

Reading with TLC: Innovative program boosts children's reading skills



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Nancy Alemian Telian and Penny Alemian Castagnozzi demonstrate their Reading with TLC Lively Letters program

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In the giant letter M shaped like a mustache, a man's lips are pressed together, showing how the mouth forms the sound, as the teacher says: "The man made chocolate chip cookies and said, mmmmm...."

This Lively Letter is showing the child how to shape their lips to pronounce the letter M, and not a moment to soon.

Two thirds of fourth graders in the United States are reading at below proficiency level, according to the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress academic report card.

"We view this as an emergency to get these kids reading," said Nancy Alemian Telian, an ASHA certified speech and language pathologist who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of reading disorders. She is an adjunct faculty member at the Massachusetts General Hospital Institute of Health Professions Graduate Program in Communication Sciences and Disorders, where she has also served as a clinical supervisor.

Telian co-founded Weymouth-based Reading with TLC with her sister, Penny Alemian Castagnozzi, who has a background in elementary education.

Reading with TLC is a national company offering a multi-sensory program training phonemic awareness and phonics for learners of all ages, with proven successes with children with reading disabilities and as a supplement to the core reading curriculum in pre-kindergarten through grade two.

The program is used locally by teachers in Weymouth, Braintree, and Holbrook schools, as well as in other South Shore locations and across the nation.

The heart of the TLC program is Lively Letters and Sight Words You Can See.

Lively Letters are picture cards representing the more than 40 speech sounds. Engaging pictures showing readers how to shape their mouths to make a speech sound are embedded in the letter and tied in with a story about sound, such as the letter M with the man who made M&M cookies and said “mmmm.”

When the picture is withdrawn, the child transitions to the letter alone. When the child looks at the unadorned letter, the right side of the brain is still seeing the picture and enables the child to learn the speech sound, according to Telian.

“This gets them to read much sooner,” Telian said.

Castagnozzi developed Sight Words You Can See by drawing mnemonic cues (cues that aid a student to remember) in and around the most difficult sight words from the Dolch sight word list, linking all three aspects of the sight words: the way they’re spelled, the way they’re pronounced, and their meanings. The line drawings add just enough to elicit the humorous cues without distracting students from the letter patterns in the sight words.

Together, Lively Letters and Sight Words You Can See are helping children learn to read with eye-opening success.

Although each case is unique, students trained with the Lively Letters methods and materials typically show improvements of 1.5 to 3 grade levels in the areas of phonemic awareness, phonetic decoding, and oral reading within several months, according to Telian.

When the program is implemented intensively, which is four to five times per week in 45 minute, small group sessions, these gains are seen within six to eight weeks, as was reported in the Boston Public Schools Initial Pilot Study highlighted in clinical studies section of the program’s web site, www.readingwithtlc.com.

“Given intervention using the Lively Letters program, dramatic improvement is usually apparent,” Telian said.

The program works well for children as a school reading program supplement and for children and adults who have a reading disability including dyslexia, or other reading challenge, such as learning English as a second language.

The failure to learn reading crisis is even greater than the NAEP statistics show.

“Reading failure at the third grade level is the strongest predictor of high-school drop-out,” Castagnozzi said. “This is really life changing. Children can’t succeed in any subject if they can’t read.”

Children who can’t read can’t benefit from other educational reforms, Castagnozzi said.

“Early intervention is critical,” Castagnozzi said. “Reading does not just come. It is very clear what children need, but it is not being implemented nationwide. Massachusetts is one of the leaders, but there is still room to grow. Big things are happening, but there needs to be more awareness.”

Intervention ideally should come before the second grade.

“The highest number of SPED referrals come in the third grade,” Castagnozzi said. “If you’ve waited until the third grade, it’s too late.”

Telian developed Lively Letters some 20 years ago when she was working as a consultant in the Boston public school system.

“A large percentage of the children had difficulty with reading, so I started developing techniques,” Telian said. Soon Castagnozzi came on board.

“People started asking us to share our techniques and materials. We were just trying to teach kids to read,” Telian said.

Every three months, Telian and Castagnozzi present a free overview of the program.

On May 31, from 7 to 8:30 p.m. at Comfort Inn in Randolph, there will be a free seminar for parents, giving specific techniques on using Lively Letters and Sight Words You Can See and showing parents what signs to look for that indicate their child is struggling. For more information call 781-331-7412 or visit [**readingwithtlc.com**](http://readingwithtlc.com).

Reading with TLC free seminars offer CCUs for speech pathologists, as well as PDPs for regular education and SPED teachers. Reading with TLC is utilized in all three tiers of the Response to Intervention model of instruction.

Reading with TLC is now taking another big step.

“We are now training trainers,” Telian said. “Teachers are coming back to be trained to be trainers, and going back to their school to teach others for free. Teachers need professional development, but schools don’t always have the money. This is our way of giving back to the community.”

Telian and Castagnozzi recently presented at the Illinois Speech Language Hearing Association National Convention, the Texas Speech Language Hearing Association Annual Convention, and the Kentucky Speech Language Hearing Association National Convention held this past winter. Telian spoke on the topic, “Merging Phonemic Awareness and Phonics within the RtI Model of Instruction.”

Telian and Castagnozzi also donated seminars to benefit events for the MASHA and MBIDA.

Telian maintains a private practice in Weymouth, and this summer hopes to hire some of those trained at Reading with TLC seminars as tutors.

“Nothing need stop your children from achieving great success and happiness,” Telian said. “At Reading with TLC, we’d just like to make the path a little easier.”

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