



The Road to Reading Success— The Elementary School Years

One of a series of Parent Guides from

**THE
PARENT
INSTITUTE®**

Parent Guide

The Road to Reading Success—

The Elementary School Years

The Parent Institute

P.O. Box 7474

Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474

1-800-756-5525

www.parent-institute.com

Publisher: Doris McLaughlin. Publisher Emeritus: John H. Wherry, Ed.D.

Writer: Holly Smith. Senior Editor: Erika Beasley.

Staff Editors: Rebecca Miyares & Alison McLean. Translations Editor: Victoria Gaviola.

Production Manager: Sara Amon. Customer Service Manager: Peggy Costello.

Business Manager: Cynthia Lees. Distribution Manager: Marc Sasseville.

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Introduction

What's the biggest factor in your child's overall academic success? (Hint: it's not her* ability to memorize the entire Friday night TV lineup.) It's reading. Simply put, a child who reads well does well.

But research shows that good readers aren't born, they're made—often in word-rich homes where library cards outnumber video games. Mom and Dad, this is where you come in.

If you can get your elementary schooler to read for pleasure, you'll be giving her a gift that will pay dividends both now and later. Help her see that books are like passports to the world around her, and you'll be handing her that world.

This guide will give you the tools to do just that—turn your child into a lifelong reader. It'll also help you wade through some of the educational jargon associated with elementary-level reading. Because underneath the talk about phonics, sight words, decoding skills and phonemes, it's all about kids and books.

And, really, what's more wonderful than that?



**Each child is unique, so this publication alternates using masculine and feminine pronouns.*

Breaking Down the Basics

You might think of reading as involving three simple steps: Grab a snack, find a comfy chair and crack open a book. And for you, it probably is that straightforward. For elementary-schoolers, though, there's a little more to it.

As your child develops his reading skills, you may hear his teachers mention different components of the reading process, as well as the degree to which he is (or isn't) mastering them.

To help you better understand these components, following is a breakdown of the reading process itself, along with a few "signs of success" to watch for.

Components of the Reading Process

Decoding: (See also “Learning the Lingo” on page 5)

With this skill, a child uses what he knows about pronunciation and the sounds letters make to figure out written words. Decoding is similar to “sounding out,” but it requires him to have a deeper understanding of the letter-sound relationship (for example, such as knowing that, when used together, “p” and “h” make the /ff/ sound).

- **Sign of Success:** A child with strong decoding skills can generally figure out unfamiliar words. For instance, he’ll see “rhinoceros” and know that the “c” sounds like /sss/. If he encounters “through,” he’ll realize that the “gh” is silent.



Using Context Clues:

This skill allows kids to use the whole of what they’re reading to understand confusing sections or words. It also boosts their vocabulary. For instance, a child might encounter the following passage: “The pond was stagnant; the murky, unmoving water looked like mud.” Using context clues, he’ll be able to determine that “stagnant” means murky and unmoving. Not only has he learned a new word, he hasn’t had to interrupt his reading to do it.

- **Sign of Success:** Kids who use context clues tend not to stumble over terms while reading. They know to search for hints about the meaning of a confusing word. And when there aren’t any clues to be found, these kids head for the dictionary.

Comprehension:

This skill has to do with grasping the big picture. A child with good comprehension truly understands what he’s reading, despite the presence of unfamiliar words or nuanced ideas. He can also go over a story and get a sense of its tone, whether it’s funny, serious, silly or dry.



- **Sign of Success:** A child with good reading comprehension will be able to tell you about (or answer questions about) what he’s read. If he encounters an especially difficult text, he’ll help himself comprehend it by rereading tricky passages, highlighting important information, or taking notes as needed.

Fluency:

With this skill, readers “put it all together and make it flow.” Kids who read fluently are the ones most likely to enjoy reading for pleasure because they’re not constantly tripping over words. While fluency may come naturally to some children, it can also be cultivated through patience and practice. Like other components of reading, it shouldn’t be rushed.

- **Sign of Success:** Fluency is easy to spot (and hear). A child who reads fluently will get through stories at a reasonable clip. When he reads aloud, his speed will be conversational and pleasant to listen to.

Phonemic A-what-ness?

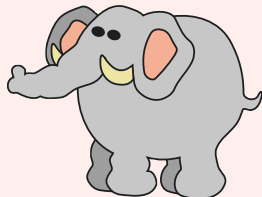
Actually, it's phonemic *awareness*, and many experts think it plays a huge role in your child's reading success.

"But I wasn't even aware I had phonemes!" you say. Relax, you don't—but words do. Phonemes are the smallest units of sound. When put together, they form words. Take *hat*, for example. A child with good phonemic awareness understands that *hat* is made up of three individual sounds: /hhh/ /aaa/ and /ttt/. Put another way, phonemic awareness helps her separate the parts from the whole.

If your elementary-schooler seems to be struggling with the idea that "sounds form words," there are plenty of ways you can help her grasp it (they're fun, too, so she won't suspect a thing!). Here are a few:

- **Start clapping.**

Syllables, that is. Shout out a multi-syllable word—like *elephant*—and have your child clap her hands for each of the three syllables (*el-e-phant*). To make it more fun, alternate your roles as shouter and clapper.



- **Make time for rhyme.**

Whether it's reading the notoriously rhyme-filled Dr. Seuss or playing a word game ("Who can name the most words that rhyme with 'sat' in 10 seconds?"), rhyming is a great way for kids to discover that changing a word's beginning sound creates an entirely new word.

- **Keep her guessing.** Start making letter sounds, and see how quickly she can blend them into a word. For instance, say, "/sss/ /kkk/ /iii/ ..." and see if she guesses *skip*. This is a good activity for long car trips, extended waits in line, or any time she's a captive audience.



Learning the Lingo

What's the difference between reading-related terminology and quantum physics? Quantum physics is easier to understand. Still, it's a good idea to have a basic grasp of certain "academic" reading terms, especially if you hear them tossed around in relation to your child. Below are some of these intimidating-sounding terms, along with their not-so-scary definitions:

A

- **Age equivalent scores:** A type of scoring that takes into account the average age of students who receive the same score as an individual child. The individual child's score, then, is said to be similar to younger students, to students his own age, or to older students. For instance, if an eight-year-old's reading assessment score is determined to be similar to that of the average twelve-year-old, the younger child would be considered advanced. (Can also be assessed by grade as "grade equivalent scores.")

- **Alliteration:** The repetition of an initial letter sound; often found in tongue-twisters ("Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers").
- **Assessment:** A gathering of data to determine a student's overall performance. While assessments may take into account individual test scores, they are not tests themselves. Rather, tests are but one component used in making an assessment.

- **Basal reader:** A book used to teach reading. Typically, the same words are used over and over in each succeeding book, with new words being added regularly.
- **Blending:** Combining individual sounds to form a word. For instance, /mmm/ /ooo/ /nnn/ can be blended into *moon*.

- **Cloze:** Fill-in-the-blank stories that require a child to use clues from the text to figure out what comes next. ("Jacob knew not to touch the fire because the flames were ____.") Cloze assessments can be used to evaluate things like reading comprehension and vocabulary.
- **Criterion-referenced assessment:** An assessment in which a child's score is compared against a predetermined "acceptable" score (instead of against other students). This score is then judged to be either above or below that standard.

- **Decoding:** When a child uses what he knows about the "spelling-sound relationships" and pronunciation rules to figure out how to pronounce written words.
- **Diphthong:** A sound that starts with one vowel and gradually changes to another vowel within the same syllable, such as /oi/ in *foil*.

- **Fluent reading:** Smooth, easy reading (silent or aloud).

Learning the Lingo (continued)

- **Listening comprehension:** refers to a child's understanding of what he hears, and can be broken into levels.
 - Lower-level comprehension can be seen in a child who only understands the basics of what he's hearing (and "what he's hearing" generally includes straightforward facts and simple vocabulary).
 - Higher-level comprehension involves the ability to grasp what's being said and also to draw inferences from it.
 - Children with high level comprehension can often understand complicated syntax and vocabulary.

L

- **Phoneme awareness:** the understanding that spoken words are made up of individual sounds. (See also "Phonemic A-what-ness?")
- **Phonics:** a type of reading instruction that emphasizes the sounds letters make and how these sounds are put together to form words.

- **Sight word:** a word that hasn't yet been taught that can be figured out based on the story's context or on other words a child knows.
- **Struggling reader:** any student who hasn't grasped the reading skills or fluency deemed necessary for children his age.
- **Syntax:** the rules for putting words together into meaningful sentences.

- **Whole Language:** a type of reading instruction that emphasizes the recognition of whole words rather than letter-sound relationships (or phonics).

Think Outside the Book

Look around your house. What do you see? Hopefully, it's books, magazines, newspapers and notepads. That's because children who grow up surrounded by words are the same ones who learn to love them. Make your home word-rich, and your child will get the message: There's something to this reading thing.

But "word-rich" means more than just having books around. In fact, if you have a reluctant reader, it may mean consciously moving beyond "curling up with a good book." Luckily, there are many ways you can make your home reader-friendly, whether your own little reader is reluctant or not.

Here are several:

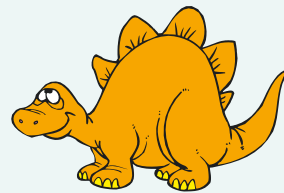
- **Read for pleasure yourself.** If your child regularly sees you with your nose in a book or magazine, she'll be more likely to want to read herself. Also, talk to her about what you're reading: "I just saw the strangest story in the newspaper"
- **Start a family book club.** It doesn't have to be formal, but why not set aside one night each week to chat about something you've all read? Better yet, do it during dinner—you'll get the benefit of each other's company and a good discussion.
- **Surround your child with letters and words.** From alphabet magnets on the fridge to writing tablets on the coffee table, give her plenty of opportunities to read, write and spell.

Think Outside the Book (continued)

More ways to make your home reader-friendly:

- **Enjoy wordy games.** From Scrabble to Hangman, there's no end to the "literary" games you can play. While you're at it, don't forget activities like 20 Questions, which will boost your child's vocabulary skills by encouraging her to come up with creative queries.
- **Limit screen time.** Books are fabulous, but they can have a tough time competing with flashy images. So don't let them. Instead, limit your child's screen time, and encourage her to spend more time reading. And, experts say, a child should never have a TV in her bedroom. (Keep cell phones and tablets out at night too!)
- **Develop incentives for reluctant readers.** If your child balks at books, make reading more attractive. Consider rewarding her—such as with stickers or a trip to the playground—for each age-appropriate book she tackles on her own.

- **Make reading a part of everyday life.** If you're cooking dinner, ask your child to read you a recipe. If you're busy folding laundry, suggest that she read you a magazine article while you finish.
- **Tie reading into the things she loves.** If your child is obsessed with dinosaurs, search out some titles on the Jurassic period. If she can't get enough of race-cars, go to the library for some books on how the speedsters work and where they're made.
- **Put books before movies.** Lots of popular children's stories—from *Harry Potter* to *Holes*—have leapt to the big screen. If your youngster is desperate to see one, let her—after she's read the book.



- **Read together.** Sharing stories doesn't have to be shelved along with your child's footie pajamas and pacifier. All kids, even older elementary schoolers, benefit from reading aloud with their parents. If yours balks, suggest that you take turns—you read a chapter to her, then she reads one to you (just don't doze off while she's reading!).
- **Take the pressure off.** Don't turn every trip to the library into a quest for the literary Holy Grail (i.e., the perfect book). Instead, give your child room to browse. Rather than herd her toward the same section each time, let her explore a different area. How about nonfiction? Poetry? Photography?
- **Give books as gifts.** Did you ever notice that birthdays and holidays seem to pop up every single year? To make these special occasions even more so, give books. It can be as simple as digging up one of your old favorites from the attic and giving it to your youngster, or as elaborate as splurging on a huge coffee table tome. Either way, it'll be priceless.



Beyond Bedtime

Few things give you that blissful, all-is-right-with-the-world feeling like snuggling up with your child and reading a bedtime story. But bedtime is only one of many terrific reading opportunities, and one that often goes by the wayside as kids grow. To keep your child in the habit of reading for pleasure, encourage him to indulge his bookishness during these times, too:

- **In the car.** Keep a small stack of “road reads” handy for the countless afternoons when you’re chauffeuring him to tee ball and band practice. Whether it’s comic books or leather-bound biographies, encourage your child to pass the miles by reading.
- **In the waiting room,** or checkout line ... or dry cleaners. A couple of paperbacks stashed in your purse—or your kid’s backpack—will be much-appreciated when a “quick errand” turns into a standing-in-line-for-20-minutes nightmare.
- **On the sidelines.** Yes, your child should probably focus on the game if he’s the team’s star center. But what if he’s just waiting while an older sibling finishes soccer practice? Hand him a book and prevent yet another senseless death from boredom.
- **In the morning.** On those rare occasions when the family’s not in a gotta-finish-breakfast-and-catch-the-bus frenzy, encourage your child to do some sunrise reading. It’s a nice alternative to brawling over who ate the last waffle.



Tools of the Trade

Want your home to be as reader-friendly as possible? Try stocking it with the following items:

- Books, magazines, comics and newspapers.
- Comfy reading spots (whether it’s an overstuffed chair or a big pillow on the floor).
- Quiet, TV-free spaces.
- Writing pads, a dictionary and a thesaurus.
- Pens, pencils, markers and anything else that encourages your child to put words on paper.
- An up-to-date, well-worn library card.



Stocking a Super Shelf

Perusing the library or bookstore for good children's titles can be a lot of fun—and more than a little intimidating. If you'd like some expert guidance, start with your local librarian. Give her an idea of your youngster's likes and dislikes, and ask her to come up with a few suggestions. Beyond that, try these resources for unearthing kid-friendly literary gems (along with tons of helpful reading-related information):



- **American Library Association**, www.ala.org.
- **International Literacy Association**, www.literacyworldwide.org.
- **Reading is Fundamental**, www.rif.org.
- **U.S. Department of Education**, www.ed.gov.

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*For more information about these and other materials for
parents to encourage learning in their children:*

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