

## **The Essential Components of Teaching Reading**

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When children learn to read it changes their lives. It is truly a life-changing event and children who get off to a strong start or a rapid trajectory in early reading; these children have much better prognoses than those who get off to a weak and struggling trajectory. And this is not only true in elementary school; the ability to read well early has a carry-over effect into adulthood, depending upon how well a child can master the challenge of learning to read. In my view, nothing should distract us from the idea that we must teach children to read through certain fundamental elements, and that these should be based somewhat upon the child's particular strengths and weaknesses.

There is such a thing as the "science of reading." The science of intervention itself is less firmly established than is the science of the basic processes of reading, and thus researchers are now trying to construct a body of knowledge about interventions. A very important piece of information is that we really need to know which components, procedures or conditions are most effective for which kind of children. This, of course, is the reading teacher's struggle every day. Which instructional procedures should I use for this child? Which instructional procedures are important for this child? Which instructional procedures can I use with everyone effectively? It's really a question of do some ways of instructing work better than other ways. While this is an old established question in research on reading intervention, we're still almost at the beginning stages in terms of our scientific knowledge about this issue. One thing we do know is that we shouldn't be thinking there are reading remediation programs that are magical solutions. This is a myth. Every remedial or preventive reading teacher really needs to firmly understand and believe that there are multiple paths to becoming a good reader, but the essential elements needed to get a child there don't diverge that much from one another.

But what do we know about the elements of instruction that are most important in preventing and/or remediating reading disabilities? In this article, I'm going to summarize what I think is the broad consensus view, based upon current research and clinical teaching practice. There are things that everybody agrees on now from research and experience that are critically important parts of good instruction for students who struggle with reading. The first key component of designing an effective teaching paradigm is to get an appropriate diagnosis of the child's reading skills. Then, it is simply a matter of focusing your teaching strategies on these areas of weakness. It is imperative that a good, thorough reading diagnostic evaluation take place so that teachers or reading specialists can specifically understand where the student is in reading. Then you can better put together a program that really builds these critical missing elements for success.

Secondly, from our research on the process of learning to read, we know that kids really need to have solid, fluid, functional phonemic awareness as they begin learning to read. They need to have a mastery of the alphabetic system to decode unknown words. They need to work towards building fluency in word recognition. We need to stimulate the growth of their vocabulary, because that helps them construct meaning. And then we need to teach them how to think while they read, which is

developing comprehension strategies. All of these elements are critically important. If we want somebody to be a fluent, flexible, generative reader, able to deal with many different kinds of text challenges they need to have these fundamental skills. Therefore, all of these teaching strategies must be a component to developing a successful reader.

The next step in designing an effective program is to provide a significant increase in the intensity of instruction. There may seem obvious, but it is not always offered. This is something we have primarily failed to do in public schools and it's one of the reasons why we are continuing to endure consistent failure to remediate and to prevent reading difficulties. We have not yet found a way to provide the right level of intensity of instruction for students who are either biologically less talented in certain domains, or who come to school dramatically less well-prepared to learn to read.

In order to further facilitate reading skills, students must be provided ample opportunities for guided practice of new skills. It takes an enormous amount of careful, relentless pursuit of reading activities in order to build skills in children. We need to persuade children for whom phonics is difficult that still you need to try to use it when you encounter new words rather than just skipping over the word and guessing. And it takes some very powerful teaching and reminding and support to help these kids establish those habits. It has also been suggested in some new research endeavors, that a key dimension in teaching reading is to teach students multiple strategies for identifying and dealing with unknown words in text when they first encounter them. That is, one can try to sound out the word phonemically, one can try to "guess" the word based on a closure procedure (figuring out the word based on the gestalt meaning of the other words in the sentence), one can learn to sight read words, etc. And finally, this wonderful thing about the art of teaching and that is to provide those individualized supports that children need as they deal with new learning challenges. Asking the right questions, providing the right kinds of practice material, that's way I call the scaffolding process.

Another very interesting and informative piece of knowledge that we have been able to add to the science of intervention is what effects on brain functioning accompany the improvements in reading that result from effective intervention. These studies, which look at brain mapping, and which areas of the brain are working or not working in children with/without reading difficulties, have allowed us to develop a better understanding of the possible neurological effects of reading remediation. As we learn more about this fascinating area, we will also learn more about possible ways of predicting long term outcomes from interventions as we look at brain changes that are associated with good outcomes.

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