

ILLUSTRATING THE GAP IN 3RD GRADE READING EXERCISE



Time: 5-8 minutes

Purpose: The purpose of this activity is to illustrate how the gap in third grade reading grows as children have or do not have 1) access to high-quality preschool programs, 2) regular preschool and school attendance and 3) summer learning opportunities.

- 1) **Begin by asking** for three volunteers to stand next to one another. (Note: Before you start the exercise, take a quick look around to make sure that volunteers will have room to walk eight steps backward and about 20 steps forward. Assign each volunteer to be Volunteer A, Volunteer B or Volunteer C).
- 2) **Ask the volunteers** to share their names, then announce to the room, "These are (insert each volunteer's name). They are all five years old. This is the first day of kindergarten. Hurray!!! Let's all give them a big hand for this exciting day!"
- 3) **Then, point to Volunteer A** and say, "But unfortunately Volunteer A (insert his/her name) did not have a chance to participate in a high-quality preschool program due to the lack of slots. So, (name of Volunteer A), please take eight steps back to represent the approximately eight to nine months of learning that you didn't get a chance to gain in the year before kindergarten."
- 4) **Then point to Volunteer B** and say, "(Insert name of Volunteer B) got into a great preschool program, but after a couple of months, things got tough with his/her family. Dad lost his job, the family car broke down, Mom got Covid, and (name of Volunteer B) stayed home because of colds and other illnesses, so (name of Volunteer B) missed a lot of preschool. After another couple of months, the preschool program told him/her, 'We are sorry, but we need to give your slot to a child who will show up regularly.' (Name of Volunteer B), please take four steps back because you only got partial benefit from the preschool learning experience."
- 5) **Then point to Volunteer C** and say, "Here we have (insert name of Volunteer C), who attended a high-quality preschool program. She/he is excited and ready to go."
- 6) **Now, direct all three volunteers** to walk forward eight steps. Share that this represents a year of learning in kindergarten. Instruct the volunteers to take the same sized steps because they all had a wonderful, high-quality kindergarten teacher.
- 7) **Then turn to Volunteer A again** and say, "Unfortunately, because (insert name of Volunteer A) never went to preschool, she/he not only missed out on learning but his/her family also lost out on the opportunity to get into the practice and habit of getting to school every day. Because kindergarten was the first time being cared for by someone other than family members, she/he was so anxious that she/he was always complaining of stomachaches, and his/her family kept him/her home on those days. In the end, she/he was what we call severely chronically absent – missing two months total of kindergarten." Turn to Volunteer A and say, "Please take two steps back to represent those two months of missed days plus another two steps to represent the days that you came back but weren't sure what was happening."
- 8) **Turn to Volunteer B** and say, "(Insert name of Volunteer B) also had some challenges getting to school and missed a month. But it wasn't as bad as with (name of Volunteer A)." Then say to Volunteer B, "Take one step back and then another step back to represent the confusion on the days you returned but were lost since you missed the instruction."
- 9) **Turn to Volunteer C** and say, "(Insert name of Volunteer C) has excellent access to health care, food and stable housing. She/he has been able to stay healthy, and even when sick, she/he missed only four days for the entire year, so those absences did not affect learning or connections to the teacher."
- 10) **Summer programs.** All three children attend a free and fun program in their neighborhood and have a great time! Tell all three volunteers, "Take one step forward to represent the gains in learning."
- 11) **Now, say to all three volunteers,** "Let's take eight steps forward to represent first grade."

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- 12) **Chronic absence continues.** Both A and B still struggle with attendance in first grade. Say, "(Insert name of Volunteer A) is anxious about school and worries about being academically behind. She/he misses four days a month in first grade, so (insert name of Volunteer A) – take four steps back." Say, "(Insert name of Volunteer B's) family continues to struggle because Mom has lingering effects from Covid. She/he is missing about two days a month in first grade, so (insert name of Volunteer B), take two steps back."
- 13) **Stop the exercise.** Say to the room, "Imagine that this attendance pattern continues into second and third grade." Ask the room, "Who do you think will be reading by the end of third grade?"
- 14) **With volunteers still standing, ask the room,** "What would it take to close the gap?" *(Be ready with some prompts, for example, how can we use summer or after-school programs to expand and accelerate joyful learning experiences? How can parents/caregivers take advantage of enrichment programs at the library?)*
- 15) **Say,** "It's important that we see the gap and take action to make sure A and B catch up."
- 16) **Thank the volunteers** for participating and ask them to return to their seats.

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