

NURTURING TESTIMONIES BY Nurturing Readers

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My friend Rachel and I hadn't seen each other since spring semester, so when I walked into the institute of religion, she rushed over and began recounting the events of her summer. She spoke of work, vacation, and family, but amidst all her experiences, what caught my attention was her final whispered disclosure: "And I started reading the scriptures on my own. I only read a chapter every night, but I'm doing it."

I thought back to our conversation months earlier as we had discussed a Visiting Teaching Message about personal scripture study. When I concluded sharing the message, Rachel became withdrawn and silent, in contrast to her normally talkative, cheery self. As I wondered what was wrong, she told me, "I have actually never read the scriptures on my own. I really struggle with reading. I don't enjoy it, and it makes me feel dumb." Now, six months later, this knowledge of Rachel's past struggles helped me understand the significance of her new nightly reading practice.

As a former high school English teacher and now as a researcher of struggling readers, I spend significant amounts of time talking with children, adolescents, and adults who struggle with reading. I am struck by the

Struggles with reading can hinder members in their gospel study, but parents and teachers at church can help. Here are four ways.

far-reaching influence of this challenge in their lives, particularly when they share ways their struggles affect their experiences at church. Some recall feeling embarrassed in Primary as they read aloud while classmates giggled or rolled their eyes. Others recount acting out in youth Sunday School to avoid being called upon to read. Still others, like Rachel, lament missed opportunities to study the scriptures because they didn't understand unfamiliar vocabulary, language, and ideas.

As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we are encouraged to seek words of wisdom out of the best books in all our studies (see D&C 88:118), to feast upon the word of Christ (see 2 Nephi 31:20), and to search the scriptures to nurture our testimonies (see 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 1 Nephi 19:23). However, reading struggles inhibit spiritual growth when they prevent individuals from studying the gospel.

The good news is we can strengthen those who struggle. The following ideas represent a few ways to support individuals with reading challenges in our families and wards.

1. Establish strong support structures. Learning to read takes practice, which includes taking risks. At church it's essential to create a classroom environment where class members feel safe to attend and participate. Try not to put people on the spot, like randomly calling on people to read. If students repeatedly avoid volunteering, consider inviting them days in advance to participate in the upcoming lesson by reading particular verses. Advance notice gives students time to practice reading and to prepare for participation in class.

Teaching, No Greater Call explains: "When you discover that a class member has difficulty reading, be particularly careful about how you ask him or her to participate in a lesson. . . . Learn more about his or her ability and willingness to read. If a person is willing to read but needs time to prepare, you can help him or her prepare to read certain passages in upcoming lessons. . . . Discuss these possibilities with the person. Work together to find the best way for him or her to participate in class."¹

One Primary teacher noticed that 11-year-old Sam struggled to read out loud from the Book of Mormon. He stumbled over words and acted embarrassed by his mistakes. The following week, as his teacher prepared the lesson, she felt inspired to call and ask Sam if he would prepare to read two verses in the next lesson. Sam accepted the assignment, practiced, and successfully read in class that

week. His success motivated him to prepare in future weeks, ultimately initiating a pattern of preparation in which Sam studied the scriptures on his own and then told his teacher which verses he could read.

2. Use audiovisual resources. Introducing elements of scripture stories through videos or pictures before reading can help readers who struggle with comprehension. Then, as they begin reading, they can concentrate on understanding principles or themes instead of tracking characters and plot lines.



As a missionary, my companions and I sometimes taught individuals who enjoyed reading but felt challenged by the unfamiliar context and content of the scriptures. We often invited these families to supplement their scripture study with the illustrated Church publication *Book of Mormon Stories*.² Although this text didn't replace their study of the scriptures, it helped them become familiar with the characters and stories, ultimately helping them better comprehend the principles and doctrines taught in the Book of Mormon.

In addition, listening to audio recordings of scriptures or conference talks offers some readers focused support

as they follow along in the printed text. Listening to a fluent reader can increase a struggling reader's ability to comprehend unfamiliar texts and vocabulary. Church resources, such as LDS.org, offer scriptures and conference addresses as downloadable audio files that facilitate these kinds of reading experiences.

3. Distinguish between actions and identities.

Struggling with reading—or any other struggle, for that matter—does not define one's identity. Elder Lynn G. Robbins of the Presidency of the Seventy explained that individuals sometimes confuse what they do (their actions) with who they are (their identity). As a result,

IMPROVING FAMILY SCRIPTURE STUDY

If you have a family member who struggles with reading, family scripture study offers opportunities for him or her to practice reading in a safe environment. Families that try to read a set number of verses or chapters each day might be frustrated if one family member reads slowly or struggles to sound out words. Instead, families can study the scriptures for a set amount of time and focus on reading meaningful passages, asking questions, and identifying principles. This approach alleviates pressure on those who read more slowly and leads to rich discussions that help all family members better understand the scriptures.



temporary failures can become labels that individuals use to define themselves.³ However, as children of God, with the potential to become like Him, we should not label ourselves that way.

In the case of readers who struggle, many perceive their reading difficulties as personal deficiencies that define their worth. When internalized, labels like “struggling reader” can be mistaken for identities that limit their vision of who they can become.

Logan, a 22-year-old university student, remembered struggling with reading in school and church. “If I wasn’t right up with everyone else, it was like, ‘Why am I reading so slow?’ and it became a self-label of ‘You’re a slow reader.’” However, he also recalled when, years later, his mission president gave him one of the first gospel books he read, outside the scriptures. Completing the book and turning the last page sparked “this huge sense of accomplishment.” This success challenged the labels he had internalized and helped him see himself as someone who could read successfully.

Helping our children and class members see their struggles as challenges to overcome rather than as limits that define them is essential to helping them understand their true potential as God’s children.

4. Seek the Lord’s help. Stan is a 27-year-old graduate student who now has read numerous books, but he struggled with reading throughout elementary and middle school. For years his mother came to his elementary school and tutored him individually. Before they started their work, they would read Ether 12:23–28, where Moroni talks about his weakness in writing and the Lord promises Moroni that His grace will be sufficient to make up for Moroni’s



weaknesses. Reading these scriptures helped Stan and his mother realize that his weaknesses with reading could become strengths and that as he humbled himself and asked Heavenly Father for help, the Lord would support his efforts. He explained, “If the Lord will do it for Moroni, He can do it for us when we ask for and seek His help.”

As family members and teachers, we too can pray for support as we work with individuals who struggle with reading. Prayer helps us seek guidance and inspiration to discern and respond to the unique needs of those in our stewardship. As we reach out in the spirit of love to “bear one another’s burdens” (Mosiah 18:8), we can extend support to our family, friends, and brothers and sisters in the gospel who struggle with reading. ■

NOTES

1. *Teaching, No Greater Call: A Resource Guide for Gospel Teaching* (1999), 39.
2. Available in print (item no. 35666) or online at scripturestories.lds.org.
3. See Lynn G. Robbins, “What Manner of Men and Women Ought Ye to Be?” *Ensign*, May 2011, 104–5.