Tips for Helping Your Third Graders Pass the Reading TAKS

Third graders are required to pass the reading TAKS test before being promoted to fourth grade. Some lack the skills necessary to read and understand the reading portion of the test and need specific skills instruction. If you or your child’s teacher are concerned about whether or not your child will pass the reading TAKS there are skills you can work on at home. Although your child receives instruction at school the individual help you can provide at home can make the difference in a passing or failing grade.

First of all students who do not read as well as other students in their class need confidence in their ability to read. One way to increase your child’s confidence is to have him listen to audio tapes and follow the written material word by word. By listening to the tapes he will not only learn unfamiliar words but they learn the way the story flows—which words go together to make a phrase, which words should be emphasized, and where the pauses should be. If the reading material is on the appropriate level and is interesting, your child will not mind listening two or three times. Chances are when he reads the material to you, he will read fairly fluently. Be sure to be complimentary and enthusiastic about his reading. Audio tapes or CD’s can be made to go along with any book. If there is something your child has been wanting to read but the material is slightly hard for him, that material would be a good choice. Many books can be purchased or ordered with tapes or CD’s.

Although most basic word attack skills are presented in first and second grade, some third graders are lacking in their application of these skills. Most know the sounds the consonants and two-letter blends spell but cannot sound out the three letter blends such as thr, spl, str, and spr. Your child may need practice reading words that begin with three letter blends. Many third graders do not know the different sounds the vowels spell, or how to apply the rules that dictate the sound a vowel will make in a certain word. Some basic rules about vowels that third graders need to know are:

1. If there is only one vowel in a word the vowel should usually be called the short sound. A should be called the apple sound; e, the elephant sound; i, the igloo sound; o, the octopus sound; and u, the umbrella sound. Examples of these words are strength, clan, strip, scrap, and trust.
2. An unspoken e at the end of a word or a syllable often means the word is pronounced with the long sound. Example words are scrape, stripe, plane, throne, and spruce.
3. When two vowels appear in a word or syllable generally the first vowel spells the long vowel sound and the second is silent. Examples of these words are treat, sprain, throat, and scream. The most common exception is ea which often spells the short e sound as in health, spread, and meant.
4. If a vowel has an r after it in a word or syllable, it is usually pronounced differently. Er, ir, and ur make the sounds in paper, stir, and burst. Ar makes the sound you hear in spark and smart, but may spell the sound you hear in stare, or snare if the a is followed by an r and then an unspoken e. An r following ai also changes the sound to the sound you hear in chair and flair.

Although there are other rules about vowels, knowing the rules above will enable your third grader to pronounce many words. Third graders are usually mature enough to catch on to these rules quickly. Just by explaining the rules and asking the student to read some sample words from flashcards or a list may help them understand.
Since the words that third graders encounter in their reading are often multisyllable, students need some strategies to pick out individual syllables. First of all they need to know to look for a root word in a long word such as call in recalling. They need to know some common beginning and ending syllables such as un, as in unbroken; re as in rewritten; mis, as in misplaced; a as in aside; ful, as in bountiful, ment, as in statement; and ly as in lively. They need to know the meanings of the most common beginning and ending syllables such as a word beginning with un, or mis, often means the opposite of the root word. The meanings of the common syllables are generally listed in any dictionary. Looking up the meaning with your child lends some insight into how words are constructed and also will give some extra practice in dictionary skills. On the TAKS your child may be asked to pick the correct definition from a list of different meanings for word. However, in third grade they only need to be familiar with the most common meanings for common syllables. Some other rules to discuss with your child about dividing words into syllables are:

1. If a word has two vowels with two or three consonants between the vowels, the first syllable usually ends after the first consonant. Some examples are splendor, scandal, tantrum, and splatter. The first vowel usually spells the short sound.
2. If a word has two vowels with only one consonant in the middle the first syllable often ends after the first vowel and has the long vowel sound. Examples are focus, stable, future, item, and tribal. If dividing the word in that manner doesn’t seem to work, the word may be divided after the single consonant following the first vowel. An Example of this is salad. In this case the vowel usually spells the short sound.

There are many more complicated rules about how words should be divided into syllables but applying these few rules will help decode many words. The questions on the TAKS are comprehension questions, but in order to answer the comprehension question your child must be able to read enough of the words to understand what the passage is about.

The most important and perhaps the most challenging task when reading a passage on the TAKS is to pick out the main idea. The passages on the TAKS test are often non-fiction Students need to know that the main idea will probably not be whales but rather what whales eat, the sizes of whales, or where whales live. The main idea is the point the author is trying to make when he wrote the passage. The questions about main idea may be phrased in different ways. The questions might read, “What is the main point the author is trying to make?” or “What was the author’s purpose when he wrote this passage?” Students need to recognize these as main idea questions. They need to be able to decide whether the author wrote the passage to explain how to make play dough, to persuade students that college is important, or to tell about a famous person’s life. Your child needs to know that the main idea may or may not be written. When you read non-fiction material with your child, ask him about the main idea, rephrasing your questions often.

When preparing for the TAKS try to read a variety of publications with your child such as newspaper articles, invitations, instructions, experiments, lists, stories, and expository books. Then question your child about the content of the publication as well as the author’s purpose. If the article is giving directions or explaining how to do an experiment, ask your child what should be done before or after a certain step. If you are reading a newspaper or magazine article be sure your child can pick out the date, the name of the newspaper, and the title of the article. After reading several publications, discuss with your child the differences in the type of material. Discuss how an author’s purpose is different when telling a story than when writing the instructions for playing a game. The most important thing is to be sure your child understands what he has read. If not, ask him to reread the information. When you ask him a specific question about the content, ask him to show you where that information is found.
One skill third graders need to learn is that when unable to pronounce an unfamiliar word they can still understand what the passage is about. If the test asks them the meaning of the word or a question where they need to know the meaning of the word, they can often figure out the meaning without pronouncing the word by looking at the other words in the sentence or the passage. Some methods you might use to help your student understand this concept is to have him read sentences such as “I quickly raised my _______ when it started to rain,” or “Sam’s cantankerous uncle wouldn’t even let us play in his vacant lot,” or “Tim’s edible socks were not a very successful invention because not many people want to eat socks.” Then question him about the meaning of the blank, or cantankerous, or edible.

Some other test taking strategies for taking a multiple-choice test you should discuss with your child are:

1. Be sure and read every question before you make your decision. Mark out the ones that are obviously incorrect.
2. Even if you feel sure of an answer, if the information can be located in the passage, go back and look to be sure.
3. Take your time. The students that finish first will most likely make mistakes.
4. Don’t spend too much time trying to figure out one word; just try to understand the main idea of the passage.
5. Don’t spend too much time on pronouncing difficult names. Usually how you pronounce someone’s name doesn’t make a difference in the meaning of the story.
6. If you just can’t decide on an answer, try to eliminate the bad choices and choose one of the answers that sounds correct. Do not ever leave a question blank as that will definitely cause the question to be counted wrong.

Just a few minutes a day working with your child not only increases his reading skills and his chances of passing TAKS but also lets him know that you are interested in his progress. Sometimes knowing you are aware of the problems he may be having in reading and are trying to help makes him try harder to become a better reader. However, many students may already feel pressured about the TAKS. Threats or negative reactions will not help. Promising large rewards such as a trip to Six Flags if he passes TAKS is probably not a good idea either. However, small rewards for spending a little extra time each night on reading might make your child more receptive to working on reading skills.