

10 Tips for Teaching Non-Verbal or Minimally Verbal Students to Read

- 1) **Believe that all students are entitled to literacy instruction** that is accessible to them!
- 2) **Expect that those who are non-verbal or minimally verbal can learn** to read with adequate and appropriate instruction. No one is 'too low', 'too old', or 'too non-verbal' for literacy instruction or related goals to be in their IEP.
- 3) **Understand that ALL children fall on one continuum of literacy skill development**, progressing through the following stages: Early emergent, later emergent, transitional, beginning conventional, to later conventional. To assess where your student is on this continuum you can administer *The Snapshot Assessment: An Informal Inventory of Early Literacy Behaviors* by Vicki Rothstein. This can help you to establish a baseline, monitor progress, and generate goals in the following areas:
 - Motivation and Interest in Reading
 - Literacy Interactions: Support from the Literacy Partner
 - Print Awareness
 - Symbol, Letter, and Sight Word Knowledge
 - Phonological Awareness/Decoding
 - Reading Comprehension

*Contact your AAC SLP or Inclusion Consultant for more information.
- 4) **Understand that literacy skills are just as important for students who are non-verbal**, if not more important. Achieving even a grade 2 reading level by the end of school creates opportunities for further education, vocational opportunities, and increased independence in daily living.
- 5) **Support students with learning to use an augmentative or alternative communication (AAC) system.** Use of AAC facilitates literacy learning and literacy skills in turn can facilitate more sophisticated communication. Both lead to increased self-esteem, opportunities, and independence.
- 6) **Use what you already know about teaching typically developing children to read** and consider adapting the way responses can be given. Get creative! Children can think sounds and words in their head, point to them on a board, select letter sounds in a communication system, respond to multiple choice, etc. Go beyond sight word reading to teach skills for decoding. Read and re-read books several times.
- 7) **Don't wait or get stuck on a skill!** Literacy activities and experiences should not be withheld while speech, language, motor, or other skills develop. Do not wait until these students are "ready" by mastering prerequisite skills to access literacy instruction, as this means they may "never" be given access to the skills and knowledge they can learn. Don't get stuck on skills such as reciting the alphabet, rhyming, initial/medial/final sound ID, or letter naming as they are not required to learn to read. Focus on letter sounds, not letter names.
- 8) **You can use a reading program.** Consider:
 - Adapting an existing general education literacy programs (e.g. Reading Mastery).
 - Adapting a literacy program designed for children with disabilities (e.g. Early Literacy Skill Builder).
 - Using a literacy program designed with non-verbal students in mind such as *Accessible Literacy Learning (ALL)* and join the VSB's ALL Cohort group. The VSB owns copies that can be loaned. For student using a 'Unity' based vocabulary, consider trying *Literacy through Unity* or *Literacy through Words for Life*.
- 9) **Consider motivation, attention, and engagement** when selecting books and activities. The amount of time actively engaged in or attending to activities or interactions is the single best predictor of academic gains for students with disabilities. Use books and activities that are age respectful.
- 10) **Reach out** to other literacy and special education teachers for help. Your AAC SLP and inclusion consultant may also be able to help with questions, access to resources, additional resource ideas, and extension activity ideas.

