

Working Memory, Processing Speed & Reading

Parent Fact Sheet

Reading is not just a visual skill. Children need to hold sounds, letters, word parts and meaning in mind while they decode, spell, read fluently and understand text. Working memory and processing speed can strongly affect how effortful reading feels, especially for students with dyslexia or other learning difficulties.

What is working memory?

Working memory is the ability to hold and use information in the mind for a short time. In reading, this may mean holding sounds in order, blending them into a word, remembering the start of a sentence, or following multi-step spelling instructions.

What is processing speed?

Processing speed is how efficiently a child can take in information, make a response and move through a task. A child with slower processing speed may understand the skill, but need more time to read, write, retrieve facts or complete work.

How working memory can affect reading development

- Difficulty blending sounds together or holding all the sounds in the correct order.
- Losing track of longer words, especially words with blends, digraphs, suffixes or multiple syllables.
- Difficulty remembering new spelling patterns, rules or irregular words without repeated practice.
- Trouble holding a sentence in mind long enough to understand it, especially when decoding is slow.
- Reduced comprehension because so much mental energy is being used on word reading.

How slower processing speed can affect reading development

- Slow, effortful decoding even when the child knows the sound-symbol correspondences.
- Reduced reading fluency because word recognition is not yet fast or automatic.
- Difficulty keeping pace with classroom reading, copying, spelling tests or timed activities.
- More fatigue, frustration or avoidance because tasks take longer than expected.
- Written responses may be shorter because the child runs out of time or mental energy.

What families and teachers may notice

- Reads accurately but very slowly.
- Needs instructions repeated or broken down.
- Can do the skill orally but struggles on paper.
- Makes errors when rushed.
- Avoids longer reading or writing tasks.
- Performance drops when tired or under pressure.

Why this matters

- Reading fluency depends on automatic word recognition.
- If decoding is slow, comprehension is harder.
- A child may know more than their written work shows.
- Timed tasks can underestimate ability.
- Extra time is support, not an unfair advantage.
- Structured practice helps skills become automatic.

Helpful supports

- Teach reading and spelling explicitly, systematically and cumulatively so the child is not relying on memory alone.
- Use short, clear instructions and check understanding before independent work begins.
- Reduce unnecessary copying and allow extra time for reading, spelling and written tasks.
- Provide repeated reading at the correct level to build fluency and automatic word recognition.
- Break longer words into syllables, morphemes and sound-symbol patterns so the child has a clear structure to follow.
- When appropriate, assess knowledge separately from reading speed.

Key message: With explicit, structured teaching and enough repetition, students can build reading accuracy, fluency and confidence.



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