



the tutor

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Tutoring Our Youngest Readers

Focusing on five major reading strategies

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This is an exciting time in the field of tutoring! It is a time when educational research and the best of teaching practice unite around the skills children need to become independent, fluent readers and writers. Together with the valuable experience of volunteer tutor programs, this information can enhance our work with young children.

In 1997, Congress asked the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to convene the National Reading Panel (NRP) to review existing reading research. Panel members included scientists, reading researchers, teacher educators, classroom teachers, administrators, and parents. The NRP issued a report in 2000 identifying five key skills integral to literacy development during the critical years from kindergarten to third grade (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001).

They are:

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Fluency
- Vocabulary
- Text comprehension

For tutors, knowing which skills

to address is only the beginning. This article will help you understand the meaning of each skill, recognize learning behaviors to look for and support, and enhance literacy development through fun, developmentally

appropriate activities. Throughout this article, you will find one consistent suggestion: When in doubt, read aloud to children! Reading aloud remains the single most important activity for supporting reading success (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985).

“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.”
—Albert Einstein

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- brainstorm solutions
- design and deliver training

What is the difference between phonemic awareness and phonics?

Phonemic awareness deals with spoken words. **Phonics** pertains to printed words.

Phonemic Awareness

Every time you chant along to a favorite children's rhyme or read aloud from a book like *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* by Dr. Seuss, you are helping children develop phonemic awareness. Notice the rhyme in this excerpt:

*Hop! Hop! Hop!
I am a Yop.
All I like to do is hop
from finger top
to finger top.*

*I hop from left to right
and then ...
Hop! Hop!
I hop right back again.*

What It Means

When children identify that the words *hop*, *Yop*, and *top* rhyme, they are developing phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is the ability to understand and hear that a word is made up of a series of discrete sounds or *phonemes*. For example, the word *did* is made up of three phonemes (/d/ /i/ /d/). This skill allows children to take words apart, put them together, and alter them. Research indicates that phonemic awareness is a strong predictor of early success in reading (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Marilyn Jager Adams outlines five basic types of phonemic awareness tasks tutors can perform with children (Adams, 1990).

1. Rhyme and Alliteration

- Listen for the two words that rhyme in a string of words like *cat*, *boy*, *bat*.
- Recognize examples of alliteration, such as *Sally sells seashells by the seashore*.

2. Oddity Tasks

- Listen for the word that does *not* rhyme in a string of words like *sat*, *sit*, *mat*.
- Listen for the word that begins with a *different* sound in a string of words like *boy*, *bit*, *man*.

3. Blending Words and Splitting Syllables

- Listen to the word parts, /m/ ... an, and blend the parts together to make the word *man*.

4. Orally Segmenting Words

- Listen to the whole word, *dig*, and then say the word parts, /d/ ... ig.

5. Phonemic Manipulation Tasks

- Replace one sound with another. For example, replace the first sound in *cat* with /m/ to make *mat*, or replace the last sound in *bin* with /t/ to make *bit*.

What To Look for

As you talk with, read to, and play word games with children, notice behaviors that indicate development of phonemic awareness. Children show progress with this skill when they can:

- Recognize that words have different numbers of syllables. Example: Child can tap out syllables in familiar words.
- Understand rhyming and rhyme words correctly. Example: Presented with word groupings (e.g., *bed/head*, *tent/rent*, *tent/tub*), child can pick out rhyming pairs.
- Blend words that have been divided into syllables. Example: The tutor says *wa / ter* and the child says *water*.
- Rhyme word families. Example: *cat*, *rat*, *fat*, *sat*, *hat*.

Glossary

phoneme: A discrete unit of sound in spoken language

phonemic awareness: The understanding that words are made up of a sequence of identifiable sounds

grapheme: A unit (letter or letters) in a writing system

phonics: The rules and patterns associated with letters and the sounds they represent

alliteration: Repetition of the initial consonant sound in two or more adjacent words

rhyme: Correspondence in sound of two or more words

syllable: A unit of language that consists of one or more vowel sounds alone or with one or more consonant sounds preceding or following

digraph: A combination of two letters that create one sound when pronounced

blend: Two or more letters that must be combined and cannot be sounded out separately to arrive at the correct pronunciation

sight words: Frequently occurring words that must be easily and quickly understood for comprehension to occur; often cannot be “sounded out”

For a complete overview of children’s development in this and other skill areas discussed in this article, refer to *LEARNS Literacy Assessment Profile (LLAP)*, downloadable at www.nwrel.org/learns/resources/llap.

How To Support Learning

Practicing phonemic awareness can be fun and inventive and helps improve reading ability for young children at risk for reading difficulties (Brady, Fowler, Stone, & Winbury, 1994). Children enjoy language and word games. As you work with children, let them make up nonsense or silly words; while the word *gog* may not be a real word, it does rhyme with *dog*. Here are a few activities to get you started:

1. Rhyme Time

Read a favorite poem or rhyme aloud, pointing to the words as you read. Ask

children to recite it with you. Once they are familiar with the poem, ask them to tell you which words rhyme. Children will enjoy stomping their feet when they hear a rhyme and substituting new words for the rhyming words.

2. Round Robin Rhymes

Invite a small group of children to sit in a circle and make up a story that rhymes. Provide children with the beginning of each sentence and have them finish it with rhyming words. For example, *Once upon a time a **dog** went to the park with a (hog, log, frog, clog). The dog saw a **cat** with a (bat, hat, mat, rat).*

3. Silly Riddles

Give children a word and a letter, and ask them to think of another word that rhymes and begins with the new letter. For example, *What word rhymes with dig and begins with /b/? Big.*

Phonics

As children are exposed to written language, they discover that marks on a page stand for letters and words. You may have heard children singing the alphabet song like this: *ellamenopee*. With increased and consistent interaction with print, language, and books, children eventually realize that the string of letters is really *l, m, n, o, p* and sing the alphabet song with greater confidence and ease. To read well, children need to understand that written English consists of letters and groups of letters that stand for a series of sounds.

What It Means

Phonics helps children understand the relationships between letters (*graphemes*) and individual sounds (*phonemes*). Children need to understand that the letter *m* stands for the /*m*/ sound, for example. Knowing these relationships helps children more accurately read familiar words, analyze new words, and write words. When children understand that *bake* is spelled with an *e* rather than *bak*, they are better able to read, spell, and write words like *cake*, *lake*, *make*, *take*, *wake*, and *snake*.

What To Look for

You will begin to notice behaviors that indicate children's growing mastery of phonics skills when they:

- Know consonant sounds.
- Know that *a, e, i, o, and u* are vowels.
- Know sounds of digraphs. Example: /*sh*/ in *shell*.
- Know sounds of consonant blends. Example: /*bl*/ in *block* and /*str*/ in *string*.
- Know short vowel word families. Example: *at, an, op, on, it, in*.
- Break words into syllables.
- Find familiar words within unknown words. Example: *mat* in *matter*.
- Substitute or add letters to make new words. Example: When asked to take away the letter *t* in the word *tan*, can the child say the word is *an*? Can the child put the letter *t* on *an* to make the word *ant*?

Books With Rhyme or Alliteration

- *Each Peach Pear Plum* by Janet and Allan Ahlberg
- *Jamberry* by Bruce Degen
- *Miss Mary Mack and Other Children's Street Rhymes* by Joanna Cole and Stephanie Calmenson
- *Peanut Butter and Jelly: A Play Rhyme* by Nadine Bernard Westcott
- *Sheep in a Jeep* by Nancy Shaw
- *Sing a Song of Popcorn: Every Child's Book of Poems* by Beatrice Shenk de Regniers

How To Support Learning

Children develop phonics skills implicitly as they hear good books being read and write stories using invented spellings. They also learn through clear and explicit modeling. A balanced approach allows for both types of learning. Here are a few activities to try:

1. Letter-Sound Cards

Make personal letter cards with each child. Write the upper- and lowercase form of a letter on one side of an index card. On the other side, help children draw, paste pictures, or write words that begin with the sound. For example, on one side write *Bb*. On the other side children can write, draw, or paste a *bat*, *bee*, or *boat*.

2. I Spy

Invite children to play a guessing game. Without revealing it to the child, select an object in the room and provide phonics clues to help the child guess what it is. For example, *I spy something that begins with the sound /t/*. Keep offering clues until the child guesses that the object is a table.

3. Sorting

Create a stack of cards with pictures that represent words beginning with two initial consonants that you would like the child to work on, for example *l* and *t*. Have children say the word and match the picture with the correct initial sound. Invite them to think of other words that might be included in each stack.

“The single most important thing a child can do to promote vocabulary growth is to increase ... volume of reading.”
—William Nagy

Fluency

We all know a fluent reader when we hear one. We enjoy listening to a story or poem when it is well phrased, paced, and read with ease. A fluent reader has control of the reading process; her reading sounds natural and more like speaking. A less fluent reader struggles and often reads very slowly, word by word (Armbruster et al., 2001).

What It Means

Fluency is an important factor in gaining control over the reading process. Less fluent readers focus their attention on decoding and sounding out words, often without understanding what they are reading. Fluent readers are able to:

- Recognize words automatically
- Group individual words into meaningful phrases
- Apply quick strategies to read unknown words

Fluent readers read accurately and quickly, but accuracy does not mean reading perfectly (Armbruster et al., 2001). When fluent readers make mistakes that interrupt meaning, they are able to detect and correct those mistakes.

Like all other reading skills, fluency develops through reading, reading, and more reading. Even very skilled readers may read slowly and struggle with unfamiliar words or topics. During the earliest stages of reading development, children’s reading is expected to be slower and less fluent. Children learn to decode words by using their knowledge of sounds, the context of the story, or the words they know by sight. Our youngest readers will respond to simple texts that sound like their natural, oral language.

What To Look for

Fluency can be observed when children read books that are matched to their abilities. For children to gain confidence, reading aloud should become a regular part of your work together. As you work with children, look for their abilities to reread or retell a story with appropriate pacing, inflection, and intonation.

How To Support Learning

Children become fluent readers by reading and listening to fluent readers. Children need to reread familiar books and read new books leveled to their abilities. Just as important, children need to listen to books read aloud with natural intonation, rhythm, and pacing.

1. Creating Favorites

Rereading favorite books is not only a great way for children to build fluency; it is also a wonderful way to create a library of stories to remember. As children reread familiar books, invite them to tape record their stories. Children love to share their tapes with others.

2. Reader's Theater

Invite children to act out a favorite story. Have each child play the role of a character while the tutor acts as the narrator. Remember that you are not asking children to memorize lines, but rather to read and reread to achieve greater fluency. Children will enjoy performing stories for other children, teachers, and families.

3. Poetry and Finger Plays

Classic children's poems, nursery rhymes, and finger plays help children learn to read with expression and ease. Read a favorite rhyme such as "Hickory Dickory Dock." The first time you recite the rhyme, do so quickly in a very flat manner with unnatural pauses. Children will eagerly join in and say the rhyme the "right" way.

"Books are teachers. Good books go right on instructing in odd moments when the teachers and parents are not on duty."

—Anonymous

Alphabet Books

- *ABC I Like Me* by Nancy L. Carlson
- *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions* by Margaret Musgrove
- *Dr. Seuss's ABC* by Dr. Seuss
- *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* by Bill Martin, Jr. and John Archambault
- *The Calypso Alphabet* by John Agard
- *Eating the Alphabet: Fruits and Vegetables From A to Z* by Lois Ehlert

Vocabulary

Even before they understand what is being said, children pay attention to speech, listen for critical sound changes, and focus on the rhythm and intonation of language (de Villiers & de Villiers, 1979). Month by month, they learn new words and discover new rules of language. They also learn that words are used for real purposes.

What It Means

Vocabulary is central to understanding what we read. Not knowing the meaning of most of the words in a book inhibits comprehension. Young readers use words they know and use when speaking to make sense of what they read. As readers develop, they encounter new words that are not part of their oral language; a key part of comprehension is being able to quickly understand those words. A typical first-grader learns 3,000–6,000 new words, a number nearly impossible to teach directly (Chall, 1983). Most of these words are learned through everyday experiences with language, including:

- Talking to and interacting with adults and other children in familiar and new contexts
- Listening to stories and poems read aloud
- Reading and talking about books and stories

(Armbruster et al., 2001)

Children also learn new words through modeling or direct instruction (Armbruster et al., 2001). The latter includes:

- **Teaching specific words and concepts.** These include words critical to the main idea(s) in a story, useful words children see again and again, and words that are too difficult to read.

- **Providing repeated exposure to words.** Children need to see a word several times before they know it well enough for comprehension.
- **Teaching strategies to learn new words.** Readers use context clues, find smaller words within words, and break words into parts to figure out meaning.

What To Look for

Watch as children listen, discuss, and read books and stories. Comprehension requires that children know most of the words they encounter. As children successfully build their vocabulary, they will be able to:

- Use genre (e.g., fairy tales, letters) to figure out unknown words. Example: Letters begin *Dear...*
- Use content to figure out unknown words. Example: The topic is baseball, so the word beginning with *c* is *catcher*.
- Reread text to clarify meaning.
- Figure out unknown words by applying knowledge of:
 - Consonant blends
 - Digraphs
 - Long and short vowels
- Easily read words that recur in text.
- Recognize a large body of sight words.

How To Support Learning

The best way to help children build vocabulary is through conversing and listening to good books. In addition to reading to and with them, engage children in word play to support vocabulary development.

1. Word Sorts

Young children like to have fun with words in concrete ways. Think of a category or favorite topic such as animals, transportation, or toys, and invite them to think of as many words as they can that fit into the category.

2. Word Bank Book

Children like to collect all kinds of things, from cards to words. Make a word book for each child by stapling blank pages together. As children come across new words they would like to “keep,” help them write them in their books. Children will enjoy collecting big words like *brontosaurus* and small words like *it*.

3. Writing Partners

Invite a child to tell a story while one of you writes it down. Talk about the story and point out special words the child used.

Text Comprehension

Comprehension is the process of making meaning from written text. In essence, this is what reading is all about! Research has taught us how to support struggling and developing readers to become more proficient and take control of their own reading comprehension (Armbruster et al., 2001).

What It Means

Comprehension develops through a series of active reading strategies. Teaching and modeling selected strategies for children will help them become interactive readers. Children need to understand *what* each strategy is, *why* it is important, and *how*, *when*, and *where* to apply it. Key comprehension strategies include:

■ Monitoring comprehension

Proficient readers know when they understand what they read and when they do not, and are able to adjust their reading accordingly. A young child may say, *I don't understand what this means*. This shows that she is thinking about her reading.

■ Using prior knowledge

Previewing a story before reading using techniques such as “picture walks” helps children make connections between the story and what they already know.

Word and Vocabulary Books

- *Arthur's Really Helpful Word Book*
by Marc Tolon Brown
- *The Cat Sat on the Mat*
by Alice Cameron
- *I Spy Year-Round Challenger!*
A Book of Picture Riddles
by Jean Marzollo
- *Richard Scarry's Best Word Book Ever*
by Richard Scarry
- *The Shape of Me and Other Stuff:*
Dr. Seuss's Surprising Word Book
by Dr. Seuss
- *The Weighty Word Book*
by Paul M. Levitt and
Elissa S. Guralnick

■ Making predictions

Stopping periodically to predict what might happen next helps children make connections between their prior knowledge and new information in the story.

■ Questioning

Asking children questions helps them focus their attention and think actively about the text. Inviting children to question the text also demonstrates that proficient readers question not only themselves, but the author's intent as well.

■ Recognizing story structure

Understanding how a story is organized helps readers construct meaning. Story structure includes setting, characters, plot, and theme.

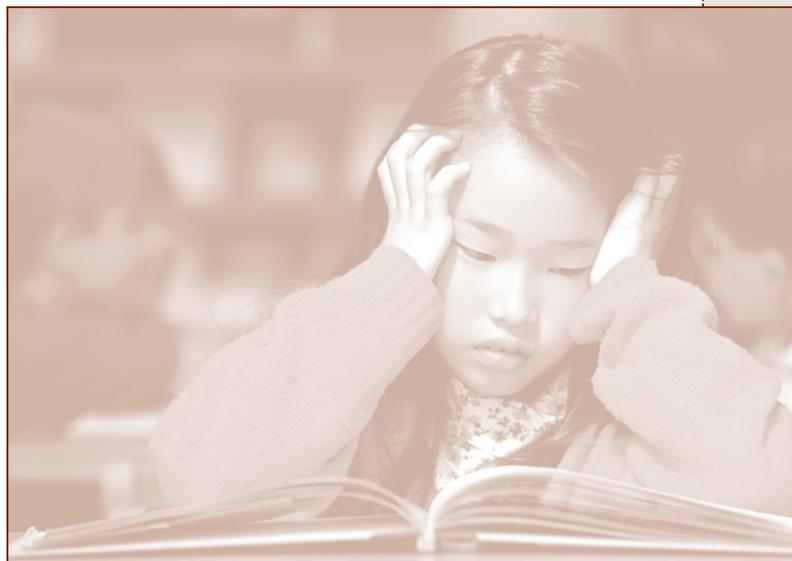
■ Summarizing

A summary requires readers to determine what information in the story is important and put the main idea(s) into their own words.

What To Look for

Learning to read strategically is a developmental process and happens over time. Children demonstrate comprehension when they:

- Use prior knowledge and personal experiences when discussing a book. Example: *I just knew she was going to fall—that's what happened to me and my friends when we were learning how to skateboard.*
- Describe similarities and differences among books. Example: *Most kids' books have happy endings. Mystery books always try to trick you.*
- Visualize and describe scenes and characters in books with few illustrations.
- Support their ideas or interpretations by giving examples from the text.
- Identify the main ideas in a story or nonfiction book.
- Describe characters' moods and motives.



How To Support Learning

As you read to and work with young children, model and demonstrate different strategies. Give children direct feedback, encouraging them to think about what they are reading and what they understand.

1. Story Map

Point out that most stories have a beginning, middle, and end. Explain that together you are going to make a story map that shows the sequence of events. On a sheet of paper make three columns and label them *Beginning*, *Middle*, and *End*. After children have listened to or read the story, discuss it and invite them to draw or write what happened at each stage. Children may also enjoy changing parts of the story or inventing alternate endings.

2. K-W-L Chart

This activity is especially useful when reading concept and nonfiction books. On a sheet of paper make three columns labeled *What I Know*, *What I Want To Know*, and *What I Learned*. Before you begin reading, talk about the topic and invite children to share what they already know. List their ideas in the first column. Then ask them to think about what they would like to learn by reading or listening to the book, and write ideas in the second column. After children have finished the book, have them discuss what they learned and list responses in the third column.

3. Interest Groups

Children like to read and listen to stories about topics of interest to them. Gather children who share similar interests together. Invite them to listen to or read books on the same topic. When they are finished, encourage children to talk about what they read, reread favorite passages, and compare books to one another.

Books for Leveled Reading

For a bibliography of books categorized by developmental levels, please refer to LEARNS Literacy Assessment Profile (LLAP), downloadable at www.nwrel.org/learns/resources/llap.

Remember there is no single approach to reading instruction that will work with every child. Rather than practicing skills in isolation, developing readers must do many things simultaneously to construct meaning out of text. Children benefit from balanced, integrated instruction supported by varied and authentic reading and writing activities. We hope the suggested activities help you support young readers to overcome challenges, improve their skills, and develop a passion for reading.

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