

If you are reading this post, you either have a child struggling to learn how to read at school, or you are an overachiever looking to teach your child to read before school starts. Either way, welcome! I am happy to share what I have learned with you!

Let's talk about numbers for a minute. Scientists estimate that around 95% of elementary students can learn to read. That is a much different number than the 32% of 4th-grade students currently reading at or above proficient levels, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Let's look closer at the numbers. Of the 95% of students scientists say should be able to learn to read, only 30% will learn how to read no matter what. That means with any program or any quality of instruction, these students will pick up reading. Those are probably the 32% showing up in the NAEP findings.

Another 15% of children need significant support to learn how to read. These are the students with dyslexia or other learning difficulties who need special instruction to learn how to read.

That leaves another 50% of children who can learn how to read if they get systematic and explicit instruction in reading. Systematic and explicit instruction isn't specialized instruction outside of the classroom. It is basic instruction from their classroom teacher.

Slowly, very slowly, our teachers and schools are realizing that we need to do something different if we want the 95% of elementary students who are capable of learning to read to learn to read.

Again, if you are reading this post, you probably don't want to wait for things to improve. You want your child to learn how to read now.

How We Read

If you want to teach your child to read, you will have to learn a little brain science first. With MRI technology, scientists can look inside the brain as an individual reads and watch how the brain processes information. All of the steps in reading happen incredibly quickly in skilled readers. They happen so fast that we aren't even aware of them. Here are the steps:

1. Look at the word. Recognize letters and digraphs.
2. Match letters and digraphs to sounds.
3. Blend the sounds into a word.
3. Connect the word to its definition or usage.

Typical readers start to map, or automatize, words after just one to four exposures. Our brains connect the order of the letters to the sound of the word. The speed of the process is why reading feels like automatic word recognition. Struggling readers may need twenty or more exposures to a word before their brains automatize it.

Start By Connecting Letters to Sounds

Knowing this, the first step in teaching a child to read must be teaching the sound each letter makes. Every reading program has its own scope and sequence for introducing letters and their sounds. Reading scientists have repeatedly stated that the specific order is not important. However, teaching each sound explicitly is.

You will want to introduce letters as quickly as possible but as slowly as necessary. Students should have a sound 80% mastered before moving on to a new sound.

You will also want to introduce letters that make words as quickly as possible. Many programs introduce the letters m, a, t, and s first because of all of the words you can make with them. You want to connect individual letter sounds to words as quickly as possible.

Many teachers will argue that students should be taught sounds without a connection to letters first. Working with sounds only is called phonological awareness. People often say, “You can do phonological awareness work in the dark.” Students don’t need to see anything to work on phonological awareness. They are learning with their ears.

While it is true that you can do phonological awareness work without using letters, multiple studies have shown that students learn to read faster and better when letters are included with phonological awareness practice.

What does this look like? What does this sound like? When introducing a sound to your child, tell them the sound and show them the letter. “Today, we are going to learn the /m/ sound. This is the letter m. It makes the /m/ sound. Can you make the /m/ sound?” Point to the letter m, “What sound does this letter make?”

Depending on your child’s needs, you may want to point out what their mouth is doing while making the /m/ sound. I also find it helpful to show labeled pictures that include the sound. “Here is a picture of milk. Do you hear the /m/ sound in the word milk? Can you point to the letter making the /m/ sound in the word milk?”

A more challenging skill would be identifying sounds at the end of a word. “Here is a picture of jam. Do you hear the /m/ sound in the

word jam? Can you point to the letter making the /m/ sound in the word jam?”

You can show vowels at the beginning of words. “Here is a picture of an apple. Do you hear the /ă/ sound (short a) in the word apple? Can you point to the letter making the /ă/ sound (short a) in the word apple?”

You can also show vowels in the middle of words. When working with short vowels, I would stick to simple words with one vowel sound. “Here is a picture of a cap. Do you hear the /ă/ sound (short a) in the word cap? Can you point to the letter making the /ă/ sound (short a) in the word cap?”

Be careful to ensure that you are only showing children one sound. You would not want to show a picture of an ape because the letter a doesn't make the short a sound in the word.

Learning to Read Routine

To get the maximum effect for your practice, only work on these letter-sound activities for a few minutes. Incorporate lots of repeated practice in your routine. Here is what a practice session might sound like.

1. Show sound cards for previously learned sounds. Have the student say the sound each letter makes. Sounds the student struggles with should be repeated. Once a student has shown automatic recognition of a letter-sound correspondence five days in a row, you can stop reviewing the card. Bring back the card if the student loses the sound.

2. Introduce the new sound using a letter card first. “Today, we are going to learn the /t/ sound. This is the letter t. It makes the /t/ sound. Can you make the /t/ sound?” Point to the letter t, “What sound does this letter make?”
3. Show labeled pictures and have the student identify the new sound in each word. “This is a table. Can you hear the /t/ sound in the word table? Point to the letter making the /t/ sound in the word table.” Introduce three to six pictures for each sound. If your child can handle it, show words with the new sound in the middle or end of a word.
4. When you have enough sounds to make words, have students blend the sounds to read. “Here is a word that has sounds we know. What sound does this letter make? What sound does this letter make? What sound does this letter make? Let’s say all of those sounds in order without stopping.” Keep saying the sounds until the student hears the word. You will want to model this process before asking your child to do it.
5. Once students have read a word, add it to a review pile for practice during a future lesson.

Handwriting

Depending on your child’s age, you may want to incorporate handwriting practice into your lesson. Make sure you are teaching your child proper letter formation. Practicing handwriting will help your child become a fluent writer.

You can also have your child practice writing the words they are decoding. This is called encoding. There is a strong link between writing and reading instruction. Practicing reading will make your child a better writer, and practicing writing will make your child a better reader.

Syllables

Once your child can read one-syllable words with short vowels, you will want to introduce syllables. Some teachers advocate introducing syllables earlier using phonological awareness activities. For example, very young children can count the syllables in a word.

One way to count syllables is to hold your hand under your chin as you say the word. Every time your chin hits your hand, it represents one syllable. This technique works because every syllable has a vowel. We make vowel sounds by opening our mouths. Opening your mouth will cause your chin to hit your hand.

I prefer introducing syllables one at a time as we learn them. Once students read one-syllable words with short vowels, I would say, “We have been reading closed syllables. Closed syllables have a short vowel sound and always end in at least one consonant. Cat, hot, luck, and ox are all closed syllables.”

Here is the order in which I would introduce the rest of the syllables. Once students know about a syllable type, they can read multisyllabic words that involve the syllables they know. For example, cactus is a two-syllable word with only closed syllables, so I could introduce it after students have learned about closed syllables. Paper is a two-syllable word with an open and closed syllable, so I would have to wait to introduce open syllables before practicing it. Just like the order of sounds, the order in which you introduce syllables is not as important as explicit instruction. Also, be careful not to introduce words requiring students to decode syllables they have yet learned.

1. **Closed Syllables:** Closed syllables have a short vowel sound and end in one or more consonants. (ex: kit, shut, patch)
2. **VCE Syllables:** VCE Syllables are also called Magic E Syllables or Bossy E Syllables. They have a vowel - consonant - silent e pattern. The vowel is long, and the e is silent. (ex: cake, rope, time)
3. **Open Syllables:** Open syllables have one vowel. It makes its long sound. The syllable ends in the vowel. They are not common in one-syllable words but are often a part of multisyllabic words such as tulip. (ex: hi, me, no)
4. **Final Stable Syllables:** Many different sounds make final stable syllables. You will not teach most of them until your child reads at a third-grade level. The first final stable syllable is a consonant + le. When we say the consonant + le sound, we hear the consonant and the letter l, but the letter e is silent. It is in the syllable because every syllable needs a vowel. I introduce this syllable early in the program because there are many words with a closed syllable + final stable syllable and an open syllable + final stable syllable, such as table or cuddle.
5. **Vowel Team Syllables:** Vowel teams are the hardest syllables to learn how to spell because so many vowel teams make the same sounds. Vowel team syllables have two or more letters, usually vowels, working together to make one sound. Most vowel team syllables make the long vowel sound, but they can also make short vowel sounds, such as in the word bread. Many programs also include diphthongs in vowel team syllables. Sometimes, you will see consonants working with vowels to make a vowel sound, such as in light or cow.
6. **R-Controlled Syllables:** These are sometimes called Bossy R Syllables. The letter r can change the sound of a vowel before it. (ex: star, born, fur, bird, herd)

The different types of syllables can feel overwhelming to adults who didn't learn them as they were learning to read and write. However, they provide an important structure to new readers and writers as they help them organize the information and rules they are learning.

Separating words into syllables can be helpful for decoding or encoding when a child needs guidance with a specific word, but research has shown that practicing separating words into syllables does not increase reading ability. This is mainly because the rules we teach in syllabification are not universal enough to be helpful. For example, tiger and camel have the same number of letters, and the vowels and consonants are in the same places. However, tiger is made up of an open syllable followed by a closed syllable, and camel is made up of two closed syllables. It is more helpful to encourage children to try the vowel sound they think is right. They can try the other vowel sound if they don't recognize the word.

Word Families

As students are learning about new sounds and syllables, they will still need to continue practicing with sounds and syllables they have already learned. Word families can be a great shortcut for this practice.

Here is how word families work. One-syllable words are made up of onsets and rimes. Onsets are the letter or letters that come before the vowel in a word. Rimes are the vowel and any letter that comes after it. If a one-syllable word starts with a vowel, it doesn't have an onset.

In word families, all of the words have the same rime, but they have different onsets. For example, the -at word family includes the words

cat, bat, sat, mat, and Pat. When a child is reading a list of word family words, they know the rime for each word. They can focus their mental energy on the onsets. Word families can be even more helpful for practicing spelling.

The Importance of Mixed Practice When Learning to Read

Word families are a great tool for reading practice, but you will also want to give your child mixed practice words as well. For example, if you are working on the short e sound your word list could include jet, step, and bell. You would also want to incorporate words from previously learned sounds, such as bad or clam. Mixing up practice and review words makes learning stickier for kids.

Decodable Texts

Students can start reading decodable texts as soon as they can read CVC words in isolation with about 80% accuracy. Decodable texts are specifically written to feature mostly decodable words a student knows. Decodable words should make up around 75% of the text. Decodable texts will tell you which patterns a child must know to access the text.

Decodable texts differ from leveled readers in which students are expected to use sentence patterns and pictures to understand the text.

Decodable readers will have high-frequency words that may not match a pattern your child has learned yet but are necessary for writing complete sentences in English.

Here are the twenty most common written words in English according to the Fry Sight Words List.

the
of
and
a
to
in
is
you
that
it
he
was
for
on
are
as
with
his
they
I

Notice that many of the words on this list are not decodable for a student who has only mastered closed syllables. To teach your child these words, you will want to show your child the decodable parts of the words. Then, show them the parts of the words that don't fit a pattern they have learned yet. Many teachers call these "heart words" because students have to memorize all or part of the word by heart. Luckily, these words are so common that your child should automatize them quickly as they learn to read.

Once your child starts reading decodable texts, your practice sessions will be a little longer because you will want to include reading time. You will continue introducing new sounds or syllable patterns as you review learned sounds and patterns.

Fluency

Reading time should focus on fluency. If a child cannot easily decode the words in an appropriate decodable book, they are not ready for the book. They should go back and practice with individual word cards.

Reading fluency is made up of accuracy, speed, expression, and comprehension. Is your child reading the words correctly? Is your child reading quickly enough that you can understand what they are reading? Is your child reading in a way that shows they know what is happening in the text? Can your child tell you about what they read or answer questions about it?

The best way to increase reading fluency once students decode efficiently is to practice reading. Research shows that repeatedly practicing the same text increases fluency with other texts. Repeated reading could look like a child reading the same text daily for a week. Each time the child reads the text, they should get faster and more expressive. You will want to remind your child that speed is only a part of fluency. It is the part that is easiest to measure, but someone speedreading will not have the expression of a fluent reader. That being said, recording a child's time to read the passage each day can be a great motivator and reflect how they are growing as a reader.

Reading Comprehension

The final part of teaching your child to read is comprehension. If you look at many schools around the country, this is where they focus most of their reading instruction. Unfortunately, schools have this backward. If our children can decode and read fluently, they should have no trouble understanding what they read as long as they have the relevant background information. Background information is what you know about a topic before reading.

There was a famous study where students' comprehension of a text about baseball was far more aligned with their knowledge of baseball than their reading levels. This is because every topic has specific vocabulary and concepts that writers assume the reader knows. A child might be able to read, "When the runner saw that the pitcher had overthrown the pitch, he dashed down the baseline to steal second." However, it will not make sense if they don't know anything about baseball. The information won't have anything to stick to in his brain.

Reading Comprehension and Background Knowledge

Luckily, we can start building our children's background knowledge long before they are ready to start reading. Talking with and reading to your child are the best way to teach them about many topics. You can also bring your child to places like museums, zoos, and parks to let them experience the world.

Reading fiction books and talking about what is happening in the story, making predictions, making connections to your own life and other books or movies, and thinking about the characters are other ways to increase your child's comprehension skills.

Once students are in school, they will need to learn about topics that may not have come up before, such as the metamorphosis of butterflies or Amelia Earhart. In these cases, videos are incredibly helpful in preparing your child to understand what they are about to read. Once students have enough background knowledge to comprehend a text, they can add to their knowledge using the text.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is a specific and important part of background knowledge. There are many ways students can learn new words. First, they can learn them in context. A text or video often explains what important or unusual words mean. They can also use tools such as a dictionary or encyclopedia to investigate new words. Teachers can help students build their vocabularies through morphology work, including prefixes and suffixes and Greek and Latin roots.

I wouldn't necessarily have a specific vocabulary program for my children at home, but I share what I know with them as they ask me about words. For example, if my child asks me about the word abiotic, I would explain that the root bio means life. The prefix a means without, so abiotic means without life. Rocks, water, and air are all abiotic things because they are not alive. You may not have this type of knowledge about some of the words your children ask you about. In that case, you can investigate together. We do that all the time at my house too.

Feeling Overwhelmed Thinking About Teaching Your Child to Read?

Finally, here are some things you might hear about that may make teaching your child how to read feel overwhelming.

Pronouncing sounds properly: There is a lot of talk among reading experts about the importance of pronouncing sounds correctly. When we sound out words, we tend to add an -uh to the end of sounds. The extra sound can lead kids to think there are extra letters in words. Conversely, your child might be saying words slightly incorrectly, leading to encoding and spelling mistakes. For example, some first graders will spell dresses with a j because that is the sound they hear at the beginning of the word. How to pronounce sounds correctly is something good to be aware of, but don't let fear of mispronouncing sounds stop you from working with your kid.

Multisensory Tools: Some reading programs discuss the importance of multisensory tools for practicing sounds and letter formation. This included writing letters in the sand and using hand motions. While the research on this is limited, there is no clear advantage to using multisensory techniques. These activities can make reading practice fun for kids, but they are not a requirement.

Professional Tutors: Professional tutors are a fantastic resource for helping your child learn how to read. Unfortunately, many of us do not have the resources to make this work for our families. A professional tutor will have experience and knowledge that is important, but the most important things for teaching a child to read are systematic and explicit instruction and repeated practice with feedback. As long as you have a program you are working with, you can provide these things to your child.

Blending: Reading is connecting what we see to what we hear. Blending is how we connect sounds into words. Some children may struggle to blend as they are first learning to read. Model stretching the sounds out and repeating them until you hear the word.

Encoding and Decoding: Encoding is spelling. Decoding is reading.

Digraphs, Diphthongs, and Blends: Digraphs are two or more letters that combine to make one sound. The /sh/ sound is an example of a digraph made up of the letters sh. Digraphs can have consonant or vowel sounds. Like digraphs, diphthongs are made up of two letters, but in a diphthong, the sound slides from one vowel sound to another. All diphthong sounds are vowel sounds. Blends are two consonants that are next to each other. You can hear both sounds in a blend. Some reading programs teach blends separately, but other reading programs do not. If your child does not have trouble blending two consonant sounds, you do not need to talk about blends. If your child is having trouble, it may be helpful to introduce the beginning and ending blends for extra practice. Knowing all of this vocabulary is helpful but not essential. You do not need to be able to define diphthong to learn how to read or to teach someone how to read.