

Directional Tracking Explained

Why Directional Tracking Is Essential for Reading Development

What is directional tracking?

We read and write English from left-to-right. This left-to-right horizontal arrangement of print is an essential component of the written English language. Proper directional tracking is looking at and processing all the letters *in order* from left-to-right. Proper directional tracking is essential for reading success.

Why is directional tracking important to proficient reading?

For accurate reading, the student *must* process sounds *in order from left-to-right*. Knowing the individual sounds is not sufficient. The following words demonstrate order of the letters is important: (stop-pots-tops) (thorn-north) (no-on) (miles-limes-smile) (step-pets-pest) (every-very) (felt-left). Poor readers have frequent tracking errors where they improperly process letters out of order. Poor readers often exhibit erratic eye movement as they look around for 'whole words' or jump around searching for familiar hunks or word families. These incorrect tracking strategies contribute to reading difficulty. To read proficiently the student must not only know the individual sound but must process the letters in order left-to-right. Correct phonologic processing requires proper directional tracking.

Why do you need to teach directional tracking?

You need to directly teach proper directional tracking because scanning left-to-right in a straight line manner is *not* a natural process. Instinctively, looking all over is a superior way to gather and process information. Straight line, left-to-right processing is one of the arbitrary artificial components of our man made written English language that the student must learn and automatically apply. Many children apply the superior natural instincts of looking all over and fail to develop straight line left-to-right tracking skills that are essential to proficient reading. Although this simple sub-skill may appear self evident, many students do not recognize and apply this essential element. Remember the child can not 'see' how we are reading. For all they know we are just telling a great story. If we do not directly show them they may learn incorrectly.

The goal is for the child or student to automatically engrain the essential left-to-right straight line processing of print. The most effective way to ensure the

student acquires this essential skill is to directly teach and require proper directional tracking from the beginning.

How do I teach my child or student proper directional tracking?

Directional tracking can be directly taught to the child with following simple, no cost, highly effective techniques. All you need is YOUR FINGER and the CHILD'S FINGER! The most effective tool for teaching directional tracking is use of a finger to physically track or pointing under the sounds of the words you are reading. Simple! Effective! USE YOUR FINGER!

- Always **demonstrate proper tracking** by sliding your finger under the words as you read. Remember, you are teaching a fundamental component of English that is not only artificial but is also difficult if not impossible for children to actually 'see'. A child can not see how you process print left-to-right when you read. If you read without pointing, it 'looks' like you are just telling a great story. By sliding your finger under words as you read you visually depict the proper directional tracking. The child learns from this concrete demonstration that we process print left-to-right. Use Your Finger!
- **Start young.** You can start teaching this essential skill from the very beginning when you sit your baby or toddler on your lap and read to them. Simply USE YOUR FINGER and follow under the words you are reading. By observing your physical motion, the child learns the essential left to right processing of print. Toddlers and preschoolers can even 'help' you read by moving their finger with yours. This is not formal lessons. This is the highly enjoyable snuggling on the couch with your child on your lap reading books together. All you need to add is the simple finger motion and from a very young age the child will acquire this necessary subskill of proficient reading.
- When the child first is learning to read words, **require the child to USE THEIR FINGER!** This physical motion is highly beneficial in engraining this essential left-to-right processing component of English. The physical pointing motion is also helpful in directing and focusing the child on individual sounds within the word. It helps them 'keep their place' and 'notice all the sounds'. Require physical tracking with the finger until the child has established strong phonologic processing skills, does not make tracking errors and has learned to pay attention to detail. It is so much more effective and efficient to teach this essential skill correctly from the beginning.

- The physical tracking motion is especially important in remediation, as struggling readers frequently make errors in processing order. The physical motion is necessary to help the student both extinguish incorrect processing of looking all over and also to build correct left-to-right processing skills. **In remediation, require the student to physically follow under words with either his finger or another pointer.** If older students are uncomfortable using their finger, they can use a toothpick, pencil or another pointer of their choice. However, make sure they physically move their finger or a pointer under the letters from left to right in all their reading. When proper tracking is automatically engrained, and the student no longer makes tracking or attention to detail errors the requirement for physical tracking can be dropped.

Is it necessary to have the child actually point with their finger as they read?

Yes, it is! The importance of the physical movement (kinetic process) in tracking can not be emphasized enough. Have the child use their 'reading finger' in the learning stage. Not only does this motion help engrain necessary left-to-right processing but pointing at sounds also helps the child focus on and correctly process individual sounds within the word. It improves attention to detail as well as proper left-to-right tracking. Require physical tracking motion when teaching beginners and when remediating struggling readers. In remediation, if an older student perceives finger motion to be 'babyish' they can use a toothpick, pencil or another pointer of their choice but still require physical motion. If the student is making tracking errors or missing details, continue physical tracking.

Eventually the child will 'outgrow' the need for physically pointing at the letters. When the child has engrained the essential left-to-right processing of all sounds physical tracking no longer needs to be directly taught. The child can then drop the finger motion. As students advance in skills from initial phonologic processing to fluency they tend to appropriately outgrow and drop finger movement on their own. If the student has established strong phonologic processing of print, and does not make tracking or attention to detail errors, they have mastered the necessary directional tracking skill and can drop finger pointing.

How is directional tracking related to vision and erratic eye movement when scanning text and reading? If you have any concerns with your child's vision you need to take your child to an eye doctor. Physical vision has

tremendous impacts on reading (the child must be able to see the print in order to convert print to sound). However, if your child's physical vision is fine (checked by an eye doctor) often erratic eye movement and improper tracking when reading are not the cause of reading difficulties but likely the symptoms of incorrect reading skills. Remember, reading is an artificial complex learned skill. If the child has not learned to process print in a straight line left-to-right manner and instead is looking all over their eye movement will be erratic. Looking back and forth, trying to visually recognize 'whole' words, hopping around looking for known parts and word families, and other incorrect reading strategies create symptoms of erratic eye movement. Proper directional tracking is closely related to eye movement. If the child learns to process all the letters *in order* from left-to-right they develop straight-line smooth eye-tracking when reading.

Remember proper directional tracking is only one of the skills necessary for proficient reading. See the articles [Overview of Teaching Children to Read](#) and [Skills Necessary for Proficient Reading](#) for additional information on the process of proficient reading.

Additional information, articles and resources on teaching children to read proficiently can be found on the [Free Reading Information](#) page of the Right Track Reading website.