

Recently a friend called to say how distraught she was about her grandson's school performance. "He can't read a newspaper, let alone a whole book" was her complaint.

As we talked, she expressed not only concern but a deep-seated fear that this 15-year-old boy was losing his future as we spoke. She is not alone in her anxiety. School drop-out rates and an absence of proactive skill development is a national concern.

Although the numbers reflect a minority, they are significant. Fifteen percent of Canadian men and 9% of Canadian women do not graduate from high school by the age of 20. The most common reason for this is their inability to read by the time they complete Grade 3.

Reading is an essential skill for learning. If you can't read, the ability to learn is diminished and the obstacles become overwhelming. How does a child get to high school if he can't read when he passes out of Grade 3 at the approximate age of eight years?

That's a good question.

In our current world, the key to getting assistance is to have a learning disability. Not being able to read is not considered a disability, so there is little or no support once a child has missed the initial three-year window allocated to building reading skills. By Grade 4, that ship has sailed.

What can and often does happen is that children who can't read fade into the background unnoticed or they act out and become a "behaviour problem." Negative behaviour can redirect a child to an alternative program that is designed to pull the child out of the mainstream so other students won't be distracted by kids with issues, but this doesn't change the picture as far as reading goes.

Reading is such a critical piece of identity that a lack of competency in this area affects the child's self-esteem and confidence, causing discouragement and loss of hope.

Research tells us that this is a recipe for disaster and many kids take that road. Others simply live out a life without potential.

By the time a kid gets to Grade 10, even though he has not truly passed a grade for several years, intervention is very difficult. The issues at this point have gone beyond the fundamentals of reading and writing.

Kids in this situation have missed key information to help them succeed. They have social, emotional and behavioural needs and many have to overcome a debilitating feeling of shame in order to move forward.

Researchers tell us that attendance is key to success in school and of course truancy is a major issue for a child who is not doing well in school.

The latest statistics report that only 20% of Canadians have the strong literacy skills needed to meet the majority of reading demands and the challenges of understanding complex information.

Literacy is not just about reading but it is a key piece of the puzzle.

Are we preparing our children for a literate future?