of the most powerful things that I've seen is — for example, in some high schools that I've worked with where they're working with struggling readers — they'll have, say, juniors and seniors, who have already been in the reading class and either have exited or progressed to higher levels. They'll come in and they'll actually buddy up with the incoming freshmen or sophomores.

And oftentimes, it's hearing the same message, but from a messenger who's closer in age, looks more like me, who says, "You know, I was right where you were when I was 15. And I gave this thing a go and now I'm not an all-star reader, but you know what? I'm reading way better than I ever have, and I can actually do most of this work on my own. And I'm planning on going to college" or whatever it is. In other words, hearing it from another kid.

So this idea of a **slightly older mentor who's been through similar circumstances**. And we have a number of programs around the country where we're doing that systematically because we recognize that who the messenger is — oftentimes the message is the same — affects a young person and adolescent differently when they hear it from a slightly older adolescent, rather than hearing it from Mom or Dad.

So part of it is hooking you up with quality programs that actually work. Part of it is engaging them with other kids who've been there and can sort of provide that role model and that support. And I think the last piece is to recognize that we as parents really can't do it all. Oftentimes we're not the best tutors; our job is to really encourage and support our kids, then connect them with an independent third party, a college kid in the neighborhood, even an aunt or uncle, a next-door neighbor, somebody else who can do this more effectively than we can.

[Otherwise] we can inadvertently wind up in this adversarial relationship with our kids [when we're] coming from a place of love and support and concern. But the kids perceive it as intrusion and

“ [Parents] can be very supportive and encouraging, but oftentimes we really need to make sure that the tutoring is [performed by] an independent, third party who doesn't have that emotional overlay ... ”

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## The Benefit of Peers and Professionals Helping Teens Learn to Read

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“They’re trying to make me do something I don’t want to do.” It becomes a major source of conflict and frustration.

**SchwabLearning.org: If parents want to have their teenagers tutored in reading and written language, who would they seek out? What kinds of titles and background and training do they look for?**

I would recommend, for parents who are interested in [how people learn to read], a book called *Straight Talk about Reading*, co-authored by Susan Hall, a parent of an adolescent who struggled with reading, and Louisa Moats, one of our country’s most respected reading experts. [The book includes] lots of resources and national organizations and a very specific way of thinking about this.

In general, [parents should] look for an established track record. In other words, I’d be less enamored with various letters after the name — M.A., Ph.D., Ed.D., M.D. — [than with finding] other people in the community that I could call who have had their sons and daughters engaged in this process — in this particular tutoring or at this specific clinic — that really got results. So a proven track record would really be number one. Some of these individuals are also aligned with national organizations that have high credibility, organizations like the Council on Exceptional Children, or CEC, for example, or the International Dyslexia Association, the former Orton-Gillingham Society.

But most importantly, because I live in a relatively small town myself, I really recommend both a proven track record and endorsements from local professionals. Not just some person’s name on a website that is from who knows where, but somebody who is a local school psychologist or a local special education teacher or a local principal. Somebody you could go talk to and they could say, “Oh, yes, this clinic here — we’ve been sending kids there for the last five years, and, boy, the feedback from parents has been great.” Keep it local and [focus on] people that you could talk to face-to-face, professionals, school folks, psychology folks, and other parents.



## The Expert Answers: Dr. Kevin Feldman

### High School Students and Adult Literacy Programs

#### SchwabLearning.org Asks:

Can adult literacy programs help high school students who are struggling to read?

#### Kevin Feldman, Ed.D., Answers:

I haven't seen any research one way or the other. I'm certainly positively predisposed to public libraries in general and to anything that's organized through the local public libraries. They tend to use local people, and they tend to have high credibility. But I haven't seen any specific research looking at that, so I can't say unequivocally, "Oh, yes, this is exactly the way to go." But that would certainly be one of the resources, adult literacy programs.

To be honest with you, adult literacy hasn't really gotten near the airplay that beginning reading and supporting students in the elementary grades has. I was just reading the current issue of *Scientific Studies of Reading*. It's a special issue on reading development in adults. And in the introduction to it, Venezky and Sabatini<sup>1</sup> talk about this issue of reading development in adults — really meaning late teens — and that that [particular] struggle with reading hasn't been given near the attention that it needs. It's really a burgeoning field. But it really looks like many of the issues are the same [as those for younger students].

But a major, major difference is this issue of attitude or the "scars" — the baggage of having failed at something that's so important and the defense mechanisms [that are part of that]. One of the major problems with adult literacy programs is the dropout rate. People go once or twice, maybe looking for the simple solution, the magic answer, the quick fix, and they "don't get the cure," and they leave when it's a long-term commitment. It would be akin to, I don't know, learning a foreign language, a musical instrument, losing weight. It doesn't happen overnight; it really takes a sustained effort.

“It's very important that young people understand [the goal and rationale of the methods selected], so they feel treated respectfully and in a way appropriate to young adults.”

**SchwabLearning.org: So, there is no one program that is going to do this for all kids, but a lot of programs that could be helpful to kids, is that right?**

Absolutely. The main thing is sticking with it and making sure that you have reason to believe that [the program you select] is a fit for your child's needs. If you know, for example, that your child is a reasonably accurate decoder — meaning they can figure out words, they can read them — but they read so laboriously, that it's really the fluency and automaticity [that's the problem], then I would ask, say, the local reading clinic or the adult literacy class, "Will you be directly addressing this issue?" So I think part of it is making sure that there's a match between what is being done and the needs of my son or daughter. While there are many programs out there that have a track record — programs like Lindamood-Bell, Orton-Gillingham, The Wilson Reading Program — research has told us no one program works for all kids. What we need are [reading instructors] who understand that and who are flexible enough that they can match what they do to the assessed needs of the individual kid. It's

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## High School Students and Adult Literacy Programs

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important to identify exactly where the breakdown occurs, because it's discouraging for kids to have to go through something simple that they already know.

And particularly with adolescents, [we have] to make sure that they're not treated like, sort of passive recipients, or like they're just automatons on an assembly line. It should be like [consulting] an expert doctor, who really explains exactly what's going on and works in partnership with you: "Here's your role. Here's my role. Together we can really make a lot of progress here."

So it's very important that young people understand why we're doing, say, the guided or overheard reading. Or why we're working on sight words, or why we're working on pre-reading strategies of chapters, or whatever it is. So they understand the rationale, so they feel treated respectfully and in a way appropriate to young adults, not treated in a babyish or a remedial kind of way.



## The Expert Answers: Dr. Kevin Feldman

### How Older Kids Can Improve Their Writing Skills

#### SchwabLearning.org Asks:

How can older students improve their writing skills?

#### Kevin Feldman, Ed.D., Answers:

You know, it's interesting that here in California — and my read of studies from around the country suggests that this is relatively consistent — we find across the board, whether students are doing pretty well or not so well, that they're usually doing better in reading than they are in writing. So we find that this is kind of a generic issue. That in general, our students, our young people are not writing as well as they should be or could be.

And the answer [to how to address this issue] very much mirrors the answer about how to address reading issues: It's a combination of **excellent instruction and age-appropriate practice — and lots of it**. For example, say you have a student who is in middle school, and they have to do a report on some famous person in American history in their eighth-grade U.S. history class. It's important that they have a strategy for how to gather information, how to organize that information, how to execute a rough draft, how to edit that draft. There's got to be a step-by-step process, and it's got to be taught and supported.

So what parents can do? Really, a couple of things. One is to partner with the schools, to make sure that we understand what the expectations are in writing, and to break the expectations down [into specific skills]. So, for example, it's really helpful, if the school's not requiring it, to support your kids by[providing] an assignment calendar where they see: Oh, this major report, an eighth-grade biography report, for example, is due in three weeks. We then help them come up with an outline by the end of week one. It doesn't mean that we have to necessarily be doing it with them, but just orienting them. "Make sure that you have this outline by the end of week one. Make sure that you've gathered research on these eight topics (about the person's educational background, their contributions, their politics, whatever the elements are)."

So, breaking it into manageable parts and then monitoring and supporting the kids to accomplish the parts. Not waiting until two nights before and then having the parent write the whole thing, which is what we find typically happens. Either the kids don't do it, or they do it poorly, or the parents wind up stepping in and writing it for them. And so it's really a matter of understanding what the requirement is, helping our students break it into manageable parts, and then working with the schools to make sure that they're being taught strategies for how to accomplish these parts.

“It's a matter of understanding what the requirement is, helping our students break it into manageable parts, and then working with the schools to make sure that they're being taught strategies to accomplish these parts.”

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## How Older Kids Can Improve Their Writing Skills

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In sum, it's very similar to [the approach to] learning to read:

- We have to really look and analyze what needs to be taught. What are the expectations? What are the standards?
- and Then separate it into manageable pieces.
- Then give them lots and lots of instruction and lots of practice.

**SchwabLearning.org: So parents are really helping their kids with a lot of their work habits and their organizational skills — and supervising that at home.**

Yes. That's a big part of it. And that's something that I think is very appropriate for parents to do. I know we've been doing that with our seventh-grade son, and at first there's quite a lot of resistance. You know, it's, "Get out that assignment calendar. Okay, what's due?" And I show Max, my son, my calendar and say, "Hey, this is exactly how I've managed my time at work." I get a lot of grumbling, but I think over time we back out. We monitor or we do less and less as he shows us that he's really taking responsibility for it.

But earlier in the year, I was monitoring it every night. When he came home, I wanted to see what the new assignments were for that day. Did he have them? Of course, at first he would say, "Oh, nothing, Dad." So I'd say, "I don't know about that." And we would call up one of the neighbor kids in his class and say, "How about that science report?" "Oh Gosh, Dad, I forgot about that." So it's two parts: It's modeling — such as modeling with your own calendar — and then monitoring.



## The Expert Answers: Dr. Kevin Feldman

### Resources & References

#### Books

Straight Talk About Reading

[www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0809228572/schwabfoundation](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0809228572/schwabfoundation)

By Susan L. Hall and Louisa C. Moats

Parenting a Struggling Reader

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0767907760/schwabfoundation/>

By Susan L. Hall, Louisa Cook Moats

#### Websites

SchwabLearning.org

What Research Tells Us about Learning to Read

<http://www.schwablearning.org/Articles.asp?r=22>

SchwabLearning.org

What the Science Says: Effective Reading Interventions for Kids with Learning Disabilities

<http://www.schwablearning.org/Articles.asp?r=318>

National Reading Panel

Report Summary: Teaching Children to Read

<http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org/Publications/summary.htm>

SchwabLearning.org

Brain Research and Reading

<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=35>

SchwabLearning.org

Susan Hall on Reading and Parental Involvement (pdf)

[http://www.schwablearning.org/pdfs/expert\\_hall.pdf](http://www.schwablearning.org/pdfs/expert_hall.pdf)

SchwabLearning.org

Reading Comprehension — Research Informs Us

<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=499>

#### References

1, Venezky, Richard L. and John P. Sabatini. "Introduction to This Special Issue: Reading Development in Adults." *Scientific Studies of Reading*, July 1, 2002 v6 i3 p217(4).


**Visit SchwabLearning's Online Resources**

**SchwabLearning.org** is a parent's guide to helping kids with learning difficulties.

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- **Connect** with other parents who know what you are going through. You'll find support and inspiration in their personal stories and on our Parent-to-Parent message boards.
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