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# READ



## Taking the guesswork out of words

By Nancy Brown

**I**T'S NOT JUST young children who cannot read. There are adults who have never been able to make the mental leap between shapes on paper and words in their minds. They may be successful businessmen — or skilled professionals denied promotion because they cannot read. In Victoria some of them have joined the 300 youngsters who attend the Victoria READ (Reading Evaluation and Development) Society, and are conquering their disability instead of using tricks to cover up.

"It takes quite a bit of courage for an adult to approach someone and say that they need help — that they cannot read," says teacher Margaret Smith.

"The adults I work with hold jobs that require a lot of skills.

"In one case a man held a job that required skill in all the language arts — he had to read and speak in public. He had to write reports and he was dealing with people on a professional level every day.

"He had to rehearse everything ahead of time to get away with this.

"When he first started with us he couldn't even use a dictionary because he couldn't find the words, and he couldn't read a meaning, although he understood the spoken language and his vocabulary was excellent. Now he has learned to break words apart and see how they are put together," said Smith.

She said it is more difficult to help adults than youngsters.

"They have been coping for years and hiding the fact that they can't read. They have learned certain strategies.

"Adult students, we find, are sight readers — they simply memorize words, and when they are reading if they don't recognize a word they just guess.

"We have to stop them guessing. We have to slow them down, get them to break down a word into parts, and sound out the parts."

It requires a great deal of patience.

Said Smith: "Adult students become frustrated, because they reach a stage where their strategies have been taken away, but they haven't conquered the process of reading.

"One student told me we had made his reading worse because instead of galloping along and guessing the things he couldn't remember, he was really starting to read."

"Adults want to learn everything in one lesson that students in school take a year over.

"It's very strenuous — but very exciting teaching adults, especially when they come along and say they have read an article in the paper and read it easily."

The lucky ones are the children who have been referred to the program before running into severe difficulties.

"Too often children with learning disabilities are considered to be naughty by parents, teachers and neighbors. It is assumed they are not

trying and are quite capable of behaving in a more acceptable fashion. Their lives become a series of rebukes and punishments.

But parents and teachers are becoming increasingly aware of the symptoms of learning disabilities.

"Parents hear from neighbors, or read something in the paper or see something on television; teachers are learning what to look out for, so when they see a disruptive child in class they are more likely to refer him to us than simply dismiss him as troublesome," says READ co-ordinator Linda Macrae.

Often problems can be traced to a specific deficiency — they have a poor memory for shapes or sounds; they may be unable to discriminate between similar sounds; they may have trouble remembering sequences.

The term learning disabilities covers a number of problems that can drastically affect an individual's education and life.

READ, which opened in April 1977, is a non-profit organization operating on a fee-for-service basis. Students are charged \$114 a month if they attend twice a week, and \$171 a month if they attend three times a week. There is a bursary fund for those unable to pay the full cost. Classes are held at 720 Linden Ave. in Victoria and 2481 Beacon Ave. in Sidney.

Prospective students undergo a battery of tests before being placed on individualized programs. There are never more than three students in a class, and most attend for an hour at a time, two or three times a week.

Students attend for a minimum of three months, some keep on attending.

"We have students who have been attending here for six years," said Macrae. "It all depends on the type of problem, and just how many problems the students have."

Enrolment varies, but an average of 300 go through the school each year.

"In July and August we have a summer school, and last year we had 130 students registered," said Macrae. "They come for three weeks, every day, one hour a day."

"That program not only provides an academic program for students, and continuity so they aren't away from their programs for too long, but it also provides student teachers from the University with exposure to children with learning disabilities."



Margaret Smith coaches Tony and Jarrett . . . a challenging mental leap from shapes on paper to the mind

John McKel photo.