**Reading helps develop spelling skills**

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Q: My son is not a good speller. He has never been a good speller. He is in fifth grade. I am lucky to get him to open a book to read. At this point, I am hoping to keep him motivated to graduate high school. Here is my question in all sincerity: Why do upper grade teachers still make students take these spelling tests each week? I know he should be able to do it, if he worked at it, but it makes it harder to get him to go to school if all he does is fail. Spelling doesn't really matter anymore and kids will type more, so when do spelling tests stop mattering?

A: Your question surprised me a little after your introduction. You were explaining your son's weaknesses accurately and presenting two things that were related: reading and spelling. Then you added a logical concern about keeping him on track so that he can finish high school. This is a fifth-grade child, so you threw me when you suggested that spelling should not matter anymore.

He is failing in areas that he needs to build. If he read more, his spelling would improve. He would "see" more words spelled correctly in context. This helps students pull from their memory how words should be spelled or if they "look right." If your son is not reading, he is likely not at grade level, thus putting himself further behind other kids his age. He is essentially standing still and letting the learning, and the other children, pass him by.

In this digital age, your son will be asked to communicate in writing, and he will need to do that clearly. Spell checking will not solve his problem. If he misspells a word like "capshun," spell check will present him with the option "caption" but he may not choose it for lack of experience with how it should even be spelled. He may choose the option "cap shun" and believe me, no employer would excuse an error like that. And if he finds himself without a digital aid and is given a pen, he won't be taken seriously in notes or memos, love letters or cards, if he cannot spell common words expected of him.

If your child's teacher is presenting grade-level work and he is failing because he is not trying, then that makes sense. Asking the teacher to stop giving him chances to perform at grade level does not make sense. If you are concerned about a learning disorder, you can ask the school to test for that, but if you know his poor performance stems from a lack of trying, you have to remedy this situation. Do not give up on a fifth-grader or excuse him from trying in any given area. He has time. Help him change. You are his parent. He needs you.

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