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# Reading Program

**R**eading is the foundation of most learning at school. Students who cannot read well often have a very unhappy school life. Our systematic and comprehensive phonics program makes sure students can read and spell well. Students use the award-winning "Reading Freedom" workbooks at the learning centre and in short practice sessions at home. The program covers **phonically regular words** that can be sounded out quickly and accurately following the rules of phonics, and **sight words** that cannot be sounded out such as "was" and "said". As the reading process becomes faster and more accurate, comprehension improves. Students can move from the Reading Program into the English Program once their basic reading skills are up to a good level.

## Learning to read – whole language or phonics

As a young teacher in the early 1980s, I had it drummed into me "Phonics is boring. You will turn children off reading by teaching them phonics." The "whole language" approach to teaching reading was in full swing. All I had to do was immerse the children in literature and let the reading begin. "The children will learn phonics along the way," I was told.

Any program designed to teach young children to read cannot be based wholly on the whole language approach. It needs to include phonics – teaching children to sound out words. As an educator for twenty-five years and the director of a learning centre, I have used phonics to teach hundreds of school aged and pre-school children to read well.

It is not possible for many children to learn to read properly the "whole language" way because they have one or more of the following symptoms:

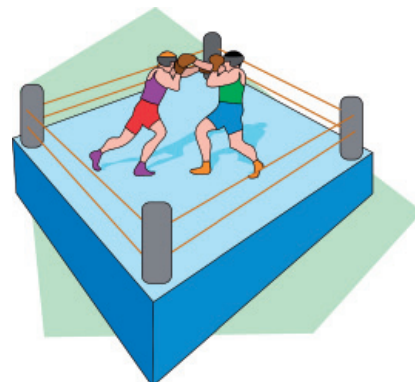
- a vision system that is not developed fully
- an ongoing or intermittent hearing loss
- a delay in language processing
- some difficulty in concentrating

The many children that have come to my learning centre with a reading problem usually have low self-esteem as a result. They are in danger of dropping out of education altogether.

Readers use three "cueing systems" to help them "decode" or extract meaning from print:

- Semantic cues – how the world works
- Syntactic cues – how the language works
- Graphophonic or phonics cues – how the letters and sounds of the alphabet work.

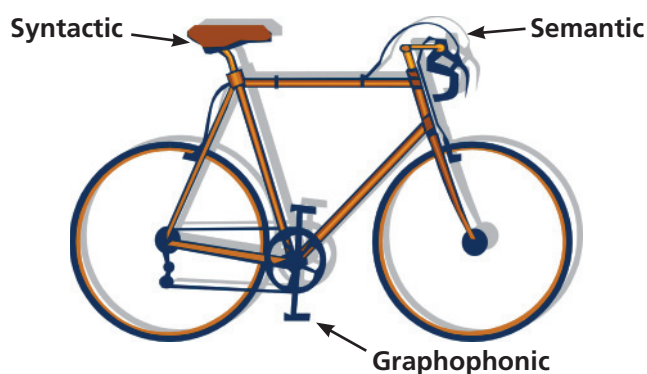
The weakness of the whole language approach has been an overemphasis on the semantic cues and learning words by sight, and a reduced emphasis on the graphophonic cues. Children have been encouraged to look at the pictures, to guess what the word might be, and, as a last resort, actually look at the letters in the word and try to sound it out.



**Whole language v Phonics**

I see the three cueing systems operating like the parts of a bicycle. Like the handlebars, our knowledge of how the world works guides us through

most of what we read. Like the seat, our knowledge of how the language works makes the reading comfortable. And like the pedals, which help us to go faster, and even uphill, our knowledge of how the letters and sounds work helps us to read words with which we are not yet familiar.



Unfortunately, many children have been given a bike that does not have pedals.

Remedial reading programs that do not emphasise phonics are not effective. I have lost count of the number of children I have taught to read after they have already had two failed runs through the reading recovery program (whole language in a one-on-one setting).

But isn't prevention better than cure? Why not teach phonics to children to prevent reading problems

developing. Phonics does not turn children off reading – poor teaching does. Phonics taught well empowers children to read well.

To see how the cueing systems interact, try to decode the next word in this sentence:

**I got on the \_ \_ \_ \_ \_**

The syntactic cues tell me the next word should be the name of something. The semantic cues tell me it could be something I can get on, like a bike or a ladder. I read on ...

**I got on the h \_ \_ \_ \_**

The graphophonic cues now tell me it cannot be a bike or a ladder, but it could be 'hay', 'horse' or 'handlebars', and my syntactic cues tell me it cannot be 'his', 'here' or 'however'. I read on ...

**I got on the h \_ \_ se**

Now the graphophonic cues tell me it could be a house, a horse or maybe a hose. I read on ...

**I got on the h \_ \_ se and rode off into the sunset.**

Okay, the semantic cues have convinced me it's a horse.

Of course, if this text were in a picture book, a child would have already seen the horse.

## Reading – Phonics Program Outline

Phonics Content	Sample words	Usually achieved by end of Year
Knowledge of rhyming sounds		K
Hear initial consonants		K
Hear terminal consonants		K
Hear medial vowels		K
Letter recognition		K
Single letter-sound correspondences		K
Consonant-vowel-consonant blending	cat, bed, pig, hop, run, sack, mess, will, fuzz	K
Terminal blends	hand, vest, gift, pond, hunt, sing	1

Phonics Content	Sample words	Usually achieved by end of Year
Initial blends	clap, sled, skip, twin, scrub	1
Initial and terminal blends	frost, stomp, strand, script, trust	1
Consonant digraphs (wh, th, ch, sh, qu)	when, thank, chomp, shelf, quick	2
Double vowel rule	rain, feet, tie, boat, cue	2
Vowel-consonant-final 'e' rule	made, these, time, smoke, cube	2
Soft 'c' and 'g'	face, cent, fancy, age, gent, giant	3
Diphthongs (ow, oo, oy, oi, aw, au)	bow, clown, moon, book, boy, oil, saw, sauce	3
Vowels before 'r' (er, ir, ur, ar, or)	fern, bird, surf, star, torch	4
Vowel digraphs (air, are, ear, ea, our, oar, all, al, oor)	hair, square, bear, bread, four, roar, ball, false, floor	4
Silent letters	badge, knife, comb, whistle	4
Compound words	news-paper, surf-board	4
Syllabification	ad-ven-ture, a-ni-mal, prin-ci-pal	5
Structural analysis (prefix-base-suffix)	en-joy-ment, com-pet-ition	5
Contractions	can't, it's, we'd, I'll, you're	5

At each level of the phonics program children also learn a basic sight vocabulary of 240 words (was, said, could, etc.) These make up more than half of the words they come across in their reading.

## Reading Homework

Reading is a skill that requires regular practice. For this reason the Education First reading program includes three or four homework sessions each week as well as the tuition session. It is important that your child does the homework as it is prescribed on the homework planner, over several sessions, rather than all on one day. This reinforces the learning done at tuition and will speed up your child's progress.

It is also important that parents or other helpers participate in your child's reading homework times. Children need someone older to identify and correct errors in oral reading, to ensure that the correct homework is done each day, to help with setting out in workbooks, to check their written homework and to help learn spelling.

Each homework session with your child should take about 10-15 minutes (Kinder to Year 2) to 20 minutes (Year 3 and older) and will follow the same format:

1. Child reads aloud to helper sight word list for that day. Also have your child read a list learned previously - revision is important.
2. Child reads aloud to helper the sounds from the book.
3. Child reads with helper the pages for that day (word lists and/or story).
4. Child does written homework for that day and helper checks it.
5. Child learns and helper tests spelling for that week.

Older children may feel they can do their homework on their own, but oral reading and spelling must be supervised by a helper, and written work should be checked for errors. Children doing homework unsupervised tend to rush through the written work and omit the oral reading. They do not progress as well as those whose parents or helpers are actively involved in the homework sessions.

The workbooks we use are all written by Hunter Calder. His Reading Centre in Maitland is the busiest in Australia. Phonics First books are for children in Kinder to Year 2. Word Workers books are for children in Year 1 to 4. Reading Freedom books are for children in Year 3 and above.

Because we know you want the best for your child, we are always available to discuss your child's progress and any specific problems you may encounter along the way. The success of the Education First reading program depends on teamwork between children, parents and tutor. We congratulate you on the support you are giving to your child and thank you for letting us be a part of their education.

## Helping children with reading comprehension

Children's ability to comprehend, or understand, what is being read can be improved by helping them to use some of the knowledge and skill described here.

Firstly, read this short passage, and then answer the questions that follow:

*The man was still tired from his morning's work in the garden as he finished his lunch. He put his old sombrero on his head and headed back outside into the hot sun.*

1. What meal did the man have?
2. Why did the man go back outside?
3. What is a sombrero?
4. Do you think the man is a hard worker? Explain your answer.

These questions involve the three main levels of comprehension. The first question is **literal** as the answer is provided in the text. The second question is **inferential**, as you have to "read between the lines" to infer the meaning. The third question is also inferential, as it asks for the meaning of a word you may not know, but that can be inferred from the context. The fourth question is **evaluative**, asking you to make a personal judgement.

Reading comprehension requires the simultaneous application of the following inter-related knowledge and skills:

**Decoding** (saying or recognising) the words accurately and fast enough to allow some mental energy for comprehension. Children who struggle to sound out or recognize words often get to the end of a sentence or paragraph with little recall of what they have read. A phonics-based program can develop the speed of reading. Practising reading aloud is more beneficial than silent reading for this purpose.

**Vocabulary** (word knowledge) needs to continue developing with age. Children who do not know the meaning of many words can be confused by what they read. The more widely a child reads and uses oral language, the more words they can incorporate into their working vocabulary.

**Knowledge of the world** and the context of what they are reading allow children to understand it better by relating it to what they already know. This knowledge can be built up through interacting with others, listening to others read, reading a range of text types, and from television. A discussion about a topic before reading can provide this contextual base.

**Active engagement** with the text while reading. Many children do not know that they should be thinking while they are reading. Children should be asking themselves questions (who, what, when, where, why, how, what if), visualizing images of what they are reading, summarizing what they've read and analyzing the text using their knowledge

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of the text features (e.g. a narrative has characters, orientation, setting, problem, series of events and a resolution).

**Monitoring** (self-checking) of what is being read. If it does not make sense, re-reading may be necessary.

Teachers and parents can model the use of these strategies while listening to children read, reading aloud to children and watching television programs with them.

Some useful questions to ask the child are

- What is it about?
- What has happened so far?
- What do you think might happen next?
- Make up 5 “wh-” questions about it – “Who? What? When? Where? Why?”

- Who and/or what do you like/dislike about it?
- Was any part of it hard to understand?
- How is it like other things you have read/seen?
- What did you learn that you didn’t know before?

Reading comprehension strategies develop over a long time. It is not realistic to expect a child to develop a strategy after suggesting it to them once or twice. A child may need many experiences of stumbling over words, confusion about word meanings, reading between the lines and making connections between events to finally develop a good range of useful reading strategies. Teachers and parents who can focus on the end result with optimism can help children over a long time frame.