

**How to Set Up  
A Community Education Course  
for Adults  
Whose Children (OR SPOUSES!)  
Have Reading/Spelling Problems**

by

Don McCabe

Copyright © 2008, 1993, 1982  
AVKO Educational Research Foundation  
3084 Willard Road  
Birch Run, Mich. 48415

Telephone: (810) 686-9283 FAX: (810) 686-1101  
[www.avko.org](http://www.avko.org)

## What is AVKO?

AVKO is a non-profit tax-exempt 501 (C) 3 membership organization.

AVKO was founded in 1974.

AVKO is subsidized by donations and grants.

AVKO is open to membership to anyone interested in literacy and/or dyslexia.

AVKO is run by members from as far away as Australia.

AVKO's daily operations are handled by volunteers and paid staff.

AVKO hopes to spread the concept that family involvement in tutoring of literacy skills can be successfully taught in adult community education classes.

AVKO provides newsletters and economical opportunities to pursue individual research projects and to take part in large scale cooperative research projects that have immediate practical applications for helping the literacy movement.

AVKO is attempting to accomplish these goals primarily through the profits generated by the sale of services and special materials developed for the special needs of students, parents, and adults.

**How to Set Up  
A Community Education Course  
for Adults  
Whose Children (OR SPOUSES!)  
Have Reading/Spelling Problems**

**THE NEED:**

As you wouldn't be reading this booklet if you weren't already convinced there are a great many parents who have children (or spouses) with reading/spelling problems, we won't bore you with another set of depressing statistics. Instead, we will go straight to the heart of the matter.

**GETTING THE IDEA ACCEPTED:**

Just because you are convinced there is a need for such a class, doesn't mean that the superintendent, the curriculum directors, the special education consultants, the principals, the teachers, and the Director of Community Education will be as excited about the idea as you are. You must realize that it is natural for these people to be less than enthusiastic. It is easy for them to become defensive especially since they can easily infer that you are implying that they haven't been doing their jobs properly. Otherwise, there wouldn't be a reading/spelling problem in the community, or so goes that subconscious line of defensive reasoning.

## **ARGUMENTS AGAINST HAVING A CLASS.**

### **1. Parents can't teach their own children.**

**WRONG!** We know that this just isn't true. Parents are a child's very first set of teachers. Parents teach the child his basic language, his basic values, and a multitude of complex actions from eating with a fork to tying shoelaces.

But even if we know this is just a myth, we can't easily dispel it. Arguing won't help. A sense of humor may. Or agreeing with a qualification—then appealing to a person's sense of fair play may help. For example, you could say: "You're absolutely right, MOST parents may not be able to teach their own children, but don't those few parents who have the common sense to know they need special instruction to be able to work with their children — don't these parents have at least the same right to have a class available to them as those people who want to learn how to crochet, repair small engines, play bridge, arrange flowers, sell real estate, or learn to operate computers?"

### **2. PARENTS DON'T HAVE THE PATIENCE to teach their own children or any close relative such as a husband or wife.**

**WRONG!** We suggest you use the same tact: Of course, most people don't have the patience to teach their own children or any close relative, but some do. This minority shouldn't be denied their rights. Besides, we feel IT IS POSSIBLE TO TEACH PATIENCE in such a class.

### **3.TEACHERS WILL FEEL IMPLICIT CRITICISM of their work. Right, unfortunately.**

Now we are really into the "nitty-gritty" of the situation. No matter what an individual's personal feeling may be concerning how well or how poorly a school's teaching staff is performing, it doesn't do one bit of good to criticize them.

For an adult class to teach parents how to tutor to succeed, we must have the cooperation of the teachers. Criticism won't help. Asking for their help and guidance may.

We suggest that it is vital to involve teachers actively in the program in the planning stages.

We also feel that it is important that from the outset there are *specific ground rules that criticism of the schools is taboo*. Again, the reason has nothing to do with the truth or falsity of allegations. What we want is a spirit of cooperation to solve a problem. For this, we feel it is best to simply state:

This class is to help adults learn how to provide a service that schools just **cannot economically** perform: that is, **one-to-one** teacher-student ratio for those very few who apparently require it in order to learn to read and spell proficiently.

**4. PRINCIPALS WILL FEEL IMPLICIT CRITICISM of the work of their teachers and their personal ability to run their school. Right, unfortunately.**

We repeat: It is important that from the outset there is to be **no criticism** of the schools. Even though you may not openly say anything critical, a principal may infer that the whole idea of having a class for parents is an implicit criticism of his school and his teachers. Therefore, we feel it is best that whoever attempts to initiate this program tells all school personnel that *this class is merely an attempt to help willing adults learn how to provide a service that schools cannot be expected to perform: providing one-to-one teacher/student ratio for those very few who apparently require it in order to learn to read and spell proficiently.*

**5. THE CHILD WILL BECOME CONFUSED by being taught one thing in school and another at home.**

**WRONG!** We suggest that you turn this argument around and use it as a REASON FOR having the class. That is, without a class and without direction parents who try to help their youngsters are liable to do just that—confuse their child.

On the other hand, a class in which cooperation with the child's teacher is taught will result in correct reinforcement of the material taught rather than confusion.

## **STEPS IN INITIATING THE CLASS**

1. If you are a teacher, discuss with fellow teachers the problem of not being able to give an adequate five minute answer on Parent Night to the rare parent who asks: What can I do at home to help my child? Wouldn't it be nice if you could say:

"There's no way I can tell you in five minutes how to diagnose reading or spelling problems and how best to work with your child, but...there's a real great course on how to tutor anybody, even members of your own family. It's on Wednesday nights at 7:30. Perhaps the best thing about it is by just taking the class, it tells your child that you love him enough to spend your time and your money learning how to help him."

2. If you are a parent, discuss it first with your child's teacher. Tell the teacher that you know she is doing the best she can, but that you think your child is one of those that needs more personal attention than a normal school can possibly supply. Discuss it in terms that are positive rather than negative. Try to avoid putting either the teacher or the school system on the defensive. Rather, say that you are looking for ways through the system to become a better parent and to help your child become a better student.
3. Talk to the school administrator that you personally think will be most responsive to your request. Ask him for his advice on how to go about establishing a committee to look into the possibility of establishing an Adult Community Education Class for those who want to learn how to tutor persons with reading/spelling problems — even those closest to them such as children and spouses. After securing a commitment, give him a copy of this pamphlet and ask him to please seriously consider adhering closely to the following committee meeting priorities.

## **COMMITTEE MEETING PRIORITIES:**

1. Find a teacher or teaching team willing to plan and to teach the course. This is absolutely essential and so obvious that you wouldn't think it would have to be mentioned. Except, we know of a system that offered a course for parents BEFORE looking for a teacher willing to teach it. It is embarrassing for a Community Education Director to cancel a class that was offered because he couldn't find a teacher.
2. Secure solid commitments from the Community Education Director and ALL the PRINCIPALS to advertise the project. Your local Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS) may be able to help you with the advertising.

## ADVERTISING IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS

### Reasons Why an Advertising Blitz is Absolutely Essential.

1. People who would want to take a class to learn how to tutor if they only knew about it, are NOT looking for it.
2. Standard listing of a course in the standard Adult Education Night Class Brochure will reach very, very few prospective parents of children with reading problems and perhaps even fewer adults whose spouse has a reading problem. Most readers of these brochures read just the listings they are interested in such as Bridge I, Advanced Bridge, Cake Decorating, etc. People interested in taking a Dancing class will skip the others. People who are not interested in any of these classes will throw away the brochure. Even though they might be interested in taking a class in tutoring, they don't look for something they don't expect to find.

## WHAT TO INCLUDE IN YOUR ADVERTISING

1. Children with reading or spelling problems are NOT dumb. They just need extra help. No child ever deliberately forgets. FORGETTING IS NORMAL. All of us forget things — but never deliberately. Wouldn't it be nice if we *could* deliberately forget some things?
2. The SCHOOLS and the TEACHERS are doing a GOOD JOB but some children require special reinforcement at home in order to master or maintain skills learned in school.
3. The PATIENCE necessary CAN BE ACQUIRED. Every parent can learn to be as patient with their own child as with any other human being. The key is: Every parent CAN LEARN to be patient if they WANT TO LEARN badly enough. If parents expect their children to have the patience necessary to learn to read they must be willing to learn to be patient themselves.
4. The class will emphasize techniques in tutoring anyone in learning how to improve their **spelling**.

#### REASON:

- In our society it isn't considered a sin to be a "bad" speller.
- We all consider bad spelling to be a handicap, but not one that is related to intelligence.
- In other words, it is much easier for parents to admit their children have spelling problems than reading problems.
- It is much easier for adults who have reading problems to accept help related to their inevitable spelling problems because there isn't the stigma attached to being a bad speller as there is to being a non-reader.

## **How to insure FAILURE for any Parenting or Literacy program —or please don't do the following!**

1. Draft a semi-willing teacher.
2. Have the Director of Community Education merely include a listing of the class in its brochure just like any other enrichment activity - and it will be lost.
3. Don't inform the local radio or television stations.
4. Don't bother to inform the teachers about the class, or if you do, do it via a paragraph buried in the middle of weekly announcements or a quick announcement at the end of a long teacher's meeting.
5. Don't bother to ask for help and advice from the principals. That's a good way to bring about failure.
6. Don't bother to involve the parent organizations such as the PTA or the LDA.
7. Don't involve local literacy groups such as Laubach, LVA, the International Dyslexia Association (formerly, Orton Dyslexia Society), The Reading Reform Foundation, PLUS, etc. That's another good way to bring about failure.
8. Don't advertise. When nobody knows, nobody comes.
9. Don't set up committees to telephone parents. No calls. No parents. Simple as that.
10. Don't set up committees to call on parents personally.
11. Cancel the class if there aren't enough parents enrolled to cover expenses. That's THE BEST WAY to insure failure. If you're interested in developing the program, you must be willing to offer the program and teach whoever comes for at least two years and let other activities subsidize this program. It will become self-supporting, but it takes time. It will take PERSONAL SUCCESS STORIES to filter out into the community to get others to participate.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR MAINTAINING ATTENDANCE**

1. Have a partially returnable fee structure. If, for example, the course fee is set for \$35.00, have part of the fee refunded every session. For example, the parent could pay \$35.00 the first session. When he comes to the second session, he receives a \$5.00 rebate plus handouts. If he misses a session, he doesn't get his \$5.00 rebate.
2. Have specific handouts with activities planned for each meeting. Let the parents know at each meeting what will happen at the next meeting.

## **MATERIALS AVAILABLE FOR TEACHING A COURSE IN TUTORING**

LESSON PLANS: Every teacher or teaching team should make their own. No commercially prepared set of plans can possibly cope with all the varying needs of all the different types of communities. However, AVKO does have a limited number of lesson plans and materials that it developed for a pilot project. We modestly believe that these can be helpful, especially the first few times the course is offered. The greatest value to this set is that it has a book for the student and one for the tutor that gives the tutor and student an opportunity to immediately achieve success in a 15 minute a day program. The tutor learns at a leisurely pace in the Adult Education course the multitude of things a good tutor should know.

This set of two books, Lesson Plans (If it is to be it is up to us to help) and the Tutor Book and Student Book combined into one (If it is to be it is up to me) can be obtained from:

**Project for Family Involvement in Literacy  
AVKO Educational Research Foundation  
3084 Willard Road  
Birch Run, MI 48415  
Phone (810) 686-9283**

**See AVKO's website, [www.avko.org](http://www.avko.org), for current pricing.**

The cost to the school system and to the class members may be kept to almost zero by having local service groups such as the Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, etc., purchase the books with their logos imprinted on them.

Use your local resources such as the school district's reading consultants, adult education consultants, learning disability consultants, and special education consultants. These people should be more than willing to share with you their ideas and materials.

## TYPES OF CLASSES

In large school systems that would have a sizable turnout of parents (IF THEY UTILIZE AN ADVERTISING BLITZ), it might be wise to have classes for specific types of parents and students.

1. **FOR PARENTS WHO CANNOT READ.** Some parents may have severe reading problems themselves. They should have their own class in which they can learn as they teach their children. The most important part of the class would be the time spent ensuring that the parents are NOT made to feel guilty or dumb. AGAIN: the title of the class might be something a little less threatening, such as:

**How to help your child overcome spelling problems when your own spelling is just plain terrible.**

Since these parents can't read, they must be contacted personally. Announcements and short sermons from local churches as well as donated radio and TV time are suggested avenues of approach. Your local PLUS representative may help you with this.

2. **For parents of EARLY ELEMENTARY school** children who have developed problems learning how to spell.
3. **For parents of LATER ELEMENTARY OR MIDDLE SCHOOL CHILDREN** who have developed problems learning how to spell.

The reason for separating this group from the first is that while bunny rabbit materials may be appropriate for the very young child, bunny rabbits are "OUT" with this group. The materials and techniques used in remediation should vary by age groups.

4. **For parents of high school students or for SPOUSES of ADULTS** who have severe spelling problems.

## APPROACHES THAT HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFULLY USED:

1. **AVOIDANCE OF SCAPEGOATING.** Whether or not the teacher or the class believes "the school" is responsible for the children's (or their) problems, it does NOT help solve any problem for anyone by seeking to cast blame on teachers or schools.
2. **SEEKING ACTIVE COOPERATION BETWEEN CLASSROOM TEACHER AND PARENT.**
3. **REMOVAL OF GUILT FEELINGS.** Parents, to be successful tutors, must NOT have guilt feelings toward their children. In turn, the parents must learn how to help their children overcome their guilt feelings for having a learning problem.
4. **ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE—ELIMINATE THE NEGATIVE.** Whatever materials, techniques, games, strategies, etc. are employed, they should all help the learners develop a positive attitude toward themselves which includes:

- A. TOLERANCE FOR MISTAKES.** Not only should the parent have patience and not be critical over mistakes and forgetting, so too must the child. AVKO advocates a policy of teaching both parent and child a simple concept:

**Mistakes are opportunities to learn.**

- B. TOLERANCE FOR FORGETTING.** Both parent and child must learn to accept forgetting as normal. AVKO advocates teaching the concept that anything can be remembered if only we forget it enough times. FORGETTING is actually a mechanism used by the computer brain to insure that only the necessary information is instantly retrievable.

- C. BECOME GENEROUS WITH PRAISE — STINGY WITH CRITICISM.**

Unfortunately, it seems to be part of our culture to be free with criticism and miserly with praise. We believe that teachers should give the parents actual practice in giving praise to their children. AVKO also believes that parents should learn which habitual language patterns have negative effects upon learning. For example:

**AVOID SAYING:**

"Didn't I just tell you? give you? ask you? etc."

"Why didn't you...?"

"Why don't you sound it out?"

**INSTEAD, TRY SAYING:**

"Nice job."

"Good."

"Don't worry about forgetting it. You'll remember the next time."

"You did a good job sounding that word out. I'm proud of you."

**BE GENEROUS WITH PRAISE  
BUT STINGY WITH CRITICISM**



**A selected bibliography**  
**of just a very few of the many books**  
**available for parents that may be of help in the conducting of a class in tutoring.**

- Bishop, Margaret. *The ABC's and All Their Tricks*. Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1986.
- Bush, Barbara. *C. Fred's Story, A Dog's Life*. New York: Doubleday, 1984. This is for fun — but it is excellent for tutoring with later on. Proceeds of this book go to Laubach Literacy Action and Literacy Volunteers of America, Inc.
- Clarke, Louise. *Can't Read Can't Write Can't Talk too Good Either*. New York: Walker & Co. 1973.
- Diehl, Kathryn. *Why Johnny Can't Read But You Can Teach Him at Home*. Scottsdale AZ: The Reading Reform Foundation, 1976.
- Flesch, Rudolf. *Why Johnny Can't Read*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986.
- Frey, Patricia, et. al. *Litstart Trainer Handbook*. Lansing, MI: Michigan Literacy, Inc. 1990.
- Granowsky, Alvin et. al. *For Parents and Children: A Guide to Better Reading*. Asheville, NC: TARMAC, n.d.
- Henry, Marcia and Nancy Redding. *The Tutor Series*. Los Gatos, CA: Lex Press, 1994.
- Larrick, Nancy. *A Teacher's Guide to Children's Books*, 4th Ed. New York: Bantam Books, 1975.
- Lyman, Donald. *Making the words stand still*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986.
- McCabe, Don. *To Teach a Dyslexic*. Birch Run, MI: AVKO Educational Research Foundation, 1995.
- McCabe, Don. *English Spelling: The "SIMPLE," the "FANCY," the "INSANE."* Birch Run, Mich.: AVKO Educational Research Foundation, 1987.
- McCabe, Don. *The Patterns of English Spelling*. Birch Run, Mich.: AVKO Educational Research Foundation, 1992.

## **A selected bibliography**

**of just a very few of the many books**

**available for parents that may be of help in the conducting of a class in tutoring** (*Continued from p. 19*).

- Miller, Julano. *Helping Your LD Child at Home*. San Rafael, CA: Academic Therapy, 1973.
- Orem, R. C. *Montessori, Her Method and the Movement*. New York: Putnam, 1974.
- Ransbury, Molly Kayes. *How Can I Encourage My Primary Grade Child to Read?* Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, n.d.
- Robson, Ed et. al. *LITSTART: Literacy strategies for adult reading tutors*. Lansing, MI: Michigan Literacy, Inc. 1990.
- Rosner, Jerome. *Helping Children Overcome Learning Difficulties—A Step-by-step Guide for Parents and Teachers*. New York: Walker & Co., 1975.
- Smith, Carl. *Help your child read and succeed*. Bloomington IN: Grayson Bernard, 1991.
- Sunday, Arlene. *Fundamentals of reading success* (video series). Cambridge, MA: Educators Publishing Service, 1994.
- Weiss, Helen & Martin. *Home is a Learning Place—A Parents' Guide to Learning Disabilities*. New York: Little, Brown 1975.

**For information on other parenting programs such as *Parents Sharing Books* contact:**

The Family Literacy Center  
Indiana University  
2805 East 10th St., Suite K  
Bloomington, IN 47408-2698

or call (812) 855-5847 or (800) 759-4723