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Reading Development and Instruction: Beginning in the K-2 Classrooms

Parents can support the development and instruction of their child with learning to read using the provided information and strategies.

What can a parent do to help their child become a successful reader?

1. Understand the five basic reading skills - phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension and fluency.
2. Know the manner and timing of typical development of those skills.
3. Be familiar with how these skills are described at each grade level according to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).
4. Maintain a dialogue with the classroom teacher about what and how they teach reading and with what results.
5. Know the relationship between classroom reading instruction and “best practices” in reading for students who are struggling and/or dyslexic.

The Five Basic Reading Skills

- Phonological/Phonemic awareness is the ability to know that words are made up of parts. The smallest parts are sounds. Words are also made up of syllables.

A word may have one syllable (cat, boy) or several (baby, elephant).

- Phonics is the reading skill that allows children to learn the rules for how sounds and letters go together. While there are 45 sounds in English, there are only 26 letters. This is a complex skill because there are many sound-symbol relationship rules and rules about types of syllables. Instructional programs develop different guideline for how to teach these rules. For example, Foundations (Wilson), Words Their Way (Bear et. Al.) and Word Matters (Pinnell and Fountas)
- Vocabulary skills: the meaning, the forms of a word, and word associations. Students also need to learn morphology (the study of roots, prefixes, and suffixes.) Some words will be very familiar (I, me, car) and some will be rare. The more a child reads, the greater his or her vocabulary for “rare” words.

- Comprehension becomes the centerpiece of reading. Reading for a purpose is critical to understanding both narrative and informational text. Comprehending texts requires a wide range of skills, including knowing the text organization, integrating concepts and ideas, summarizing, making inferences, drawing conclusions, providing evidence while reading “complex” texts.
- The fifth skill, fluency, is dependent on the previous skills. Fluency is not just about how fast a child reads. It is also reading with accuracy and expression. There are published norms that give guidelines for reading fluency at each grade level. How fluency is measured—single words, sentences, or paragraphs will influence a child’s fluency score. Using “grade-level” or “decodable text” can change the fluency score.

The Development of Reading Skills

Knowing when and how reading skills develop is necessary for early identification and intervention for reading problems. We need to be able to relate growth to some set of expected targets. It is possible to track both oral language and reading progress beginning in preschool.

Phonological/Phonemic awareness develops as children progress through the preschool years and into grades K-2. Mesmer, Mesmer and Jones (2014) trace this development from the preschool to grade 2 years. Their first benchmark is letter naming in the middle of preK. The 2nd grade benchmark is fluent reading at a rate of 50 words per minute. They list 11 benchmarks between those two points.

Phonics skills begin when children notice that words are made up of specific sounds. An early benchmark is learning the initial letter/sound combination of their name. There are definite developmental progressions that are learned before others: some sound-letter combinations, some rules, and some syllable types. See the CCSS for English Language Arts Appendix A page 17 for a detailed sequencing of these phonics skills.

Vocabulary Development begins in infancy. Parent-child conversation and story reading play a big role helping to develop a child’s vocabulary. We know that nouns and verbs are learned before other parts of speech. We know kindergarten children’s vocabulary size ranges from 2300 root word meanings to 4700. In reading instruction there is a distinction between common and rare words and between “sight” and decodable words. See the “Text Project” site on Vocabulary for information on how these different types of words develop over time.

Development of Comprehension also begins well before reading instruction begins. It is initially influenced by children’s conversation with parents, teachers, and other adults. Parents know that by age 2 or 3, children can fill-in missing words and sentences if a parent pauses while reading a familiar story. Children develop a sense of “story structure” as early as kindergarten. Even primary grade children learn about the basic organization of information texts: description, classification, compare-contrast, cause-effect.

Fluency develops as children gain skill in the other four reading skills—phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension. Reading with accuracy, inflection and age - appropriate speed are characterized as fluent reading. It is possible to see differences in reading fluency as early as kindergarten.

The Common Core State Standards for the English Language Arts

Knowing the standards is important since it may be related to eligibility for additional support. Across all grade levels, there are 10 “anchor” standards segmented into four sets of skills.

They are: (1) Key Ideas and Details, (2) Craft and Structure, (3) Integration of Knowledge and Ideas and (4) Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity. The Kindergarten level for these 4 categories is slightly different for Narratives and Information texts. Listed below are the goals for Narrative texts.

Key Ideas and Details:

With prompting and support:

Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

Retell familiar stories, including key details.

Identify characters, settings, and major events in a story.

Craft and Structure:

Ask and answer questions about unknown words in a text.

Recognize common types of texts (e.g., storybooks, poems).

With prompting and support, name the author and illustrator of a story and define the role of each in telling the story.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:

With prompting and support:

Describe the relationship between illustrations and the story in which they appear (e.g., what moment in a story an illustration depicts).

Compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in familiar stories.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity:

Actively engage in group reading activities with purpose and understanding.

The third set of reading standards for grades K through 5 are Foundational Skills, introduced in the following way: “These standards are directed toward fostering students’ understanding and working knowledge of concepts of print, the alphabetic principle, and other basic conventions of the English writing system.... Instruction should be differentiated: good readers will need much less practice with these concepts than struggling readers will. The point is to teach students what they need to learn and not what they already know—to discern when particular children or activities warrant more or less attention.” A really valuable addition to the Foundational Standards listed is a detailed list of sequenced phonics instructional information in Appendix A, pp. 17 to 22 (CCSS).

Phonological Awareness standards apply only at K and grade 1. Phonics and Word Recognition standards decrease significantly after grade 2. There is a shift to morphology skills at grade 3.

Grades 4 and 5 have only two phonics and word recognition standards.

- Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills.
- Use combined knowledge of all letter-sound correspondence, syllabification patterns, and morphology.

Maintain a Dialogue with the Teacher Beginning in Preschool

The teacher’s approach to reading/literacy is important. Teachers might describe their approach in general terms as skill based or balanced or meaning based. Or they may describe it in terms of a framework (Guided Reading, Developmental Reading, Orton-Gillingham).

“The Reading Wars” have been going on for decades. These different views of teaching reading impact children who struggle with learning to read. Michael Pressley and Richard Allington describe these differences as “skilled based” and “meaning based.” They advocate a “Balanced Approach.” They describe this approach as “early and explicit decoding instruction ...and explicit comprehension strategy instruction and blend it with...meaning-based instruction for developing vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation to read.” It is in parents’ and children’s best interests to go beyond labels and to look at the resources, instruction, and materials the teacher uses. Parents should spend time observing in the classroom. Volunteer when possible during the literacy period. Parents should collect teacher-generated progress reports across the primary grades, K-2.

Understand the relationship between classroom reading instruction and “best practices” in reading for students who are struggling or dyslexic.

The most important question for parents to ask is what to do when children are not making sufficient progress. In 1998, Torgensen’s article “Catch Them Before They Fall” offers research-based evidence on the importance of early identification and intervention, most of all for “word reading skills”.



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He supports intervention that will be effective: “(a) the right kind and quality of instruction delivered with the (b) right level of intensity and duration to (c) the right children at the (d) right time.” Pressley and Allington offer similar advice about phonemic awareness and phonics instruction. They give a research-based discussion about the other three reading skills: vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency, advocating for “balancing” skill-based and meaning-based instruction.

Parents need to know about K-2 early identification and intervention in their school system. There are typically three possibilities: in the classroom, in a tutoring situation, or in a special education program. Some educators and advocates refer to these options as Response to Intervention with three “Tiers” or a Multi-Tiered System of Supports.

Support in the classroom requires a skilled teacher who knows the signs of dyslexia. He/she also needs to know how to differentiate instruction and monitor progress.

Teaching must be consistent with the child’s learning needs. Those needs include an approach and the frequency of instruction that will get the best results. Progress monitoring is central to assessing results. Tier 2 instruction may not achieve enough progress to meet grade level standards.

Intervention may demand a carefully designed IEP or 504 plans carried out by a skillful special educator. For any of these options, parents and teachers will need to engage in serious and timely progress monitoring to determine whether the intervention is effective.

References

Mercer, H. A. E., Mesmer E., and Jones, J. (2013) *Reading Intervention in the Primary Grades*. New York: Guilford Press.
Pressley, M. and Allington, R. L. (2015) *Reading Instruction that Works* (4th Edition). New York: Guilford Press.
Torgensen, J. K., “Catch them before they Fall.” *American Educator/ American Federation of Teachers*. Spring/Summer, 1998.

Resources for Understanding how Decoding Skills Are Taught

Books

[Recipe for Reading Third Edition](#) by Nina Traub and Frances Bloom
[Phonics and Spelling Through Phoneme-Grapheme Mapping](#) by Kathryn E. S. Grace

Online Videos

SPIRE Reading Program
Explode the Code
Barton Reading Systems
Foundations Wilson Language Training

National Dyslexia Resources

International Dyslexia Association
Learning Ally - Support for Dyslexia and Learning Disabilities
Learning Disabilities Association of America
National Center for Learning Disabilities
Understood for Learning and Attention Issues