

# How To Calm A Struggling Reader

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Recently, a tutor of a struggling reader asked me this question: “Do you have any advice on things to say to calm my student down? Sometimes my student gets in a loop of thinking. He cries and says he hates this tutoring, he can do harder stuff than this, his anger and sadness causes him to be in a place where he cannot learn. I plan to have a variety of activities and books available to have an option when one activity isn’t working. Two sessions ago I stopped the session, because my student could not calm down. We made an agreement that day to stop using the books he didn’t like. I continued the session yesterday, but I’m not sure how much he learned. I didn’t want him to think I’m going to give up.”

## Possible Answers

How to calm a struggling reader requires the tutor to know what is currently causing or aggravating the problem; this allows the tutor to tailor interventions, such as the strategies below, to the struggling reader’s needs. Although the strategies below are directed to the tutor, teachers and parents might also benefit from understanding them:

1. **Use Proper Materials.** Especially during the first few months of tutoring, make sure that the material is easy for him. Make sure that after this period, when you increase the difficulty of the materials he’s about to read, you give him materials at his proper reading instructional level; before instruction, he should be able to quickly recognize 95% or more of the words in what he’s about to read and understand 70% or more of the material. When he’s about to read independently, you’re sure he can recognize 99% of the words and understand 90% of the material.
2. **Remove Threats by Stressing Fun.** Remove the threats inherent in tutoring. Do this by building lots of fun into tutoring. Fun means the struggling reader likes it and looks forward to it. This may require playing Monopoly for the first few sessions or, if he likes basketball, just “shooting hoops.” When you do this, you’re not wasting time; instead, you’re building a positive relationship — one in which he feels safe, comfortable, and respected — and anticipates good things. As time passes and he’s obviously feeling comfortable, gradually add reading instruction that’s designed to foster success and the anticipation of success. You might begin by reading aloud to him, but reading only materials in which he’s interested, such as Pokémon comics. You might also motivate him by

having him choose what to read, from materials that will interest him and that are at his proper instructional and independent levels. Translation: start where he is, start where he's comfortable.

3. **Explore Relaxation Training.** If the struggling reader is getting help from a qualified mental health specialist, such as a psychologist, psychiatrist, or licensed clinical social worker, thoroughly discuss with this person and with the child's parents the possibility of teaching the child simple relaxation strategies, such as diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or visual imagery. Relaxation training refers to a promising set of simple practices that lower anxiety, and, as a side benefit, have helped some children strengthen their reading, improve their attention and their behavior. To learn more about relaxation training, visit our website ([www.reading2008.com](http://www.reading2008.com)) and download the free article, *Self-induced relaxation: A practical strategy to improve self-concepts, reduce anxiety and prevent behavioral problems*.
4. **Systematically Strengthen the Struggling Reader's Self-Efficacy.** Self-efficacy is the child's belief that he can succeed on a task. To this definition, I generally add, if he makes a moderate effort. Self-efficacy is critical to motivation. After all, if a child thinks he'll fail, no matter his effort, he's unlikely to try, he's likely to resist. He'll think: Why fail? Why prove to everyone I'm dumb? Why embarrass myself? If his self-efficacy for reading is weak — as it is with many struggling readers — you have to help him strengthen it. To do so, you need to stress the four sources of self-efficacy: (a) mastery experiences, (b) vicarious experiences, (c) verbal persuasion, and (d) physiological and emotional arousal. Tutors, teachers, and parents can learn more about how to use these sources in *Increasing struggling learners' motivation: What tutors can do and say* (under resources at [www.reading2008.com](http://www.reading2008.com)) and *Improving self-efficacy and motivation: What to do, what to say*.
5. **Weave Aerobic Exercise and Music into Your Tutoring Sessions.** To improve the struggling reader's mood, you may want to start your sessions with music that will help him feel positive about the upcoming lesson:

Music seems to offer a novel system of communication rooted in emotions rather than in meaning.... Music reliably conveys certain sentiments.... We may never know why music exists.... But even amid uncertainty about music's origins, we can still use songs to pump ourselves up or calm ourselves down, ease pain and anxiety, bond with others or simply move people to tears. (Schrock, 2009)

You might also provide short sessions of aerobic exercise throughout the tutoring session. Why? Because aerobic exercise can improve both a

child's mood and his cognitive functioning. So, you might encourage him to exercise three minutes here, two there:

When the students in Titusville or in Naperville go for a mile run in gym, they are more prepared to learn in their other classes: their senses are heightened; their focus and mood are improved; they're less fidgety and tense; and they feel more motivated and invigorated.... In addition to priming our state of mind, exercise influences learning directly, at the cellular level, improving the brain's potential to log in and process new information. (Rately & Hagerman, 2008, p. 35)

Jonathon noticed the changes that were emerging. He would go for a run or ride a bike during *stormy* times, trying to find some way out of the mood that seemed to take him over. These rhythmic physical activities helped him to calm his body, to get grounded in his awareness, and to bring himself back into balance. (Siegel, 2010, p. 98)

We learn more effectively when we are physically active. (Siegel, 2010, p. 84)

### Critical Questions

Clearly, I've listed only a few ways to improve the struggling reader's readiness for learning, including his confidence, motivation, and behavior. Other ways include counseling, music therapy (see <http://www.reading2008.com/blog/?s=pellitteri>), and applied behavior analysis. Generally, it's best to match the intervention to the current causes of the difficulty, which can take considerable time and expertise. In the meantime, build your lessons around these five questions:

1. Does the struggling reader think the lesson will be *fun*?
2. Does he think the materials and the activities will be *interesting* or *important*?
3. Does he think he will *succeed* if he makes a moderate effort?
4. Does he think his success will help him *achieve goals* that are important to him, that will get him what he wants?
5. What can you say and do to strengthen his self-efficacy, his *confidence* that he will succeed?

Also, examine other parts of his day. Ask:

1. *Throughout* the day, are his teachers giving him materials and activities at his proper instructional and independent levels, including homework?
2. *Throughout* the day, is he getting sufficient social and emotional support, so that he feels psychologically and physically secure?
3. Is he getting enough sleep? Is it quality sleep?
4. Is his diet likely to support learning?
5. *Throughout* the day, is he getting enough exercise?

## Resources

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