

Case Studies from Reading Rockets

<http://www.readingrockets.org/article/portraits-struggling-readers>

Aaron

Aaron is a serious and quiet little boy. He sits at the kitchen table with a book from school looking like he's ready to go into battle. He hunches down over the page, pointing to each word so with such force that his index finger is white at the tip. It's painful for his mom, Rona, to listen to him as he labors over each sound:

"Iiiii aaaa aaaa, aaaa, aaaannnn ssss ssssuuu – I mean, ssss ssss uuuu tttt. Ttt. Ttt."

As he incorrectly reads the first sentence, "I am so tired," his voice trails off in frustration, and he sounds indeed, like he is tired – tired of working so hard.

Rona says gently, "Just five more minutes, O.K.?"

Aaron's shoulders slump as he turns the page and tackles the next set of words with the same intensity, and unfortunately, the same trouble. Rona comes over to try to help on the word *bed*.

"Sound it out, Aaron."

"Bbbbbb, bbbb, bbbb, aaaa, aaaa. Bbbb, bbbb, aaaa, bbbb. Bant. Ban. Bbbb, aaaa...."

Rona doesn't know how to help him, because it seems like he works so hard. She's always believed that effort was what made the difference – and Aaron's two older sisters could achieve anything they put their minds to – but reading just wasn't coming for Aaron. In fact, Rona was pretty sure this was the same book he brought home yesterday. Why did it seem like every word was a new battle all over again? And what could she do to help him? **What is Aaron struggling with?**

Felicia

Felicia is one of those kids that her teacher, Laura, can't quite figure out. When Felicia is reading aloud, she usually manages to get almost all of the words right – often on her first attempt. However, she gets each word after a very long pause: Laura can see Felicia moving her lips as she tests out each and every word before she says it aloud.

Laura had all her students read the same text aloud to her one-on-one. The record of Felicia's oral reading showed 95% accuracy – technically in the top third of the class – but it took Felicia three times longer than the lowest reader in the class to finish the story. "Once... upon... a... time... there... lived... a... giant... the... giant... was... tall... a... boy..."

Felicia's reading sounded like the puttering of an old jalopy.

When Laura's other students read, they read in phrases, or sentences, or whole stories. They read fast enough for a listener to follow the story line. But no matter what Felicia reads, she always reads word by word, and it's always painfully slow.

Laura had never actually seen Felicia finish any book she'd started. Every day, her students read for 10 minutes independently before lunch. Every day, Felicia picks up a new book and reads the first few pages. When Laura calls the students to line up for lunch, Felicia immediately shuts her book and put it back on the shelf, while the other children either bring their books with them or leave their books open on their desks so they can pick up where they left off after lunch. The next day, it's a different book, and just the first few pages again.

Laura's not sure exactly what the problem is, and she doesn't know what she can do to help Felicia. **What is Felicia struggling with?**

Charlie

Charlie's the most talkative little kid his tutor, Jeff, has ever seen. Every week they meet he has plenty to talk about – telling him about the baseball game he won, or his favorite video game, or how much he wants to get a dog. But, whenever it comes time to talk about the story he just read, Charlie clams up. Charlie's mind seems to wander while he reads, so Jeff decided to choose books especially for him.

One day, Jeff picked out a book about dog training he thought Charlie would really like. Charlie read the book aloud with no problems, stopping to comment on a few of the pictures – "See, that's exactly what kind of dog I want... I want a black dog, not white... This dog is tiny!"

Pleased with the choice of book, Jeff said, "So, do you think you could train a dog?"

Charlie looked at him quizzically and said, "What do you mean? I don't have a dog, remember?"

Jeff smiled, "Oh, I know that! I meant, in the book, what did they say about training?"

Charlie turned back through the pages of the book – although every page described how to train dogs to obey a different command, he couldn't seem to find what he was looking for. Finally, he turned back to the first page and reread the first sentence aloud, "Trainers know you can teach an old dog new tricks."

Jeff thought maybe his question was too vague. Instead, he asked, "What did you learn about dog training from the book, Charlie?"

Charlie looked again at that first page, "Umm, training is for old dogs?"

Frustrated, Jeff wasn't sure what to do next. He didn't think the book was too hard for Charlie – because he read the whole thing with no problems – and he knew that the book interested him – Charlie even asked if he could bring it home to show his mom the pictures. Why, then, did he always have such trouble getting Charlie to talk about the books he read? **What is Charlie struggling with?**

Molly's father, John, was at his wit's end. Molly's teacher had sent home a note saying that Molly was misbehaving during reading time – and frankly, John wasn't surprised. He'd fought enough battles with Molly at home to know that she would do anything she could to get out of having to read.

At first, John hadn't been too concerned. After all, kids will be kids, and he understood not wanting to do homework – after all, John didn't like bringing his work home either.

But Molly's teacher wrote a comment on her report card two weeks earlier that Molly wasn't making enough progress in reading and she needed more practice at home. The problem was, when Molly was supposed to be reading in her room, more often than not, she was making towers and ramps with the books instead.

Right after the report card came home, John tried out a reward system to get her reading – every time Molly read five books, he took her out to McDonald's, her favorite place to eat. However, she quickly started choosing from her infant brother's board book collection (the one about shapes only had five words in it total!) in order to read through five books quickly. This was not exactly what John had in mind!

Then he tried withholding television until Molly read a book each afternoon after school. But Molly put up such a fuss that this quickly became a miserable hour-long daily ritual, usually ending in frustration when John had to give up and make the kids dinner.

And now she was giving her teacher a hard time! John thought about getting Molly a tutor, but he didn't really know if it would help. What would help, he wondered? **What is Molly struggling with?**