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# Learning Lifeline

A LETTER ABOUT LEARNING FROM ESTHER WILKISON

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Don't let the title fool you into thinking this *Lifeline* is only for those teaching reading. Reading Teams can be helpful in any subject with reading assignments.

In the early grades, we work hard to help children learn to read. Our desire is that—for the rest of their lives—our students will read to learn. The challenge comes when we expect kids to read to learn before they have mastery in learning to read. This is where peer tutoring can help. Kids who have mastery in reading can help a peer in three key ways.

A competent reader can:

1. Read aloud so a fellow student who cannot yet read can learn by listening.
2. Help a fellow student who is unsure how to pronounce words.
3. Assist a fellow student who is unsure what a word or sentence means.

Those three things are obviously beneficial to a student who is still learning to read, but those three are also helpful for a student who has more mastery. Reading aloud improves their ability to read with expression. Helping another both sound out and comprehend gives the helper far greater mastery than he or she would get zooming through reading assignments on their own.

However, pairing a good reader with a struggling reader can end in disaster, unless you teach both how to learn well through the process. Someone who is reading at a more advanced level doesn't always want to go back to reading something with less-intensive vocabulary. Also, learning to help someone who is not a skilled reader takes patience and energy. If the advanced reader feels like he or she has to complete all of their regular work as well as help someone else, the unfairness can weigh on them. It helps to shorten the assignment of an advanced reader so he or she understands that you are freeing them up to help others. It also may help if your advanced readers know they will also have time on their own to read.

There are some students who think that the ability to read better than peers makes them superior. This child or teen is in real danger of pride, which is one of the things God hates. In talking to people struggling with pride, Paul wrote, *"Who says that you are better than anyone else? What do you have that you didn't receive? And if you received it, then why are you bragging as if you didn't receive it?"* (1 Corinthians 4:7 CEB).

Explaining a passage like that to both good readers and struggling readers provides you with an awesome moment of educational discipleship. It is God who designs every person's brain. If we are given the aptitude to learn—that's a gift from God. If we are exposed to books early so we develop better vocabularies which helps us learn to read—that is a gift from God. If we were put in a book-rich environment early on—that is a gift from God. If we have good ocular development and tracking skills—that is a gift from God. If we are able to use our gift to bless someone who received different abilities—that is a gift from God.

Students who struggle with reading can be helped by having a peer tutor work with them, but the real transformation may come when you get them teaching younger kids.



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In *The Extended Mind: The Power of Thinking Outside the Brain*, Annie Murphy Paul writes: “The act of teaching can positively affect students’ identity and self-image, as demonstrated by a number of real-world peer-tutoring programs. Valued Youth...deliberately recruits struggling students and assigns them to teach younger kids. Evaluation of the program shows that students who engage in tutoring earn higher grades, attend school more consistently, and stay enrolled at higher rates than similar students who did not participate.”

## **Cautions:**

- If you use struggling readers to help younger kids, make sure you prepare them so they can be successful.
- If you are homeschooling and your better reader is younger than your struggling reader, you may want to have your kids help other children and not family.
- Do not assume that students will work together well without your training and oversight. Partner time should never be a place where any student is allowed to ridicule another.

## **Benefits:**

- In a class setting—if you pair up everyone into two-person teams to read to each other, the groups generally finish at about the same time. And they stay on-task far better than when you have students read silently.
- If you teach something other than reading where there is a textbook, having students read to one another will likely produce a far better understanding of what is read than having them read on their own.
- Life is full of opportunities to use our gifts to help others and to work in partnership with those who have different abilities than we have. When we teach students how to work well in teams, we not only help them academically, but we also bless their future families and coworkers.

Ready to give reading teams a try? Let me know how it goes. I’m cheering you on!