

How Children Learn to Read: A Different View

by Russ T. Fugal

As a parent of a struggling reader, you might be wondering why traditional phonics-based approaches aren't clicking for your child. I'd like to share a different perspective on how children learn to read, based on both research and real-world experience with young readers.

The Traditional View vs. A New Understanding

Traditionally, we've considered reading a process where children must first master phonics—learning to “sound out” words by connecting letters to sounds. While this works for many children, it can be frustrating and ineffective for others. Here's why: reading isn't just about connecting letters to sounds.

Think about how you read right now. You don't sound out each word - you recognize them instantly—like recognizing a friend's face—but also, like recognizing a word when you hear it. Our brains *perceive* written words like visually recognizable objects rather than like sound puzzles.

How Children Actually Learn Words

When we see a word, our brain doesn't process each letter one at a time. Instead, it takes in the whole letter sequence at once, much like how we perceive other things, like (-_-)zzz or 🤪. This whole word (or word form) recognition happens in a specific part of the brain called the visual word form area.

What's fascinating is that when it happens (for most words we read), this word recognition happens in hundredths of a second—*before* our brain connects it to sounds. This explains why some people struggle with spelling and sounding out words but can still learn to read effectively.

A Crucial Rule: No Guessing

Before we discuss this practice, there's one critical rule: never encourage guessing at words.

Guessing:

- Creates bad reading habits
- Leads to confusion and frustration
- Interferes with proper word learning
- Can harm reading comprehension

Instead of guessing, children should pause at unknown words and get help if needed. This builds confidence and accuracy in word recognition. Even with proper word recognition, we often are still guessing at meanings of words, sentences, or larger contexts. We don't want to add another layer of ambiguity by guessing the identity of a word itself.

A Gentler Practice: Engaged Aided Reading

I've developed an "Engaged Aided Reading" (EAR) practice that works with how our brains naturally perceive words. Here's how it works:

1. When your child encounters an unfamiliar word:
 - Have them name each letter in the word
 - Tell them the word (name it)
 - Ask them to name it. If they ask what it means, discuss it
 - Let them continue reading
2. The next time they see the word:
 - They might recognize it instantly
 - If not, repeat the process
 - No pressure, no sounding out required

This practice has helped many children, including those who struggled with traditional methods. For example, using this practice, one child went from not recognizing little words (like if and it) to reading chapter books in just a few months.

The Critical Element: Letter-wise Attention

The most important part of this practice is ensuring your child pays attention to each letter in unfamiliar words. Simply hearing the word isn't enough—their brain needs to connect the exact letter sequence to the word's identity. A way to achieve this is to have them name each letter aloud.

What This Looks Like in Practice

Here's a typical reading session using this practice:

1. Your child reads what they can
2. When they come to an unknown word, they pause
3. Ask them to name each letter in the word aloud
4. After they name all the letters, tell them the word
5. They name the word as well
6. They continue reading

For example, if your child encounters the word "bright" and doesn't recognize it:

Child: "The sky was... (pauses at 'bright')"

Parent: "Can you name each letter?"

Child: "b... r... i... g... h... t"

Parent: "bright"

Child: "The sky was bright. The sun was ..."

This letter-naming step is crucial—it's not just busy work. When your child names each letter, they're:

- Ensuring their attention touches every letter in sequence
- Creating stronger neural connections between the letter pattern and the word
- Building an accurate and larger sight word vocabulary

Common Questions

Q: Why name the letters instead of sounds?

A: Letter naming requires less cognitive effort than producing sounds, letting your child focus on the word's visual form. They'll naturally pick up letter-sound relationships over time or can learn from explicit instruction later.

Q: What if my child rushes through letter naming?

A: As long as they're identifying each letter it's ok. If you're not also looking at the word, maybe you'll need them to repeat it! The goal is attention to each letter, not speed or memorization.

Q: What if my child wants to guess the word?

A: Kindly but firmly discourage guessing. Remind them that pausing and asking for help with unknown words is always okay.

Q: Should we do this for every unknown word?

A: Yes, whenever practical. Each letter-naming encounter helps build stronger word recognition attention. If you have a voice assistant like Alexa or Google Home, you can use it to help with this practice. For example, your child can ask Alexa, "what does 'b... r... i... g... h... t' spell?"

Why This Works

When we remove the cognitive burden of sounding out words and prevent guessing, children can:

- Focus on understanding what they're reading
- Build confidence as readers
- Develop a love for reading
- More easily pick up patterns in word letter-sound units over time

Think of it like learning to speak—babies learn words by hearing and using them in context, not by breaking them into individual sounds. Reading can work similarly.

Results We've Seen

Using this practice, we've observed:

- Children learning to read more quickly and with less frustration
- Improved comprehension because mental energy isn't spent on decoding
- Greater enthusiasm for reading
- Better long-term reading success

In one study with struggling readers, children learned new words after just 1-2 exposures using this method, compared to the 4-14 exposures often needed with traditional methods.

What Parents Can Do

1. Read with your child daily, using an EAR practice
2. Consistently require letter naming for unknown words
3. Never encourage guessing—provide words when needed
4. Keep reading enjoyable and stress-free
5. Choose books that interest your child
6. Let them reread favorite books—this builds fluency naturally

Moving Forward

When trying this practice:

1. Make letter naming routine for unknown words
2. Keep the process gentle and matter-of-fact
3. Praise effort, attention to letters, persistence, and fluency
4. Don't rush—good attention to each letter is more important than reading speed
5. Remember that each letter-naming encounter is strengthening your child's reading brain

Think of each letter-naming moment as helping your child's brain photograph the word. Just as a camera must focus clearly on an image, your child's brain needs to focus on each letter to create a clear "word form id" for future recognition.

Final Thoughts

Remember, struggling with traditional reading instruction doesn't mean there's anything wrong with your child—they might just need a different approach that better matches how their brain works. The key is providing consistent support, requiring careful attention to letters, and never allowing guessing while keeping the entire process enjoyable and stress-free.

All the best in your child's reading journey. If you'd like additional support, feel free to schedule a call with me at

Read by EAR with Sara's Books — www.read-by-ear.com