

# Learning to Read Ain't What it Used To Be

by Jill Lipski

It is natural for parents to become concerned when facing the daunting task of supporting their child's first reading challenges. You can help your child's reading progress by having some awareness of the reading practice of today's educators. Here are three ways you can help your beginning reader. First, be informed about the instructional strategies your child's teacher is using to teach reading. Second, figure out your child's learning style. This will help you understand how he/she will learn best. Finally, help your child by reading, modeling and practicing good reading skills at home.

## Become Informed

There are generally two methods of reading instruction: whole language and phonics. In practice, most teachers' reading instruction will combine the two methods.

Whole Language includes the four blocks of language arts: reading, writing, speaking and listening. Teachers use high interest, predictable children's literature to model and practice real-world reading behaviors. Children use the text in a meaningful way by practicing reading skills. All specific skill lessons are taught in application. For example, if students are learning about a specific letter sound, the teacher will choose a text where the letter sound is used frequently. This method's focus is, "What do good readers do?" Good readers read, re-read, write and talk about what they read.

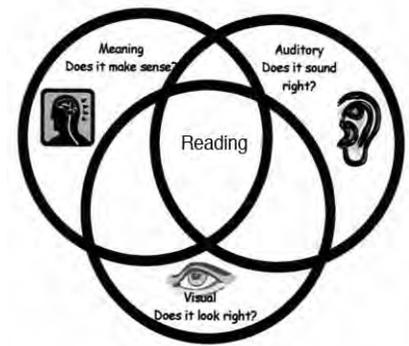
Phonics is the relationship between written letters and their sounds. Skills are presented in a logical, sequential order. Students apply skills to beginning reading texts that often have a highly patterned vocabulary.

To understand the difference between these two methods think of them this way: Whole language is a "top down approach" while phonics-based instruction is a "bottom-up approach." In whole language teachers start with a whole text and break it down from overall comprehension to mini-lessons that focus on specific reading skills. Alternately, phonics instruction begins with letter/sound practice that builds over time and leads to word recognition and beginning reading.

As you become more informed about how teachers teach reading, it is important to understand the role of phonological awareness. Phonological awareness is a fairly recent discovery in reading instruction. Research has shown a correlation between phonological awareness and reading ability. Good readers have phonological awareness. Children who do not have phonological awareness will struggle with reading.

Phonological awareness includes phonemic awareness: the understanding that our language is made up of individual sounds and those sounds can be manipulated. Children with phonemic awareness can hear the individual sounds in words and learn to recognize them in different positions in words. They can manipulate the sounds and make new words (cat, rat, fat, hat). They can match words with the same beginning, middle and ending sounds. They learn to blend (/m/ + /a/ + /p/ = map) and isolate the sounds (map = /m/ + /a/ + /p/).

Phonemic awareness is developed through both language and word play. Children discover rhyme and alliteration through experience with books, poetry, songs, finger-plays (i.e. Itsy-Bitsy Spider)



and conversation. Young children can develop phonemic awareness skills naturally, internalizing their understanding of our sound/word relationships without formal instruction. However, some children need direct instruction to learn phonemic awareness skills.

Phonemic awareness and phonics, though they may seem similar, are not. As a teacher, I explain it to parents like this: phonemic awareness applies to spoken language; phonics is the connection of sounds to print. Understanding that **B** makes the /b/ sound is not useful unless you can connect this information to language and meaning.

## Know Your Child's Learning Style

Children use their eyes, ears and sense of touch to make sense of information. The sense they depend on more heavily determines their preferred learning style: auditory, visual or tactile/kinesthetic. Young children tend to be more kinesthetic, developing auditory and visual skills as they mature. You can get an idea of your child's learning style by examining her/his play preferences. Which activities would your child choose?

### *Auditory learners prefer to:*

- Listen to music or stories
- Talk about events
- Tell stories
- Make music or noise while playing

### *Kinesthetic learners prefer to:*

- Act out stories or role play
- Dance or move to music
- Build with blocks
- Play with clay or playdoh

### *Visual learners prefer to:*

- Look at pictures in stories
- Drawing pictures and color
- Learn by watching
- Notice details

## Support From Home

The most important thing you can do with your child at home is read, read, read. Read with your child every day. Read aloud stories that interest your child and allow time to just enjoy the book. Discuss what you have read. Read a variety of materials including story books, how-to books, non-fiction, poetry, and joke books. Re-read favorite stories with your child. Encourage your child to chime in with predictable words or known phrases. When you read, point to the words, drawing your child's attention to the print in the book. Take turns 'reading' stories that have been memorized, helping as your child points to the words.

As your child begins to read independently, it's helpful to know how a teacher might approach what is called guided reading. To simplify things, you can focus on three main reading cues when reading with your child; visual, auditory and meaning. When a beginning reader uses these three cues in unison, they have the tools to read unknown words.

Visual cues are what you see in the text. These include the individual letters you see in words, chunks of words (blends, prefixes, roots and endings) as well as sight vocabulary (high frequency words good readers know by sight such as the, is, of.) Auditory cues are how the words sound. They include sounds of individual letters and language structure (we read, we have read). Meaning cues come from what you already know about the context of the story such as your prior knowledge of the topic or any personal connections you may have to the material often called "schema" by teachers. In a children's book, pictures provide many of the meaning cues. The setting of the story, who the characters are and how they are feeling are all shown in the pictures.

Here is an example of how these cues work together: A student is reading and

comes to an unknown word. She guesses zebra but by looking at the pictures, she determines that the book is about farm animals. Using these meaning cues, she knows a better guess would be horse. However, using her visual cues she sees the word starts with a P. Now a better guess is pony. Finally, she uses auditory cues and re-reads, "I see two pony? That doesn't sound right." The unknown word must be ponies.

Do not allow your child to become frustrated by reading. If he/she needs help with an unknown word - say the word. Keep reading at home a positive experience.

Modeling good reading practices at home is also important. Parents are role models in a young child's world. When your child sees you reading for enjoyment or information, she/he experiences first hand the value of reading.

There are many games and activities that you can do at home to build your child's reading skills. Try some of these ideas, taking into consideration your child's learning style when selecting an activity.

### *Rhyming*

- Have your child chime-in with the rhyming words in familiar stories
- Play "I Spy" rhyming word games in the car - I spy something that rhymes with ridge - bridge!
- Read poetry or nursery rhymes to your child

### *Letter Identification*

- Play hide-and-go-seek letters - write letters on index cards and have your child seek the letter you say - find the B!

- Treasure hunt - arrange the letters in a path. Put a little treat or sticker at the end of the path. Have your child pick up the letters as he/she follows the trail, naming each letter along the way.
- Practice writing letters in a cookie sheet with salt, pudding or shaving cream in it.

### *Letter Sounds*

- Play "I Spy" - I spy something that begins with T! or I spy something that starts with the /t/ sound!
- Read and Jump - use chalk to write letters on the sidewalk or driveway. Have your child jump on the letter's sound you call out.
- Substitute the beginning sound for each word in a nursery rhyme - instead of Mary Had a Little Lamb, try, Mary mad may mittle mamb, mittle mamb, mittle mamb . . .

As a kindergarten teacher I have guided hundreds of children through the beginning reading process and each is different. It is always exciting for me when something just clicks and the child reaches a new level of understanding- sometimes it is like a bolt of lightning and sometimes the light dawns as gradually as a sunrise. However it happens for your child, the time when a child learns to read is one of the most amazing times in their lives. Experience it together and enjoy! ■

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## Parent Resources

[nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/questions/questionsabout.html](http://nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/questions/questionsabout.html)

[www.readingrockest.org/articles/161](http://www.readingrockest.org/articles/161)

[www.parentingweb.com/dev\\_edu/improveread.htm](http://www.parentingweb.com/dev_edu/improveread.htm)

## Online Activities and Resources to Do With Your Child

[www.bbc.co.uk/schools/parents/search/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/parents/search/)

[www.fcps.edu/KingsParkES/staff/pa/index.htm](http://www.fcps.edu/KingsParkES/staff/pa/index.htm)

<http://www.starfall.com>