



P
E
A
T
C
parent
educational
advocacy
training
center

Reading: What the Experts Say

The Lowdown on the National Reading Panel

By Cathy Healy

Most children are not natural born readers. In fact, reading is not a naturally occurring skill at all, but rather a complex process that requires a careful and systematic instructional approach according to the research gathered by the National Reading Panel. It is dependent upon a number of factors including a child's world knowledge, vocabulary and memory skills. Of all the skills children must acquire in their lives reading is the most critical one for future success in school as well as throughout life.

Creation of the National Reading Panel

In 1997, to respond to the alarming numbers of children who fail basic literacy tests,

Congress asked the Director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) to convene a national panel of reading experts to study the state of reading research in the US. Composed of reading research scientists, representatives of colleges of education, reading teachers, educational administrators and parents, the charge to the panel was:

- to analyze what we know about how children learn to read based on factual information,
- to develop strategies for the "rapid dissemination" of the information in order that schools be given the tools necessary to facilitate effective reading instruction, and
- to recommend what further research was needed to understand early reading development and instruction.

"...reading is the most critical [skill] for future success in school as well as throughout life."

The final report from the National Reading Panel was submitted to Congress in February of 1999. After careful consultation with leading experts in the field and previous research reports, the following topics for intensive study were selected:

- Alphabetic
- Phonemic Awareness Instruction
- Phonics Instruction
- Fluency
- Comprehension
 - Vocabulary Instruction
 - Text Comprehension Instruction
 - Teacher Preparation and Comprehension Strategies Instruction
 - Teacher Education and Reading Instruction
- Computer Technology and Reading Instruction



Rigorous standards for evaluating research literature, which are widely accepted by scientists involved in medical, behavioral, and social research,

were adopted in order that valid conclusions could be drawn from the studies. Children who were typical learners, children deemed at risk due to socio-economic circumstances, and children identified as having learning disabilities between pre-school and grade 12 took part in the studies.

The National Reading Panel reports that good reading programs are not simply phonics programs. Nor is the whole language approach to reading without merit. Good reading programs are balanced in that they incorporate opportunities for children to practice letter-sound correspondence in both easy to decode text and in good literature. Good reading programs include strategies for efficient word recognition, which strengthens opportunities to develop comprehension and memory skills. Good reading programs always provide access to good literature and high interest materials.

General Findings:

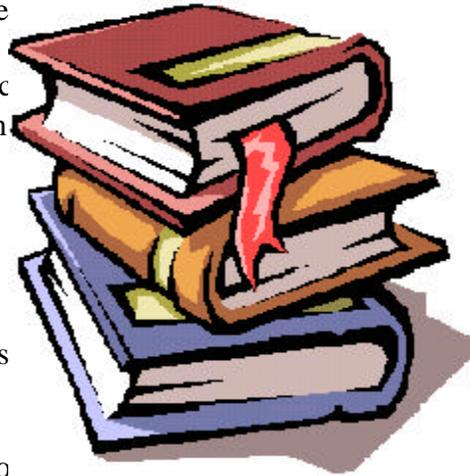
The Reading Panel has published its findings and has made several recommendations.

- Most teachers don't have a background in how to teach reading.
- The earlier a child learns to read the better chance the child has of excelling in school.
- Prevention of reading difficulties early on by providing balanced and research-based instructional programs is paramount.
- Children who have not learned to read by the third grade are at greater risk of not developing reading proficiency.
- Young children who demonstrate difficulties in learning to read require more explicit and intense instruction to help overcome the difficulties.
- Children who have not mastered reading by middle school can still be taught to read but require a greater intensity and individualized teaching.
- Oral reading and sustained silent reading for children with poor reading skills may not be effective instruction and further research is warranted.
- Vocabulary learning is a part of normal content area learning that may lead to better reading and listening comprehension and may improve achievement in general course work.

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic Awareness is a critical step in learning to read. Children need to understand that sounds correspond to symbols and that symbols

when joined together have meanings. The beginning reader must learn the connections between the 40 or so sounds of spoken English (the phonemes) and the 26 letters of the alphabet. Phonemes are the smallest



units constituting spoken language. In order for a beginning reader to learn how to connect printed symbols into sound, the would-be reader needs to understand that speech can be broken into small sounds (phonemes.) Phonemic awareness refers

to the ability to focus on and manipulate the smallest units of sounds in spoken words. This understanding that written spellings systematically represent the phonemes of spoken words is the alphabetic principle and is absolutely necessary and non-negotiable for the development of accurate and rapid word reading skills. Research now demonstrates that it is not the ear that understands that a spoken word like "cat" is divided into three sounds and that these sounds can be linked to the letters C-A-T. It is the brain that performs this function.

For some youngsters the brain easily processes this type of information. However, in many more children the skill is learned with difficulty and thus must be taught directly, explicitly and by a well-trained informed teacher. Even more evidence suggests that

"...in many children [phonemic awareness] is learned with difficulty and must be taught directly...by a well-trained teacher."

these early reading-related skills are fostered when children are read to at home during the preschool years, when they learn letter and number names and when they are introduced at very early ages to concepts of print and literacy activities.

One thing is certain: children who have not had explicit

instruction in phonemic awareness struggle with decoding words and will be too exhausted to comprehend what they have just read. Moreover incidental learning of phonemics from exposure to literature does not occur. Children need to learn the sounds of the letters, especially when combinations of letters blur sounds. But phonemic awareness is one step in a larger process.

Phonics Instruction

Phonics Instruction is a way of teaching reading that stresses the acquisition of letter-sound correspondences and their use to read and spell words. Phonics instruction is designed for beginners in the primary grades and for children having difficulty learning to read. Phonics rules are letter-sound correspondence rules. The names and sounds of the alphabet are phonics rules. Beyond the single letter-sound correspondences for consonants and vowels, phonics instruction covers long vowel correspondences such as a silent –e for long a, digraphs such as sh in ship, initial consonant blends such as sl in slap, and final consonant digraphs such as ck in back. Research indicates that programs focusing on the most frequent spelling patterns for the approximately 44 phonemes of English can bring children at risk for reading failure up to the national average in decoding words.

Fluency

Fluency means readers can read text with speed, accuracy, and proper expression. If the reader does not recognize words quickly enough, the meaning will be lost. Fluency depends upon well developed word recognition skills, but such skills do not inevitably lead to fluency. There is common agreement that fluency

develops from reading practice. What is not agreed upon is what form such practice should take. Without accurate and rapid word reading skills, comprehension and fluency will not follow. Reading with a partner or buddy, oral reading of familiar text, or text written by the reader are examples of instruction that seem to help fluency. It is less clear whether reading programs that include sustained silent reading for blocks of time each day have merit or not and the panel has recommended that further research to determine effective instructional methods for fluency is warranted.

Reading Comprehension

Reading Comprehension is the understanding of the written word, the understanding of the content that is being read, and the construction of meanings of the text. Reading is a purposeful and active process. A reader reads to understand, to remember what is understood and put the understanding to use. A reader can read a text to learn, to find out information, or to be entertained. Effective instructional strategies are those that involve the reader actively by asking questions through self-monitoring, cooperative learning opportunities. Suggestions for teachers include: explaining fully what it is they are teaching; what to do, why, how, and when; modeling their own thinking processes; encouraging students to ask questions and discuss possible answers among themselves; and keeping students engaged in their reading via providing tasks that demand active involvement. Explicit, formal instruction in comprehension strategies is believed to improve text understanding and use.



Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center

Supporting ALL Virginians
with
Offices in Springfield & Richmond
and
Teams throughout the Commonwealth

PEATC
6320 Augusta Drive #1200
Springfield, VA 22150
703-923-0010 (Voice/TTY)
703-569-6200 (en Español)
800-869-6782 (VA parents only)
703-923-0030 (Fax)
E-mail: partners@peatc.org
Website: www.peatc.org