

Components of Effective Reading Instruction

What are the elements of effective reading instruction for kids who have trouble learning to read? What can parents do at home to develop pre-reading skills and reinforce classroom learning? A reading expert answers those questions here.

By Susan Hall, Ed.D.

What are the components of effective reading instruction for students who have difficulty learning to read? What can parents do at home to develop pre-reading skills and reinforce instruction at school? In this article, Susan Hall, Ed.D., addresses these questions.

Parents are often advised to evaluate the reading instruction their child receives in the classroom, yet how can they recognize good instruction when they see it? Although delivering excellent early reading instruction requires a well-trained educator, recognizing whether a teacher is using a research-based approach is not that difficult if you know what to look for. **Parents don't need to know how to teach reading – just how to evaluate the approach used and to identify whether it is working for their child.**

Fortunately, parents can look to a federally funded report for a summary of the scientific research on reading. Teaching Children to Read, published in March 2000, is the result of the work of the National Reading Panel, 14 people commissioned by Congress in 1997 to assess research-based knowledge about reading, including the effectiveness of various approaches to teach children to read. The panel reached these critical conclusions about effective reading instruction based on convergence of significant data from reliable research studies.

- **Explicit instruction in [phonemic awareness](#) (PA) improves a child's reading and spelling skills.** PA can be taught during kindergarten and early first grade using game-like activities. Children are taught to blend and segment the individual sounds in simple words, first orally and later with the associated letters. When visiting a kindergarten class, parents might see the teacher using a puppet to play an oral word game. The puppet says the initial consonant sound of a word, the teacher says the rest of the word, and the children are asked to blend the parts together and say the word. An example of a PA activity to segment sounds is when the teacher asks the students to delete one sound in a word. The teacher might say to the students, "Say the word 'beam.' Now say 'beam' without the /m/ sound. What's the word? The word is 'bee'." At home, parents can play similar word games that draw a child's attention to the separate sounds in words.

- **Systematic phonics instruction significantly improves reading and spelling skills of kindergarten – 6th grade students, especially those who struggle in reading.** First graders who were taught phonics systematically were better able to read and spell, and they showed significant gains in their ability to comprehend, as well. Systematic phonics is not merely a useful component of early reading instruction, it is a necessary component. A common practice in systematic phonics instruction is to teach children to say the sounds of letters and blend them to read unfamiliar words. Instruction is typically organized in a planned, sequential set of phonics lessons rather than teaching letter sounds randomly as they occur in the literature children are reading. Activities should reinforce letters and sounds that have been taught. One activity is where the teacher gives each child three letter cards (e.g., “p,” “t,” “s”). She then says words (e.g., “puppet,” “tail,” “salt”) and asks the children to hold up the letter with the sound they hear at the beginning of each word. Using sounds that have been taught at school, parents can make up similar activities at home to reinforce skills.

Teachers who teach systematic phonics often use books with controlled vocabulary (sometimes called “decodable books”) in the first few months of first grade. These books contain simple words that can use letters and sounds children have been taught. This enables children to read all the words successfully rather than resort to guessing strategies when given books that contain words with sounds they haven’t yet learned.

Scientific research shows that the most skilled readers are efficient at reading single words accurately and fluently and that they rely on context very little for figuring out unknown words. Even though it appears they skip words and effortlessly absorb meaning in a global way, studies tracking eye movements confirm good readers read virtually every word and process the print letter-by-letter. Therefore, the most effective practice is to teach children to sound out words. Guessing a word from context or picture clues is not effective or efficient, especially once a child reaches fifth grade when most of the text contains no pictures and introduces considerably harder vocabulary. Therefore, parents should always encourage their child to sound out words rather than guess.

- **The practice of asking children to read aloud with guidance and feedback, sometimes called guided oral reading, helps develop reading fluency.** Parents can listen to children read aloud and provide coaching as needed to help read words accurately and quickly enough to construct the meaning.
- It also is important to explicitly teach children a variety of **strategies to guide and improve reading comprehension.** Some of these strategies include learning techniques to help monitor understanding while reading, developing and answering

questions, using the structure of a story to recall events, and using graphic organizers to create a visual representation of the information.

Although the conclusions of the National Reading Panel apply primarily to general education classroom instruction, effective instruction for the struggling reader incorporates the same components. Struggling readers especially need explicit and systematic instruction in both phonemic awareness and phonics. Children who don't easily make the associations between letters and sounds often benefit from a multisensory approach to teaching – one that uses all the senses – auditory, visual, and kinesthetic/tactile.