

## **Understanding Your Child's Reading Instruction: Defining Phonics**

By Shane Templeton

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One of the significant accomplishments in a child's early educational development is learning the alphabet. The "Alphabet Song"—sung to the tune of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star"—has taught millions of children their ABCs for generations. But once your child learns the English alphabet, what's next?

Research shows that children benefit from phonics—the part of reading instruction that focuses on the relationships between sounds and letters and the use of those relationships to read words. Phonics instruction is based on the simple concept of teaching the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, the forty-four sounds they make, and the most common ways that those sounds are spelled.

For many parents, a phonics book is something they remember from their own elementary school education. Today, phonics instruction is receiving attention from educators because of research that supports its powerful effects on reading development. In fact, the National Reading Panel has found that phonics is one of the five essential components of reading instruction and, because of that, it is an important part of the No Child Left Behind legislation.

What does good phonics instruction look like? Effective phonics instruction teaches children to "decode" words systematically by blending groups of letters. Studies show a few key characteristics that make school phonics programs a success.

*Phonics instruction should begin early.* Learning to read begins in a child's preschool years, with speech and an understanding of what text looks like. The alphabet is next; kindergarteners should learn to recognize and name both upper case and lower case letters using songs, games and activities that encourage them to practice writing the letters they learn. Rhyming songs and games are great tools for teaching children to how to sound out letters and words.

*Phonics instruction should be systematic.* Studies show that children learn phonics best when teachers plan the order in which sounds and letter combinations are introduced. While no "correct" or even ideal sequence for phonics teaching has been proven, there are logical guidelines. Teachers should begin with the simplest sounds and letter combinations before working up to more challenging material. It makes sense to teach the most common sounds first; more words contain *m* than *j*, for example. Also, new sound-letter combinations should be practiced with ones already taught for reinforcement.

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*Phonics instruction should be direct and explicit.* Research indicates that an explicit approach works best. This means that children should be taught to identify the sounds of letters and to blend them together to form words. For example, children who have learned the sounds associated with the letters *s*, *a* and *t* can blend them to read *sat*.

*Practice.* Studies show that practice in applying phonics knowledge is more effective than memorizing phonics rules. Over time, through practice in applying their knowledge of letter-sound correspondences, children will learn the most helpful phonics rules. For example, *c* followed by *e* usually stands for the sound of *s*; *g* followed by *i* and *e* usually stands for a “j” sound.

*Instruction should be flexible.* Children are unique, even in the ways they learn to read. Different children require different amounts of instruction and practice. Some students quickly master decoding skills, while others need more attention.

*Learning is an ongoing process.* Phonics provides the foundation for word study in the middle and upper elementary grades. At those levels decoding is more sophisticated because longer words often have to be divided into syllables and meaningful parts such as roots, prefixes, and suffixes. Attention to these aspects of words helps develop powerful skills that make it easier to learn new words and increase vocabulary depth and breadth.

Parents have a remarkable opportunity to reinforce classroom phonics instruction by reading aloud at home as much as possible. In addition to strengthening skills, reading at home models the usefulness and enjoyment of reading, motivating children to practice as they learn.