

Learning to Read - Research Informs Us

Learn what skills are necessary to learn to read and what kind of instruction he should have.

By Jan Baumel, M.S.

Most kids learn to read no matter what method of instruction is used. But 20 percent of school age kids are poor readers and remain that way through their lifetime. You may have heard that letter reversals are an early indicator of reading problems. Actually, many young kids exhibit some reversals as they're learning to form letters and sequence from left to right. The scientific, [independent research](#) results tell us that reading is a language-based skill. This means that delays in early language development are better predictors of reading problems.

What Should I Look For?

The best way to tell how kids in kindergarten and first grade will [develop reading skills](#) is to look at their ability to break up spoken words into the individual sounds, or phonemes. They have to be able to isolate sounds and manipulate them in words.

- Can your child tell you if two sounds are the same or different, e.g., /p/ /b/?
- Does he enjoy stories that rhyme? Does he play with rhyming?
- Can he name words that begin with the same sound?
- Can he hear that the words "ash," "so," and "it" each have two phonemes?

Our language is based on the alphabetic principle. Written words are made up of letters that represent sounds. Kids need to learn that certain sounds go with certain letters.

- Can your child say the alphabet?
- Can he tell you the names of letters?
- Can he match a letter sound with the symbol?

Reading comprehension depends on quick and automatic reading of single words. If kids read slowly and struggle with words that should be familiar, they won't remember or understand what they've read.

- Does he remember words he's read before?
- Can he sound out new words quickly?
- Does he decode new words correctly?
- Can he tell you what he has just read?

If problems with reading have existed over a period of time, he has average or above average intelligence, has received basic instruction in reading, and has no physical or emotional disabilities that might affect learning, he may have a reading disability. Talk to his teacher, and make sure that he's receiving effective, research-based instruction. If necessary, consider having him assessed.

What Is Effective Instruction?

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) recognized that poor reading is not only an educational problem but also a public health issue. So they began a large-scale program to review research on the causes of reading failure and methods of teaching. From the *NICHD Report of the National Reading Panel*, we've learned that effective reading instruction should include all of the following:

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemes are the smallest units of spoken language and are different from the letters that represent them when writing words. Kids need to focus on and manipulate the sounds in spoken syllables and words without any letters. Phonemic awareness shouldn't be confused with auditory discrimination, the ability to recognize whether two spoken words are the same or different.

Phonics

Instruction in phonics has been helpful to kids who struggle with reading. They're taught that sounds are represented by letters of the alphabet which can be blended together to form words. Sounds are linked to the individual letters and letter combinations and the symbols that stand for them. Kids with reading difficulties need to be taught explicitly to change letters into sounds and then blend the sounds to make words.

Skills must be taught systematically, in a carefully planned order. Reading material should be decodable. That means that it should contain sounds and words that already have been taught and avoid sounds and sight words that haven't been introduced.

Because kids vary in reading ability and the skills they bring to the classroom, no single phonics program is recommended for everyone. There are different approaches to teaching phonics. Instruction needs to be designed to meet the needs of particular kids or groups of students in a classroom.

Guided Oral Reading

Guided oral reading practice is necessary to develop efficiency and ease in reading. To become a more fluent reader, your child needs lots of opportunity to practice what he just learned. He should read out loud to you, the teacher, or other students and have mistakes corrected. If necessary, skills should be re-taught.

Vocabulary Comprehension

For kids who are fluent readers, strategies to increase vocabulary should be taught. New words can be learned as they are read in the text or introduced before an assignment. Being able to use a dictionary or thesaurus is an important skill. Computer technology, such as hypertext that links highlighted words to definitions, may be helpful, too.

Text Comprehension

It's important for your child to be aware of whether he understands what he's reading. Strategies to improve comprehension include using graphic and semantic organizers (including story maps),

answering oral or written questions, asking himself questions about the story, and being able to summarize the story. Integrating new ideas and generalizing from what he's read are the ultimate goals.

What Can You Do?

If your child has reading problems, he'll need more instructional time and practice. It's really important for you to listen to him read at home every day for about 15 minutes. Remind him that to develop any special skill requires practice. Just ask someone who participated in the Olympics, plays a musical instrument, or is learning to drive a car!

Be sure that what he's reading out loud to you is at a level below his classroom instruction. This gives him the chance to reinforce skills and make them automatic. If he makes more than 5 errors on a page, there's a good chance that the text is too hard for him to practice on. Ask his teacher to supply the books that he should be reading at home.

Spend some time reading a book aloud to him. By reading a book that he can't read independently but is interested in, you'll help him increase his vocabulary. By asking questions about what you've read or having him retell the story to a family member, you can check on his level of understanding. There may even be an added benefit of developing a desire to improve reading skills to find out more information for himself.

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