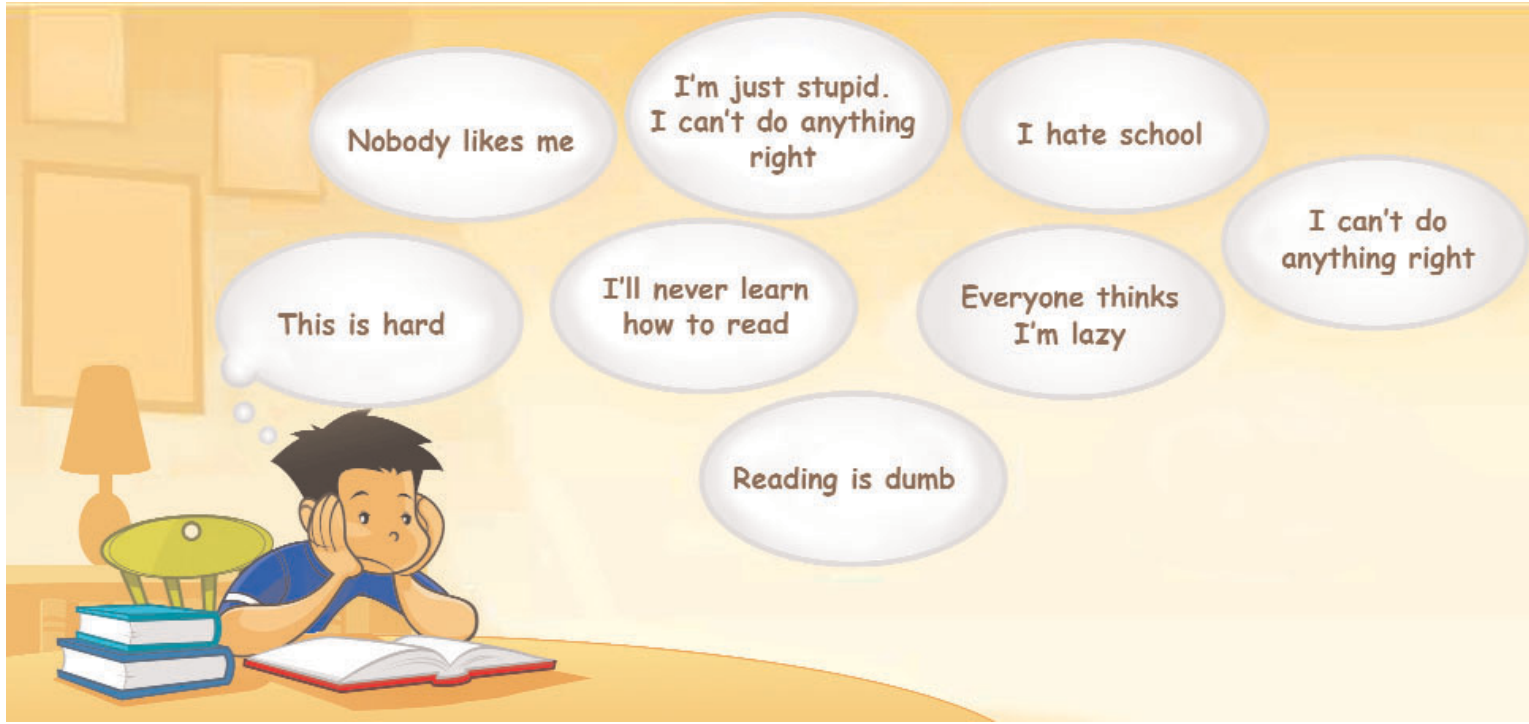


# Put Downs & Comebacks



## How to respond to a discouraged kid

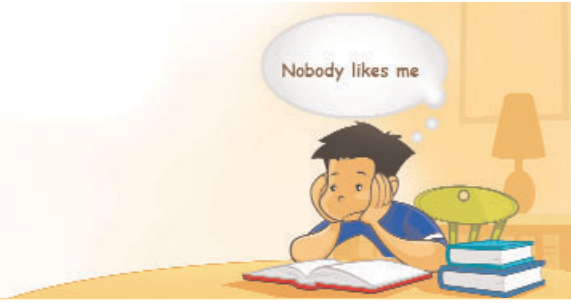
**W**hen children struggle in school, they can easily get discouraged. They might say or think, “I’ll never learn how to read” or “I’m just stupid. I can’t do anything right.”

To help caring parents and teachers respond to these “put downs,” the following pages show what a child may be trying to tell you and what you can do or say to encourage him or her to keep trying. An interactive version of “Put Downs & Comebacks” is also available at [www.readingrockets.org/helping/putdowns](http://www.readingrockets.org/helping/putdowns).

Note: Although we use “he” and “him” throughout (to make it easier to read), this information is applicable to both boys and girls.

“Put Downs & Comebacks” was written by Mia French and produced by Threespot Media for Reading Rockets. Many thanks to Dr. Louise Spear-Swerling for her review.

# “Nobody likes me.”



## What your child may be trying to tell you

- I'm having trouble making friends
- I do things to mask my learning difficulties, even if it alienates other people
- I don't have confidence in myself
- I'm sad

## How you can respond

- Try to draw out specific examples of why your child is feeling this way
- Give him guidance in forming friendships
- Help him determine what makes a good friend
- Find ways your child can be a helper at home and at school
- Role-play social situations that are difficult for your child
- Trust your instincts if you worry about the severity of these feelings

### ■ Try to draw out specific examples of why your child is feeling this way.

You may find that the problem is with one student, one adult, or in a particular setting. Is there another student who is being distracting or unkind? Is there a teacher who he feels is treating him unfairly? Is he acting out in ways that are irritating to other students? Is he disrupting instructional time because he's frustrated? Help him brainstorm a plan to address the problem. It will probably be most effective to then enlist the help of someone at school who can help him carry out the plan.

### ■ Give him guidance in forming friendships.

Some children long to be friends with the popular kids and overlook other kids in their class who may be a more comfortable and logical fit. Ask your child's teacher to suggest someone who might make a good friend for him. Help to cultivate this friendship outside of school and, in the beginning, give him any support he needs with appropriate social skills. Ask for his teacher's help in nurturing this friendship in the classroom. For example, the two kids can sit next to each other, be classroom helpers, and take notes to the office together.

### ■ Help him determine what makes a good friend.

Brainstorm a list of the qualities he would like in a friend. Does he know anyone who exhibits those qualities? Does he act like the type of person that he would want to be friends with? What can he do to become a better friend?

### ■ Find ways that your child can be a helper at home and at school.

Helping others is often a powerful way to boost self-esteem. It's wonderful to feel needed! Maybe he could be a reading buddy to a student in a lower grade or, if he has a good relationship with the P.E. teacher, he could help set up the P.E. equipment before school. At home, he could help plan, shop for, and prepare meals. He will be making a genuine contribution to the family and these activities will provide him with many opportunities to practice his reading skills.

### ■ Role-play social situations that are difficult for your child.

Act out different situations and outcomes and the consequences of each. Another benefit of role-playing is that your child might feel more comfortable sharing what's bothering him if he is "in character."

### ■ Trust your instincts.

If you worry about the severity of these feelings of alienation and sadness, talk about your concerns with the appropriate school personnel, such as teachers, social workers, school psychologists, and guidance counselors. They can help you determine the next step to take.

# *“I’m just stupid. I can’t do anything right.”*



## What your child may be trying to tell you

- I feel different from the other kids
- I feel frustrated with a particular situation or person
- I rarely feel successful or competent

## How you can respond

- Emphasize to your child that having learning difficulties does not mean he is unintelligent
- Try to find a specific source or pattern to this frustration
- Encourage him to nurture his strengths and interests
- Make a list with your child of all of the things he does well

### ■ **Emphasize to your child that having learning difficulties does not mean he is unintelligent.**

By definition, a student must have average or above average intelligence in order to qualify as learning disabled. It is important for you and your child to understand what it means to have a learning disability or difficulty. Entrusting your child with information about his difficulties will empower him to discredit the voices of doubt that he encounters, including the voice inside his head. The better he understands the nature of his learning difference, the better prepared he will be to advocate for himself, learn to accommodate for his weaknesses, emphasize his strengths, and not limit his potential.

### ■ **Try to find a specific source or pattern to this frustration.**

Does he exhibit this frustration both at home and at school? Is it with a particular subject or type of assignment? Does he seem to be down on himself the most when he's with certain people? Ask him what he thinks is causing him to feel that way. If you can pinpoint a specific catalyst leading to the frustration, then it will be easier to help him think of solutions that will help.

### ■ **Encourage him to nurture his strengths and interests.**

A child can become consumed by his struggles with reading or learning, causing him to feel different from and less capable than many of his peers. This can erode his confidence to the point that he feels incompetent, passive, and reluctant to take risks in all aspects of his life. It is important to guide him towards his strengths and interests both in and out of school. If your child is interested in art, for example, have him help you set up an art studio in a corner of the house, complete with exhibit space. If room is limited, he can decorate an art box as his portable studio. Mail his masterpieces to friends and family, “commission” him to create holiday decorations for the house. Schedule


“craft night” once a month. Have him help you choose artwork, of which you are both particularly fond, to frame for the walls at home and at your work. Try signing him up for an art class. Encourage him to make birthday gifts, cards, and wrapping paper, or take him to art museums, studios, and craft fairs. At school, talk with his teachers about incorporating your child’s interest in art meaningfully throughout the school day. The art teacher may welcome his help organizing supplies or even assisting with a younger class. He could help decorate a school bulletin board or include a piece of art to accompany his writing assignments.

Even if he is not especially artistic, encouraging him to pursue his interests will provide him with an opportunity to exercise his independence, develop his own identity, work at something in which he is interested and feels successful, allow him to become an “expert” on a particular subject, and give him the chance to surround himself, and hopefully make friendships with, like-minded people.

### ■ **Make a list with your child of all of the things he does well.**

It can be easy for your child to focus on his weaknesses to the point that he believes it is what defines him. Help your child discover that he is a multi-faceted person who is much bigger than his learning difficulties.

Together, make a list of all of the things he does well. The more extensive and specific you can make it, the better. You can list that he is a good soccer player, but also list what it is about him that makes him a good player, such as being a strong kicker, a good sport, or a fast runner. And don’t forget small and even silly accomplishments, such as his ability to cross his eyes, to organize his Yu-Gi-Oh cards, or to ride a roller coaster five times in a row without feeling sick! Making the list will help your child to feel good about himself and to articulate what it is that makes him uniquely special and valuable. Post this list in a prominent place and add to it frequently.



I'll never learn  
how to read

## ***"I'll never learn how to read."***

### **What your child may be trying to tell you**

- I feel alone in my struggle with reading
- I have been working so hard and I haven't made any progress
- I feel like giving up

### **How you can respond**

- Show empathy for your child's struggle
- Remind your child that learning any new skill takes practice
- Help your child see the progress he's made

#### **■ Show empathy for your child's struggle.**

It can be disconcerting for your child to know that he is struggling with something that seems to come so easily to everyone else. Acknowledge that learning to read is a challenge for him, but that everyone has challenges in his or her life. It may be helpful to share some of the challenges that you've personally faced. Together, you can research famous people who have worked through their disabilities to do extraordinary things. Reassure him that he is capable of learning how to read and that with continued determination, patience, and hard work he will become a reader.

#### **■ Remind your child that learning any new skill takes practice.**

Discuss the many things he can do, such as walk, talk, tie his shoes, and ride his bike. He had to work

at these skills, but eventually mastered them. His homework, class work, and the reading he does with you at home are the means by which he can practice his reading skills to mastery.

#### **■ Help your child see the progress he's made.**

Your child is so close to the struggle, that it may be difficult for him to see his progress in reading. Pull out some of his old schoolwork and compare it to his recent work, check out library books that he can read but were challenging for him before, ask his teachers to share the results of his reading assessments, and every few months, tape record him reading so that he can hear for himself the progress he is making.



Reading is dumb

## ***"Reading is dumb."***

### **What your child may be trying to tell you**

- I'm angry that I struggle so much with reading
- I don't see the point in having to work so hard to learn how to read
- I'm not interested in what I'm given to read

### **How you can respond**

- Acknowledge to your child that he does have to work hard at reading
- Point out the power and practicality of reading in everyday life
- Help your child find reading materials at his reading level that also interest him



- **Acknowledge to your child that he does have to work hard at reading.**

Sometimes he may feel very alone in his struggle. Let him know that you are there to support him and ask how you can help. Reassure him that it's okay to feel angry and frustrated sometimes. But also caution him not to let his anger toward his learning difficulties and his struggles with reading limit him or become an excuse for giving up.

- **Point out the power and practicality of reading in everyday life.**

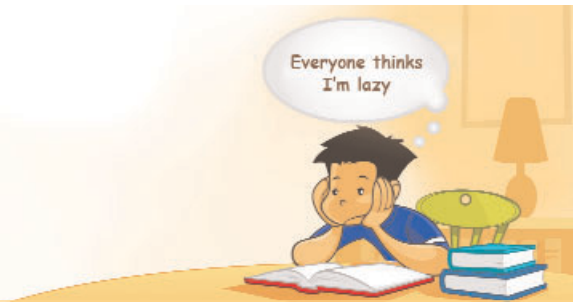
It is helpful for a child who is struggling with reading to understand the reward for all of his struggles. By mastering reading, his world will be full of opportunities, from the type of career he chooses to

his ability to select an entrée off a restaurant menu. The ability to read enhances everyday experiences.

- **Help your child find reading materials at his reading level that also interest him.**

A child who finds reading to be challenging will be even more resistant to read if the subject matter is not appealing to him. It can be a huge challenge to find books at your child's reading level that also interest him. Enlist the help of the reading specialist and other teachers at your child's school. Consider other types of reading materials such as magazines and computer learning games. Ensure that your child is engaged in the selection process. Keep in mind that you and he can enjoy an interesting book beyond his current independent reading level if you read it aloud to him and then discuss it together.

## ***"Everyone thinks I'm lazy."***



### **What your child may be trying to tell you**

- I feel overwhelmed
- I'm not being challenged
- I feel misunderstood
- It's difficult for me to ask for help
- I don't have confidence in my abilities

### **How you can respond**

- Teach your child how to advocate for himself
- Help your child recognize that it takes practice to master any skill
- Try to determine if an assignment is appropriate for your child
- Work with your child to break his assignments into smaller, more manageable parts
- Help your child get organized

- **Teach your child how to advocate for himself.**

Explain his learning difficulty to him so he can explain it to others. Not only should he understand the nature of his problem, but also the types of accommodations and modifications that are most effective for him. Teach him to ask for what he needs, including help. Reassure him that knowing when, who, and how to ask for help are signs of independence and maturity and demonstrates to others that he is serious about his learning.

- **Help your child recognize that it takes practice to master any skill.**

Sometimes your child may prefer not to try than to risk failing or looking stupid. Help him think of skills he had to practice in order to learn. Give him examples of skills that you are practicing, but still haven't mastered yet.

- **Try to determine if an assignment is appropriate for your child.**

Work with your child and his teacher to find a balance in his work so it is challenging but not frustrating. It is helpful to share your observations with his teacher because sometimes students can be successful with assignments at school, but then have trouble using the new skills when at home. It is equally important that he feel intellectually stimulated and that his assignments are meaningful. Genuine learning doesn't take place when a child is given unrealistic expectations or busywork.

- **Work with your child to break his assignments into smaller, more manageable parts.**

Your child may feel so overwhelmed staring at a

blank sheet of paper or at a chapter in the textbook he's supposed to read that he just doesn't know where to start. Help him devise a plan for his writing, show him how the information in textbooks is organized and broken up by headings, or have him complete some of his math problems and then take a break before completing the others. By achieving little goals along the way he will be more likely to complete entire assignments.

### ■ Help your child get organized.

Many children with learning differences have difficulty with organization and time management. Help your child organize a suitable workspace that is dedicated to completing homework. Work together to determine a schedule for when he will work on his assignments. Help him keep his backpack and notebooks organized.

## "I hate school."



### What your child may be trying to tell you

- I'm embarrassed that I need extra help
- I don't feel successful at school
- I feel different from everyone else

### How you can respond

- Be careful not to dismiss your child's feelings
- Help your child put his learning difficulties into perspective
- Help your child understand that everyone has different strengths and weaknesses

#### ■ Be careful not to dismiss your child's feelings.

Ask him what it is about school that he hates. Is he having difficulty with other kids or with adults? Does he feel like he is being treated fairly? Is he getting enough academic support? Get specific so that you can find the source of these strong emotions and can begin addressing them with your child before he gives up on himself as a student.

#### ■ Help your child put his learning difficulties into perspective.

Impress upon your child that there is no shame in having a learning disability. Just as some students need glasses to help them learn, your child may need assistance from educational specialists to help him learn. Help him recognize that the specialists aren't there to "pick on him" or make him feel stupid in front of his peers. They are there to coach him and to teach him the skills he needs so he won't need their help anymore. The goal is for him to find a way to live with his learning difference that will allow him to become successful, achieve independence, and reach his potential.

Help your child put his learning difficulties into perspective. Parents and other adults can be very helpful in providing kids with a long-term view. Things that seem like insurmountable problems now may improve or become less important later. In fact, children who hate school one year can do a complete

turnaround a year or two later if they find more sympathetic friends, for example, or a more understanding teacher or something in school they really enjoy. Also share with your child the many examples of people who did not shine when they were in school, but who found great success in their careers or by pursuing their interests.

#### ■ Help your child understand that everyone has different strengths and weaknesses.

Every student brings different strengths and needs to a class. Your child may be overly sensitive about his differences and be convinced that he is the only one who is "different."

Point out that while it is true that your child may not be the best reader in his class, he has strengths that he can contribute that help make his class a special community in which to learn. Generate a list together of people inside and outside of school whom he can help and the skills he can use to help them. He can teach another student how to draw bubble letters or how to do a flip on the monkey bars. He can also think of ways to help his neighbors as well as the local and world community to which he belongs. This will enable him to see that he is part of something much bigger than himself and that he is able to make real contributions to it. He will be able to experience success, to feel needed, and to see himself as someone more complex than just a student with a learning difference or disability.