

Reading Isn't Fundamental

How to help your child learn to read.

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As a parent, you feel a special deep panic when you realize that your child—your beautiful, clever, funny child, who regularly surprises you with precocious *bons mots*, who built an ingenious bow out of tubing and rubber bands that can shoot a chopstick across the living room with remarkable accuracy—is having trouble learning to read. Meanwhile, all the other kids appear to be breezing along, polishing off Harry Potter books while your child stumbles over the difference between "how" and "now." You don't want to be one of those hysterical parents who gets all crazy about every little developmental bump in the road, but, hey, your kid can't really read yet, and the others can. In your darker moments you feel the desolate urge to ratchet down your ambitions for your child from valedictorian to graduating at all.

Such fears may be exaggerated, but they're not irrational. Reading ability does predict school achievement and success (which is, of course, related to income, health, and other factors), and reading gains ever greater importance beyond school, as more jobs are now based on information and technology. Failure to read places significant limits on how one fares in other parts of life. And a lot of people never do learn to read well: Approximately 40 percent of fourth-grade children in the United States lack basic reading skills; 20 percent of all graduating high-school seniors are classified as functionally illiterate (meaning that their reading and writing skills are insufficient for ordinary practical needs); and [about 42 million adults in the United States cannot read](#). So you're not nuts to take a reading problem seriously.

Now for some perspective. First, let's take a moment to recognize that compared with the development of oral language, the acquisition of reading is unnatural. Speech and the ability to understand speech can be considered the result of a natural process in the sense that the requisite skills emerge without formal training. Several species of animal employ sounds such as clicking, whistles, song, or foot tapping in a fashion that constitutes focused and targeted communication (and [dolphins actually seem to have names for one another](#)). Before children can speak fluently, they move from sounds to words, words to phrases, and so on, acquiring their growing expertise from exposure to the speech around them. They then make efforts to speak, with little formal guidance. By contrast, children must be taught to read.

The good news for kids who have trouble reading is that while a deficiency in reading may look like an across-the-board failure, it is often a local problem in just one or two of the components that add up to the ability to read. Reading, like golfing or playing the guitar, is not one big global skill but a constellation of many smaller ones. When we read fluently, the little skills weave together so seamlessly that they look like a single expertise.

It's important to look at the components because a holdup in the development of any single one may be at fault in a child's poor performance in reading. If we can identify the component that's not doing its share, we can do a great deal to improve reading. The components that make up reading are interrelated and overlapping, but distinguishable:

Vocabulary: knowing the meanings of words. A child's comprehension of what is read depends on this. Better vocabulary better prepares a child for reading.

Comprehension: understanding and being able to interpret what is read, connecting the printed words and sentences with human experience.

Phonological awareness: identifying and manipulating units of oral language, such as words, syllables, onsets, and rimes. Children who have phonological awareness can recognize that sentences are made up of words, words can be broken down into sounds and syllables, sounds can be deleted from words to make new words, and different words can begin or end with the same sound or have the same middle sound(s).

Decoding: breaking down words into their constituent sounds and building words from those sounds. This begins with blending sounds ("puh" plus "al" equals "pal") and extends into sounding out words the child has never seen before by recognizing the sounds of letters and syllables that form them.

Fluency: reading smoothly with accuracy, speed, and expression that conveys the sense of what's being read.

As a parent with no particular professional expertise in teaching literacy, there's a lot you can do on the level of normal play and routine home life to promote reading—and without turning it into a chore or a high-pressure struggle.

Parents can begin working on the components of reading when their child is still an infant and extend the process throughout childhood. To begin with, the more the child knows about oral language, the better. When she begins to read she will draw upon a reserve of expertise that she first built up as a speaker and listener: vocabulary, comprehension, phonological awareness, connecting words to things.

With infants, talk to the child and encourage him to make a range of talklike sounds. Begin reading to the child, and keep books around, including some within the child's reach. Do what you can to make reading fun, enjoyable, peaceful, and engaging, setting

the stage for what comes next at the toddler level. You are building command of sounds, love of reading, and an appreciation of the value and importance of books.

With toddlers and preschoolers, it helps to connect reading to some routine such as bed time, nap time, or a pre- or after-meal lull. Select topics she likes; let the child select books for you to read. Get in the habit of activities or games that rhyme and otherwise play with sounds: songs, jingles, made-up phrases (e.g., "Billy is silly" to catch the rhyming sounds, "Sally sounds silly" to catch the sound of the initial S). Nursery rhymes are especially rich in words, rhyming, and other fundamentals. Talk about a greater range of subjects, even very mundane ones—like pointing to the parts of a car or animal in an illustration and labeling them. As you read, stop and ask a gentle question: "What do you think Babar is thinking here?" or "What do you think will happen next?" These are great for comprehension. If the question is too difficult, offer a little more guidance by attaching a statement: "I'll bet Babar is a little lonely. What do you think would make him feel better?" Also, you can encourage your child to experiment with writing, which helps reading because she uses sounds to try to write the word. You might see the child write "sn" for "sun," a great start that shows awareness of sounds and the breakdown of words into sounds.

As your child continues in elementary school and begins to work hard during the school day on reading, it's a good idea to continue reading with and to him, mixing in casual writing practice (some kids will go for the idea of alternating entries in a journal with a parent) and talking over dinner and in other family settings about what the child has read. If there's a series of books that speaks to one of your child's enthusiasms, helping him get into that series will allow him to become familiar with continuing characters and engage with a larger story, which makes even new books seem familiar. Keep a dictionary around and easily accessible, and use it once in a while, inviting your child to do this with you. The dictionary not only reinforces vocabulary and comprehension, it helps your child decode words by showing that they are composed of syllables that can be sounded out. Make up word games to play while driving or in a store. "Think of words that sound like snow" is good for a first or second grader, but you can work up to more complicated games for older children. If you make the play competitive (if your family's into that), please resist the temptation to rattle off 50 words in a row and then do your special taunting wiggly victory dance. And, of course, continue to show by your actions and not just your pronouncements that reading is engaging, relevant, and a path to fresh experiences. Keep books around where your child can pick them up in the natural course of things. And don't forget to pick up a book yourself. Model the desired intimacy with books; don't just preach it.

You can't add becoming a full-time reading tutor to the already full-time demands of parenting, and children will vary in interest, ability, and attention, so you'll inevitably have to select just a few of the many possible activities to promote reading skills. In general, go for regularity—a little almost every day, as part of a routine that links reading to the more relaxed moments in the day—rather than a Shakespeare marathon one Saturday a month. And when setting priorities, bear in mind that two activities are clearly the most critical:

1. Read aloud to the child. It shows that reading is important, part of everyday life, and fun, and allows you to model the basic component skills. It's fine to read the same books over and over, as many children like to do. Research indicates that repeated readings help a child to integrate words better; comprehend meaning; and connect sounds, words, and meaning. Even on the 50th time through the same story, interact during the reading to bring the child into the activity. "What is Pooh doing? What do you think is in the jar?"
2. Help the child understand that letters are related to sounds and that words can break down into sounds. Ultimately, the child's reading will advance by being able to sound out words, not by memorizing individual words. There are alphabet books to help you work with your child to connect letters to sounds. In the middle of reading, stop and sound out a word. "Let's sound this out together: Errr ... un. Run! He's getting ready to run."

Reading may be important and complex and very scary when your child has trouble with it, but parents should take heart in remembering that mundane low-pressure practice during games and other activities with you can make an enormous difference. Even a slightly increased sensitivity to breaking down sounds or rhyming, even a slightly heightened familiarity with books and motivation to engage with them, can provide a significant boost at school. Reading preparation is at the top of the list of factors that make a difference in school achievement. Such preparation need not—and should not—feature threats, severity, and drudgery. Instead, help your child to read by doing what you do anyway—playing with him, talking with her—in a slightly more purposeful manner.

You may well have questions. [Here are some common ones.](#)

How will I know if my child has a reading problem?

The news usually comes in one or more of three ways.

1. School feedback. If your child's teacher alerts you to a problem, resist falling into the blame game. If the teacher asks, "Do you ever read to him at home?" don't come back with, "Aren't you teaching him to read at school? Whatever you're doing isn't working."
2. Your child's statements. The child may well make general or specific comments: "I don't want to read," "I can't do this," "I don't get what's happening in this story." More likely, your child will just express frustration. Strong resistance against practicing reading, including blanket statements like "Reading is dumb" is an obvious sign.
3. Behaviors you can observe—reluctance to be read to, getting stuck on most words in a sentence, slow or no reaction when you ask a simple question like, "What is the sound of that letter?" Another warning sign would be if the child's reading is very slow. Accuracy in early reading is much more important than speed, but if you can wash and dry the dishes before the sentence is completed, fluency is a

problem. Or you may notice that the child gets the beginning of the word but guesses at the rest of it—reading "smoke" as "smile," for instance—which suggests she is trying to memorize whole words instead of breaking them down to sound them out.

Can't I just wait until the child gets to school, where they have teachers trained to teach reading?

You could, but it would be better if you did not. Practicing the components of reading in the home doesn't mean you force reading before your child is ready to, but you can help develop important skills without rushing the process, and the child who does practice those skills will do better when he does get to school and is ready to read in earnest. [Studies show](#) that having more of the component skills in place at age 5 predicts better school achievement at ages 7 and 15.

What do I do if I think my child has a reading problem?

A reading evaluation can be very important. A trained specialist can identify weakness in any of the component skills and will know how to work on it. Bear in mind that the child's negative reaction to reading alone will not necessarily show you where the problem is. Your best bet is to ask your child's teacher, school psychologist, or principal to bring in a reading specialist. Or if you prefer to seek out help on your own, you can do your own search for a reading specialist online or in the phone book. A little respectful tact in dealing with your child's teacher may well be necessary, but you're not questioning the teacher's competence or going over her head by consulting a specialist. Reading is a well-developed area of educational specialization, with masters and doctoral-level professionals who can offer very focused assistance that goes beyond what can happen in the classroom. Plan to work with the teacher, as will any reading specialist your child ends up seeing.

There are more serious problems—auditory disorders, dyslexia, pervasive developmental disorder—that can lead to reading impairment. One reason to go to a specialist is that there are different strategies associated with addressing each of the many causes of a reading problem.

What if my child can read, but just won't? What if my child just has an attitude problem?

You can be certain of motivational problems only if all of the component skills are well established. As a parent, you probably cannot determine this on your own. But if you've taken your child for a reading evaluation and the problem really is just motivational, then you might try the following: Establish more reading routines; engage in more talking about reading at the dinner table; have the child select a book to read together at the book store; switch to engaging magazines or something else other than a book that has words to read; read stories connected to movies, and see the movies with the child.

If my child is pulled out of class for an intensive reading program or I enroll her in an outside program for a few weeks, will that bring her up to speed?

A few weeks in an intensive reading program, all by itself, probably will not be enough. A program that is sustained and supported in the home is more likely to have staying power. Research suggests that much can be done to help the child and build the skills needed, and that steady progress takes precedence over a quick fix. Most of the time, the mundane, gamelike activities I've discussed above will go far to improve reading and complement school activities. If you can start early, all the better. If you have the option, select day care, preschool, and kindergarten that emphasize sounding out, rhyming, and other pre-reading skills.

But do not leave the teaching of reading to the school. Without becoming a whip-cracking achievement monster, you can accomplish a great deal as part of a regular routine of play and home life.

For more information, try these sources:

[National Institute for Literacy](#)

[National Right to Read Foundation](#)

[U.S. Department of Education](#)

[Reading Rockets](#)

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