

Helping Children with their Reading

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The simple view of reading is that learning to read requires two abilities –

1. correctly identifying words (decoding) and
2. understanding their meaning (comprehension).

Decoding is a teachable skill and can be systematically taught.

Comprehension is a thought process that relies on oral language development and accurate decoding.

Acquisition of these two broad abilities requires the development of more specific skills.

An extensive body of research on reading instruction shows that there are five essential skills for reading:

Phonemic Awareness	The ability to identify & manipulate the distinct individual sounds in spoken words	Teachable Skills
Phonics	The ability to decode words using knowledge of letter-sound relationships	
Fluency	Reading with speed & accuracy	
Vocabulary	Knowing the meaning of a wide variety of words & the structure of written language	
Comprehension	Understanding the meaning & intent of the text	Thought process

When listening to a child read, the purpose of doing so is to help put together the five keys.

The following prompts are useful because they help children develop their phonemic awareness & connect to the phonics they are being taught at school:

- Sound the word all the way through.
- Read what's there.
- Don't guess.
- Point to all the letters in the word & say their sounds as you point.
- If you don't know all the sounds, I'll help you.

It is perfectly fine to model the process of decoding a word (regular or irregular) and to help children figure words out by going all the way through the word.

In turn, this process also helps with spelling.

The following prompts are not useful and bring about only marginal, temporary success. They are especially damaging for children whose phonemic awareness is emerging:

✗ Look at the picture. ✗ Skip the word.

✗ What is the *first* letter? ✗ What would make sense here?

The prompts above attempt to use comprehension as the key to decoding. For children who have trouble with phonemic awareness, these prompts rob them of the opportunity to practise turning the letters in the page into sounds and then into words. This practice is *crucial*.

Children who are encouraged to use cues other than the letters on the page also tend to fail at learning to spell well, as their eyes move away from the word and very little, if any of the word is placed in their visual memory.

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