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Catch a
Falling Reader by . . .

Modeling What Good Readers Do

Give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish, you feed him for a lifetime.

—Lao Tzu

We all learn by observing what competent, successful people do. For instance, we learn skills and strategies by watching good cooks, we adapt new moves from observing good skiers, and we can learn from the experiences and hardships of good dieters. Children need to know what good readers and writers do. If they have grown up without daily modeling of language and literacy skills, they will need to know these things even more than others if they hope to catch up to their peers.

When we engage children in the practice of shared reading, we involve them in the very things that good readers do. We model good reading while also drawing them into the act of reading. Big books and enlarged texts are perfect for this because they are usually read with the whole group. This gives struggling kids a chance to learn from their teacher as well as their peers. It also provides a

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nonthreatening context for practicing quietly by participating in the best way you know how. The key to success is in knowing how to model what good readers do without putting kids on the spot in front of their peers.

Here are a few tips for sharing language and literacy experiences together while also modeling the ways of good readers:

- Get in the habit of saying, “Good for you! That’s what good readers do!” or “I like the way you all used your eyes to point to the words, just like good readers do!” These powerful statements will stick in the heads of kids because they know what your expectations are. Verbal prompts might include something like, “You went back when you got stuck. That’s what good readers do,” and “Yes, you left spaces between your words! That’s what good writers do.” These statements not only confirm the reader’s action or behavior, but they also encourage the child to keep moving forward. Once again, this is feedback. If used frequently and wisely, it can catch kids and pull them up . . . fast! It is psychologically similar to what might happen if someone said to us, “Good for you. You’re doing what good dieters do in order to keep that weight off.” We would more than likely feel that our efforts were noticed and then confirmed. We all need to know if we are on the right track. So do kids!
- Set up a “working” listening center in your classroom or home. This means that the headphones and CD players are in good working order! Then be sure to have a variety of books and CDs for kids to listen to. When readers record books on audio, they read faster and more fluently than young readers read. This is good modeling. It also forces the child to visually scan across the lines and subsequent lines more quickly. With practice, scanning abilities become second nature, and most readers no longer need to use their fingers or a bookmark to track the lines. Falling readers should be listening to books and CDs *daily*. They should also be given opportunities to respond to the book they listened to through creative art and writing activities. Respond sheets, graphic organizers, and story frames all lend themselves well to extending readers beyond just *listening* to a book and CD, although just listening has its place too.

Children who are not read to or told stories will greatly benefit from the rich language experiences that can be gained from listening to audiobooks.

- Buddy reading is an effective way for readers to learn from each other. Pairing up children in various ways can lead to modeling and sharing that might otherwise be lost in the shuffle of everyday classroom life. Just as babies love to watch and learn from toddlers, readers can learn much from sharing literacy experiences with their peers. This is *not* to say, however, that advanced readers should *always* be paired with falling readers. This is a good practice when children are encouraged to build on each other's strengths. If it becomes common practice, then struggling kids often resent the fact that they can't read like their buddy. Common sense should guide you in pairing students up in a variety of ways. Struggling kids can coach and help each other as well! They should also have opportunities to be shining stars, and this may mean that they should have buddies who are younger than them once in a while. There is great power in having a falling reader read to a preschooler or kindergarten buddy. The little ones will also be getting the modeling they need as well.

Perhaps one of the greatest teaching tools available to anyone who teaches is the ability to model. Master this, and you will catch many kids who might otherwise continue to founder, all the while looking for someone to actually show them how it's done.