

SEVENTH PRINTING

# The TREATMENT and PREVENTION of READING PROBLEMS

THE NEURO-  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
APPROACH

This unique and provocative book presents a TOTALLY NEW APPROACH TO READING AND LANGUAGE PROBLEMS. Dr. Delacato has worked with this problem as teacher, school administrator, diagnostician, and psychologist.

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Director of Psychological Services  
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Director of The Reading Clinic, Chestnut Hill  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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BIOLOGICAL ORGANIZATION AND  
DEVELOPMENT IN POOR READERS

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# The Treatment And Prevention Of Reading Problems

*(THE NEURO-PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH)*

*By*

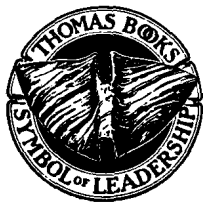
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***To Janice, my wife***

## PREFACE

THROUGH verbal communication, children are assimilated into the culture. In the past, children who could not hear or speak were looked upon with awe. Their acceptance into the social framework was tenuous because the members of their group could not communicate with them. This lack of the ability to communicate led many times to the rejection and exploitation of these children by their culture.

As an extension of the above, today's children who are unable to read or who do not read well receive a great deal of attention from both the general public and educators. This attention on the part of the general public tends to be critical of education. The public usually blames instances of poor reading on the system of reading used, the lack of phonetic instruction, poor school discipline or just poor teaching.

Educators, aware of this criticism, have tried many avenues for the elimination of the non-reading or poor-reading handicap. There remain, however, a number of children who do not read up to the level indicated by their capacity. It is these children, their teachers and parents, to whom this work is directed.

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**THE TREATMENT AND PREVENTION  
OF READING PROBLEMS**



# 1

## THE NATURE OF THE RETARDED READER

IN the past the teaching of reading has been primarily oral and phonetic in nature; reading was taught after the child knew the sounds of the letters of the alphabet, and the evaluation of mastery of reading was made at an oral level. Until comparatively recently those children who did not learn to read under this system were considered intellectually incapable of reading.

The psychological testing movement gave strong indications that many non-readers had normal capacity or better. Reading specialists then began to analyze the skills involved in reading, and many new techniques were developed. Poor readers have proved tenacious, however, for no matter what techniques were evolved, poor readers stay with us in abundance.

As a result there are many systems for the teaching of reading. Each system has concomitant staunch supporters and each system has severe critics. The criticism and defense of the various systems for the teaching of reading seem fruitless, for with each system some children learn to read and some do not. Historically, when children do not learn to read, the system is modified or changed. The new system helps some children to learn to read but there are always good readers and poor readers, no matter what the system.

These systems fall into three general categories, each with its own bias. There is the *educational bias*. This

bias stresses teaching technique from many points of view. There are the progressives, who feel that reading is a process of waiting for ripening and maturity to take place. There are the "phonetic" biased educators who feel that children must learn to read phonetically, and conversely there are the word-sight people who feel that everything is learned from a Gestalt or "whole" concept. There are those who feel that there is too much discipline in education and those who feel that there is not enough discipline. There are those who feel that children should be grouped differently, interested differently and motivated differently. One finds all of these educational facets described in the very abundant educational literature. Many, many books have been written by educators relative to the teaching of reading and remedial reading and yet our poor readers remain with us.

The psychological movement gave us a second bias, *psychologically oriented reading activity*. This bias implies that children should be taught by highly specialized personnel using highly specialized remedial techniques under very favorable "emotional climates." Many children have progressed under such a regime, as did they under the educational regime, but poor readers remain with us.

The third is the *psychiatric bias*. Many investigators have written that children for purely emotional reasons do not learn to read. This bias implies that if we were to solve children's personality and emotional problems, their reading problems would disappear. This has been worked at and written about to a great extent. Our reading and language problems persist.

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The author joined this fruitless search for a perfect

system. He conducted a series of studies using the various accepted systems as remedial procedures for a period of seven years. The various systems were adapted to the needs of the slow readers. There was growth, but no system proved to be ideal, for with each system there remained the poor readers. Having analyzed the various systems for the teaching of reading, having culled the educational literature, the author concluded that the answer might not lie in the system but might be found elsewhere.

The next step was to cast aside the analysis of the teaching of reading and to make a comprehensive scrutiny of the poor readers themselves, no matter what system was used to teach them, to see if they had common characteristics which could be related to their poor reading.

---

When poor readers are counted on the basis of sex, it is found that the ratio of poor readers is four boys to one girl. Because there are so many more boys than girls, it was decided to analyze forty-five boys who were poor readers. They ranged from eight to eighteen years of age, representing three states and twenty-six very different public, private and parochial schools. The boys were applicants for diagnosis and remediation in a six-week summer reading clinic conducted by the author. For a complete description of the program see: Delacato and Delacato, *A Group Approach to Remedial Reading, Elementary English*, National Council of Teachers of English, Part I, XXIX, No. 3, March, 1952; Part II, XXX, No. 1, January, 1953.

The objective of the analysis was to find how poor readers resemble each other. The criteria were set up as follows: When a trait existed in twenty to thirty boys,

it was denoted "fairly common"; in thirty boys or more, "common"; and in over forty, "universal." Any trait which existed in less than twenty boys was discarded as "not common."

The next forty-five boys referred to the clinic were used as the group to be studied. Each boy was diagnosed and taught for at least six weeks, and each characteristic below was evaluated as to its presence or absence in each boy.

*Not Common* — Fewer than twenty out of the group of forty-five retarded male readers exhibited each of these characteristics, hence, we can assume that if they are causal in poor reading they are not universally causal.

1. Low intelligence
2. Common socio-economic status
3. Race
4. Religion
5. Divorce
6. Very progressive schooling
7. Very conservative schooling
8. Emotional maladjustment
9. Too much phonetic instruction
10. Lack of phonetic instruction
11. Faulty school placement
12. Changing teachers
13. Social immaturity
14. Rigid parents
15. Lax parents
16. Poor in arithmetic
17. Restricted speaking vocabulary
18. Severe emotional conflicts at home
19. Hostility on the part of the child
20. Exhibitionism
21. Poor hearing

22. Poor vision
23. Poor attitude toward school
24. Nail biting
25. Poor present health
26. Lack of interest
27. Lack of motivation
28. Lack of reading materials at home
29. A specific teaching method

The items above have been referred to by teachers, psychologists, and parents as factors which cause poor reading, *yet not one of them was present in twenty or more of the forty-five poor readers*. The author concluded that although each item might be a causal factor in retarding reading for an individual, no single item could be looked to for a general solution to the problems of retarded readers.

The following were titled *Fairly Common* in that they each existed in twenty to thirty of the forty-five poor readers:

1. History of allergies, asthma or choking during the first six years of life.
2. Sibling placement.
3. Hyperactivity in babyhood or childhood.
4. Some early speech slowness or difficulty.

The following were titled *Common* in that each existed in thirty to forty boys in the group of forty-five:

1. Poor penmanship
2. Poor gross coordination
3. Poor manual dexterity
4. Tendency to read or write backwards in the first grade
5. History of a severe childhood illness or head injury

The following were titled *Universal* in that each existed in forty or more of the group of forty-five:

1. Early childhood thumbsucking of the thumb on the dominant hand.
2. Posturalization during sleep with the sub-dominant hand prone, or no posturalization.
3. Made a better score on test 5 or 6 (whichever tests the sub-dominant eye) than on test 5 or 6 (whichever tests the dominant eye) on the Telebinocular.
4. Gave some evidence of perceptual confusion in spelling and reading.
5. Some birth complication or longer period of labor than other children in the family.
6. Some lack of unilaterality.
7. Understood and used many more words than he could read.

Upon evaluating the *fairly common*, *common* and *universal* factors one can easily deduce that these factors seem to be physical or developmental in nature.

The reading pattern of these children showed a very early and consistent history in grades one and two of reversals that is, reading and writing words such as *was* for *saw*, *on* for *no*, reading and writing numbers such as 24 for 42. These same children were very poor in early spelling and, if they were fair readers at the time still tended to be poor spellers, reversing letters within words periodically. We found in the reading pattern indications of great difficulty with the word sight method and when the method was changed equally slow mastery of the alphabet or phonetic system. We also found that at all ages these children tended to have higher vocabulary scores than comprehension scores on standardized tests and their reading speed seemed to be very slow. They tended to have significantly more difficulty during early



reading years with small words than with large words. Generally they disliked reading. They seemed unable to associate symbols, be they words or sounds, with ideas. They also tended to be good in other academic areas, especially the area of arithmetic. They tended at the secondary school level to have much higher mathematical ability scores than language ability scores on tests of scholastic aptitude. They tended as they went through the junior high and secondary school years to have low marks in English and most of their reading courses but tended to do well in memory courses and courses involving mathematics and mechanical skills.

The next step was to evaluate the area within the physical organism which might be even more specifically related. The area in which all of the forty-five retarded readers had something in common now appeared to be in the *neurological realm*. This premise seemed more valid because the obvious basis of all learning rests within the central nervous system. The premise gains validity when one evaluates the ways in which good readers learn to read. Teaching the good reader to read has never been a problem to educators. No difficulty is encountered in teaching good readers *regardless of the system used to teach them. Good readers seem to learn to read by wholes, indeed by osmosis, and they also exist in every kind of classroom and in every kind of school.*

The author investigated the differences between good readers and poor readers and those differences all pointed toward the neurological realm as the potential etiological factor in poor language and reading development.