

Beginning to Read is Child's Play

Developmentally Appropriate Instruction for Beginning and Struggling Readers Presentation Summary

Reading Success Involves the Understanding and Use of the Alphabetic Principle Mastery of early reading skills depends largely on the child's understanding and application of the *alphabetic principle* at the letter level as well as at the word level. The alphabetic principle requires the child to understand how symbols (letters) are used to represent the speech sounds of English (phonemes). This is dependent on the child's ability to perceive sounds in spoken language (*phonemic awareness*).

Utilize the Child's Phonemic Awareness Phonemic awareness is the foundation of automatic, fluent letter recognition and word identification (decoding) and ultimately of reading fluency and comprehension. Therefore the activities we present to beginning and struggling readers must involve the child's phonemic awareness. We must elicit it, observe it and recognize how the phonemic portion of the task is being performed, whether easily or haltingly. Phonemic awareness must not only be tested; it is something we must observe with each reading, writing or spelling task the child is asked to perform.

Teach the Alphabet Correctly Most alphabet knowledge is taught through song, movement, group instruction, etc. That is, it is taught primarily by targeting the child's memory instead of his understanding. But to appreciate the alphabetic significance of letters, the child must gain conscious access to phonemes. When he has access to phonemes (i.e. beginning sound isolation), he is able to make his own connections between sound and symbol. For example, if a child isolates the beginning sound of a the word GOAT, he can easily be shown that the written symbol ("g")* next to the picture of the goat represents the sound /g/. And he can soon identify the sound of any letter that is placed beneath or next to a picture. *[A letter enclosed by this symbol (/ /) indicates a phonetic sound, not a letter name. /d/ represents the sound made by the letter "D" in DOG.]

Beginning Sound Isolation The child must be able to isolate and say the beginning sound of a spoken word. For example, he must be able to tell you that the word TABLE starts with the sound /t/. He learns this important phonemic awareness skill by listening to his teachers and parents *model* it again and again through oral games. The ability to isolate the beginning sound of a word must be the *foundation* for teaching the alphabet letter-sounds.

Beginning Sound Isolation Activities Activities for teaching beginning sound isolation include, first and foremost, the *modeling of beginning sound isolation* by the teacher. "Who has the /b/...BUFFALO? Where has the /f/...FISH?" We must be very careful to give the correct sounds of each phoneme as well as to pay close attention to how the child says the phoneme as he repeats /b/...BUFFALO or /f/...FISH. The way the child says these phonemes is the way the child will read alphabet letter-sounds when he begins to decode. Once he gains conscious access to phonemes (through beginning sound isolation), we want the child to practice this phoneme isolation many times so that the neural pathways by which he accesses his "phonemic brain" grow denser and become faster. *Beginning Sound Bingo* is an excellent *independent* activity that produces an automaticity of phoneme isolation crucial for easy mastery of the alphabet letter-sounds.

Introduction to the Alphabetic Principle Show the child how to use his beginning sound isolation skill to identify an alphabet letter by its *sound* when the letter is associated with an object or picture. This most basic understanding of the alphabetic principle—that printed letters and speech sounds map onto each other—will allow the child to easily learn the alphabet. *We teach the alphabetic principle before we teach the alphabet* so that the child

can use his phonemic awareness to *understand, identify, learn* and *remember* letter-sounds.

Letter Mastery Struggling readers are almost never fluent and confident in letter recognition. Through games and activities that produce meaningful repetition, the child can easily master the alphabet. He must first learn the letters by sound, not by name. The names are far less important to the child's ability to read and should be taught later. For beginning instruction, we must allow the child to associate sound and symbol on his own. This is accomplished by always providing a key picture with each letter and with each independent letter activity. In this way, the picture acts as a sort of teacher who is asking the child, for example, "Where is the /d/?" Also in beginning instruction it is best to divide the alphabet set into clusters, arranged so as not to create confusion between similar looking or sounding letters. The child masters one cluster at a time—in sequence—until all 26 letters are learned. Introduction to decoding does not begin until the child has achieved a significant level of mastery of the entire alphabet. Mastery implies accuracy and speed of letter naming (by sound). Recommended clusters: [1] a, g, h, m, s [2] c, d, l, o, t [3] f, i, p, r, u [4] e, j, k, n, w [5] b, v, y, z, qu, x. Teach lower case first, upper case later.

Fluency = Accuracy + Speed It bears repeating that struggling readers are almost never fluent and confident in letter recognition. This greatly hinders their success with decoding words and reading connected text. Therefore when working with struggling readers, we must always evaluate their letter-sound fluency and be prepared to offer activities that will provide opportunity for mastery. And we must not rush children into decoding just because they know some letters.

Letter Recognition Activities Beginning sounds and letter matching; letter and picture sorting; alphabet sound memory game. Each of these activities and games allows the child to access the correct sound of a symbol or to check his work by isolating the beginning sound of a vocabulary picture.

Teach Blending and Segmenting of 3 Phonemes The student must be able to listen to 3 sounds spoken to him by an adult (e.g. /c/... /a/... /t/) and *blend* those sounds into a word he knows (CAT). By playing *The Blending Game*, the child is hearing the teacher or parent (or older child) *segment* spoken words into sounds again and again. Eventually the child himself is able to segment these words (like *fish, lip, bag, goat, rake, etc*) into individual sounds. **Phoneme segmentation is the most important beginning reading skill.** Words used in teaching blending and segmenting do not have to have 3 letters, just 3 sounds. For example: HOUSE has 5 letters, but only 3 sounds. For beginning instruction, you can start this activity on day 1; you should not wait until the child has learned letter-sounds. With struggling readers evaluate the child's phonemic awareness and introduce blending and segmentation activities if the student is not segmenting 3 phonemes clearly and discretely. As soon as a student can blend 3 phonemes really well, choose blending game pictures that have 4 sounds, like *crab, tent, flag, lips*, etc. Blending is much harder than segmentation; do not expect the child to segment just because he can blend.

Phoneme Segmentation It bears repeating that phoneme segmentation is the most important beginning reading readiness skill. ["The best predictor of reading difficulty in kindergarten or first grade is the inability to segment words and syllables into constituent sound units." G. R. Lyon, 1995.] There is a direct correlation between a child's phonemic awareness and his word identification skills, which are primarily based on decoding. A great way to increase the clarity and fluency of a child's phoneme segmentation is to play games that require the child to segment the sounds of a vocabulary picture he hides from you. You then "guess" the word. Or to ask a child to find "the last sound" or "the middle" sound of a word, first by saying each sound until he finds the answer, and then eventually asking him to do it silently.

3-Letter Word Building (Introduction to Reading Part I) Show the child how to build (encode) simple 3-letter short vowel words (like *dog*, *mop*, *sun*, etc.) First he *segments* the vocabulary picture into sounds and then—as he speaks the 3 sounds—places the letters one at a time in proper sequence to form the printed word. We begin with 3-letter words because that matches the child’s level of segmentation. *Encoding 3-letter short vowel words is the best way for a beginning reader to learn how to decode 3-letter short vowel words.* And it’s the most effective intervention for students who are struggling with decoding fluency. Don’t think of this as spelling, though. It is encoding and it is meant to show how printed and spoken words map onto each. This is the understanding of the alphabetic principle at the *word* level. Word building allows the non-writing child to have repeated success building words he will soon be ready to read. The older child who has already learned to write can do this same kind of work with a pencil, but using letter cards often produces greater repetition, so needed by the struggling reader.

Word Encoding Building a word by first segmenting the phonemes and then placing the letter cards in sequence is a demonstration of *the alphabetic principle at the word level*. This is perhaps more obvious if you move a child too quickly to 4-letter words. He will often leave out one of the letter cards because he is unable to segment a word with 4 phonemes and therefore is unable to map all the letters required for the word. [Example: “FLAG” may be built F.A.G. and the “L” letter card is left out.]

3-Letter Word Cards (Introduction to Reading Part II) The first reading material should connect a vocabulary picture with a short vowel word to allow the child to “map” the 3 sounds of a spoken word—which he gets from *segmenting* the picture—onto the printed 3-letter word. The child thus learns about left-to-right decoding and word identification. Once the child is familiar with the set, he can turn the card so the picture is hidden, decode the short vowel word and then flip it back to see if he got it right. This first independent “reading” is always successful and will give the child confidence as he moves forward into more challenging reading levels.

More Decoding Activities More than anything else, a beginning and struggling reader needs lots of practice decoding words that match his ability level. So we need to provide him with many simple decoding games that provide a picture clue attached to or separate from the printed word label. The child can refer to the picture for phonemic clues if needed. Word cards with the picture on the back allow the child to check his work. Through repeated encounters with simple 3-letter words (or with any category of word identification) the child reaches a point where he doesn’t need to sound out each letter, but instantly recognizes the word. And eventually this word recognition becomes faster and faster. Remember, FLUENCY = ACCURACY + SPEED. Struggling readers can usually decode, but they don’t have the automaticity they need to attain fluency with connected text. More decoding games: 3-letter short Vowel pictures & labels; 3-letter short vowel word choice game; 3-letter short vowel action word labels; 3-letter short vowel environment labels; etc.

Teach Blending and Segmenting of 4 Sounds Beginning readers must be able to blend 4 sounds (*/f/.../l/.../a/.../g/*) into a known word (FLAG) in order to accurately decode 4-letter short vowel words. More importantly the child must be able to segment words that have four sounds, like *train*, *clown*, *slide* and *plug*. (Notice that these words have 4 sounds, but not necessarily 4 letters.) This level of blending and segmentation is achieved—as was the first level—by playing *The Blending Game*. In this game the child is blending sounds that the teacher or parent is speaking. Thus the entire time he is blending, the child is hearing the adult *model* segmentation. This is how the child learns to do it himself. When 4 sounds are mastered, segmentation training can continue with words that have 5, 6 and more sounds, like *plant*, *twist*, and *clamp*. When working with multi-syllable words (*playground*, *report*,

etc.) segment individual syllables.

4-Letter Short Vowel Word Building Encoding 4-letter short vowel words (like *flag, club, sand, etc.*) is the best way for a beginning reader to learn to *decode* 4-letter short vowel words. And it's the most effective intervention for students who are struggling with decoding fluency. The older child who has learned to write can do this same kind of work with a pencil, but using letter cards often produces greater repetition, so crucial for the struggling reader. Remember: in order to decode or encode 4-Letter short vowel words accurately, the student must be able to *segment* 4 sounds. In other words, a child's phonemic awareness level must generally match the decoding level we're asking him to perform.

Reading Problems Primarily Occur at the Word Level Struggling readers will almost always show significant weakness in various areas that all relate to *word identification*. The weakness might be with letter recognition, phoneme blending, phoneme segmentation, 3, 4 & 5-letter short vowel decoding. Or, with students past the beginning levels of reading, the weakness might be in quick identification of high frequency words (*away, money, water, round*) which generally contain letter combinations (phonograms) that the student doesn't know. [Phonogram recognition (for example, *ai, oo, igh, ey, ou, etc.*) is a kind of alphabet knowledge itself, isn't it?]

Foundations of Decoding Decoding, however, is the most basic and important skill that leads children to word identification. And the two things that support accurate, confident, fluent decoding are: letter-sound knowledge (first the simple alphabet A-Z and then the phonograms) and segmentation. Fluent decoding begins with this foundation but is achieved only through repeated encounters. Another word for "repeated encounters" is: practice. Often what a struggling reader needs most is the opportunity to have successful practice sessions reading words. For some this is at the 3-letter level, for others the 4 or 5-letter or multi-syllable level (*report, subtract, level, etc.*). And for many, it involves working with the 500 most frequent words in the English language. [The best spelling lists are created from the 2,000 most common words of the English language.

Understand a Sequence of Crucial Reading Skills and start your interventions where a child is showing insufficient competency.