K12 ACADEMICS — A FIELD GUIDE FOR FAMILIES

The Complete Guide to Literacy

5 guides to reading & math development — the science of reading, milestones & supporting a struggling reader.

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2026 EDITION

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Understanding Reading

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UNDERSTANDING READING

The Science of Reading

WHAT IT IS

The science of reading is the large body of research — from cognitive science, education, and linguistics — on how children actually learn to read . It's not a program or a fad; it's the evidence base. States across the country are now rebuilding reading instruction around it, because the research is clear: most children need explicit...

HOW IT WORKS

A helpful model is the Simple View of Reading : skilled reading = decoding (turning letters into sounds and words) × language comprehension (understanding those words). Both are essential — a child who can't decode can't read, and a child who decodes but doesn't understand isn't truly reading. Scarborough's Reading Rope expands...

TYPES & OPTIONS

- **Phonemic awareness** — Hearing and working with the individual sounds in spoken words
- **Phonics** — Connecting letters to sounds to decode written words
- **Fluency** — Reading accurately, quickly, and with expression
- **Vocabulary** — Knowing the meaning of words
- **Comprehension** — Understanding and making meaning from text

AT A GLANCE

What	**The research on how kids learn...**
Five pillars	**Phonemic awareness, phonics, f...**
Core idea	**Reading = decoding × lan...**
Approach	**Structured Literacy**
Why now	**The #1 education priority nati...**
Not	**A single program or fad**

WHY IT MATTERS

The approach the science of reading points to is called Structured Literacy — explicit, systematic, cumulative instruction (especially in phonics and phonemic awareness) that benefits all readers and is essential for students with dyslexia. This is the same approach recommended for dyslexia, which is why the two topics are closely linked.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **Is the science of reading a program?** — No — it's the research base; programs can align with it (or not).
- **What's the Simple View of Reading?** — Reading = decoding × language comprehension — both are needed.
- **What are the five pillars?** — Phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.
- **What is Structured Literacy?** — Explicit, systematic instruction the research supports — good for all, vital for dyslexia.
- **Why are states changing reading instruction?** — Because the evidence shows explicit, systematic teaching helps far more children read.

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UNDERSTANDING READING

Reading Milestones

WHAT IT IS

Reading develops in fairly predictable stages — though every child moves at their own pace . Knowing the milestones helps families notice progress, celebrate it, and spot when a child may need extra support. The single most important transition happens around third grade , when children shift from learning to read to reading to learn .

TYPES & OPTIONS

- **Birth–age 3** — Enjoys being read to; babbles, learns words; notices books and print
- **Ages 3–5 (Pre-K)** — Recognizes some letters and sounds; rhymes; "pretend reads"; knows print carries meaning
- **Kindergarten–Grade 1** — Learns letter-sound connections; begins to sound out (decode) simple words; reads simple books
- **Grades 2–3** — Reads more fluently and accurately; builds vocabulary; understands more of what's read
- **Grade 3 — the pivot** — By the end of grade 3, children should read well enough to "read to learn" in other subjects
- **Grades 4 and up** — Uses reading to learn across subjects; tackles longer, more complex texts

WHY IT MATTERS

Why the third-grade pivot matters so much: from grade 4 on, reading becomes the tool for learning everything else . A child who isn't yet reading well by then has to work harder in every subject — which is why states focus so heavily on reading by third grade , and why early support pays off.

AT A GLANCE

Birth–Pre-K	**Language, sounds & print aware…**
K–1	**Letter sounds & decoding begin**
Grades 2–3	**Fluency builds**
The big shift	**"Learning to read" → "reading…**
Grades 4+	**Reading to learn across subjec…**
Note	**Every child develops at their…**

TIPS

- **Read together daily** — At every age — it's the single best thing you can do
- **Talk a lot** — Rich conversation builds the language reading depends on
- **Notice the stages** — Celebrate progress; watch for a child stalling
- **Don't panic over pace** — Ranges are normal — but don't ignore persistent struggle
- **Ask the teacher** — If you're unsure where your child should be

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **When do kids learn to read?** — Decoding typically begins in K–1; fluency builds through grade 3.
- **What's the 'learning to read' vs 'reading to learn' shift?** — Around grade 3, reading becomes the tool for learning other subjects.
- **My child is behind the milestones — what do I do?** — Talk to the teacher; persistent struggle warrants a closer look.
- **Is it normal to develop at different paces?** — Yes — but don't ignore ongoing difficulty.
- **What helps most at home?** — Reading together daily and rich conversation.

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UNDERSTANDING READING

Early Literacy Screening

WHAT IT IS

Early literacy screening means giving young students quick, regular checks of the building blocks of reading — so schools can catch difficulties early , when help works best. It's central to the nationwide literacy push, and many states now pair it with "read by third grade" laws . Here's what it involves and what it means for your child.

HOW IT WORKS

- **Universal screening** — Typically all students in grades K–3 are screened, several times a year
- **Quick checks** — Brief, low-stress tasks — not high-stakes tests
- **What's measured** — Phonemic awareness, letter sounds, decoding, and reading fluency
- **Dyslexia screening** — Many states require screening for signs of dyslexia specifically
- **Early action** — Students who need help get targeted support quickly

TYPES & OPTIONS

Common screening tools include DIBELS and other brief measures (see our screener guide). They're designed to be fast and repeatable, so teachers can track progress and adjust support — not to label or rank children.

AT A GLANCE

What	**Quick checks of early reading...**
Who	**Usually all K–3 students**
Checks	**Phonemic awareness, phonics, f...**
Common tools	**DIBELS, and others**
Policy	**Many states have "read by 3rd...**
Purpose	**Catch difficulties early**

HOW IT VARIES BY STATE

Many states have "read by third grade" laws that require screening, notify parents of difficulties, and provide interventions. Some also include a retention provision — holding back students who aren't reading proficiently by the end of third grade unless they meet an exemption. These policies vary a lot by state , so confirm your...

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **Is screening a high-stakes test?** — No — screeners are quick checks to guide support, not high-stakes tests.
- **What do screeners measure?** — Early reading skills: phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency.
- **What's a 'read by third grade' law?** — A state policy requiring screening, parent notice, and intervention — sometimes retention.
- **Will my child be held back?** — Only in some states, under specific rules with exemptions — check your state.
- **What if screening flags my child?** — The school should provide targeted support; ask what the plan is.

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Support at Home & School

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SUPPORT AT HOME & SCHOOL

Supporting a Struggling Reader

WHAT IT IS

If your child is struggling to read, the most important things to know are: you're not alone, it's not your child's fault, and early support works . Reading difficulties are common and very treatable with the right, evidence-based help. Here's a calm, practical path — what to watch for, what to do at home, and how to get the school's...

TYPES & OPTIONS

- **Trouble connecting letters and sounds** — Difficulty sounding out (decoding) words
- **Slow, effortful reading** — Reading is laborious and tiring
- **Spelling struggles** — Even with familiar words
- **Avoiding reading** — Frustration or reluctance
- **A gap** — Strong in talking/thinking but struggling on the page — a possible sign of dyslexia

STEPS TO TAKE

- **Keep reading together** — Daily, low-pressure, enjoyable — model that reading is good
- **Talk to the teacher** — Share what you see; ask where your child is and what the school is doing
- **Ask about screening** — Many schools screen early for reading difficulties
- **Ask for evidence-based help** — Structured, explicit, phonics-based instruction is what works
- **Request an evaluation if it persists** — In writing — you have the right to ask (see our special-ed guides)
- **Protect confidence** — Celebrate effort and strengths; struggle with reading is not a reflection of intelligence

AT A GLANCE

First	**Notice the signs early**
At home	**Read together; keep it positiv...**
At school	**Ask the teacher & about screen...**
If it persists	**Ask about an evaluation**
Best support	**Structured, explicit reading h...**
Key	**Early help works best**

WHY IT MATTERS

The support that helps most is Structured Literacy — explicit, systematic, phonics-based instruction — the same approach recommended for dyslexia . If difficulties persist despite good instruction, a comprehensive evaluation can identify a specific learning difference and unlock formal support (an IEP or 504 Plan).

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **Is my child just lazy or behind?** — Neither — reading difficulty is common and unrelated to intelligence or effort.
- **What can I do at home?** — Read together daily, keep it positive, and stay in touch with the teacher.
- **How do I know if it's dyslexia?** — A comprehensive evaluation can tell — see our dyslexia guide.
- **Can I request help from the school?** — Yes — ask about screening and, if it persists, request an evaluation in writing.
- **What support actually works?** — Structured, explicit, phonics-based reading instruction, started early.

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SUPPORT AT HOME & SCHOOL

Numeracy & Math Milestones

WHAT IT IS

Just as reading has its milestones, math (numeracy) develops in stages built on number sense — an intuitive feel for quantities and how numbers work. Math is now the rising companion to literacy in state policy (several states have added "numeracy" laws alongside reading), and the same principle applies: strong early foundations make...

TYPES & OPTIONS

- **Pre-K** — Counts, compares (more/fewer), recognizes numbers and simple shapes
- **Kindergarten–Grade 1** — Counts fluently, understands quantity, adds and subtracts small numbers
- **Grades 2–3** — Place value, fact fluency (addition/subtraction, then multiplication), problem-solving
- **Grades 4–5** — Multiplication/division fluency, fractions, multi-step problems
- **Middle grades** — Ratios, proportions, and the pre-algebra foundations for later math

WHY IT MATTERS

Number sense is the foundation — like phonemic awareness in reading. Children who build it early find later math (fractions, algebra) far more manageable. And like reading, math difficulties (including dyscalculia) are real, common, and helped by explicit, well-designed instruction.

AT A GLANCE

What	**Building number sense & math s...**
Rising fast	**States adding "numeracy" laws**
Pre-K	**Counting & comparing**
Elementary	**Operations & fluency**
Key	**Number sense is the foundation**
At home	**Everyday math builds it**

TIPS

- **Make math everyday** — Cooking, shopping, and games are full of math
- **Build number sense** — Count, compare, and estimate together
- **Practice facts** — Fluency with basic facts frees the brain for harder problems
- **Keep it positive** — Math anxiety is real — model that math is figure-out-able
- **Watch for persistent struggle** — And ask the teacher; see our dyscalculia guide if concerned

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **What is number sense?** — An intuitive feel for quantities and how numbers relate — the foundation of math.
- **Why is math a rising priority?** — States are adding numeracy laws alongside reading, recognizing early math matters.
- **How can I help at home?** — Everyday math (cooking, shopping, games) and practicing basic facts.
- **What if my child really struggles with math?** — It could be dyscalculia — talk to the teacher; see our dyscalculia guide.
- **Is math anxiety real?** — Yes — keep math positive and low-pressure to help prevent it.

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