

# Some thoughts on the teaching of reading

- 1 When children are born they acquire the ability to speak words aloud and gradually to associate those words with meaning. Mama, dada, kitty, doggie, hotdog, spoon, MINE, NO ... this process is a natural process that comes by associating words in a child's spoken vocabulary with the words parents, siblings, and others use in daily conversation at home. As the child grows and learns to associate more and more words with items and concepts like love, good, bad, wind, ocean, lake, their spoken vocabulary expands.
- 2 Picture books with a few words repeated over and over become favorites with children and many memorise the words of the story without really knowing the full meaning conveyed by the story. Some parents begin to say the letter sounds of the words, while many do not. Children usually learn the alphabet quickly and with much repetition they can repeat it for parents and others with great delight.
- 3 By the time children are aged four or five, their spoken vocabulary includes several thousand words that they can talk about, use and understand. The background of children entering preschool and kindergarten varies greatly but even those who have not been exposed to books, or have not been read to by their parents, have a sizable spoken vocabulary that they can use effectively in communicating with others. That vocabulary is far greater than the few hundred words they are required to memorise in most schools today.
- 4 Formal schooling, beginning in kindergarten, is where a child is taught to read words that are already in their spoken vocabulary. There is no problem with them comprehending the words in the text, if attention is paid to how these spoken words are introduced. Decodable books are often used effectively in this process so that unusual word spellings are not a hindrance from code mastery. However, when 'big books' or library books are used before the letter/sounds of the wide variety of words included have been taught, a child has no choice but to try to guess at new words where the letter/sounds have not yet been taught. This process, if followed systematically, directly, sequentially and completely should be complete for most children by the end of grade two at the latest. 'Decoding' is not taught year after year if it is taught properly. It is a skill to be mastered early and well.
- 5 For a child who has not been taught any of the letter/sound combinations the lines on a page of print are no more than squiggles. There is no meaning to them, unless the entire word has been memorised. Most whole word programs require that children memorise lists of most frequently used word, such as the Dolche list, but that approach limits them to the number of words they can memorise, rather than providing them with the tools to unlock ANY new word in the English lexicon.



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- 6 The purpose of teaching children from the outset the letter/sounds of ALL of the 26 letters, the 45 sounds they represent, and the many ways to spell those sounds, is that this the most effective way to provide the tools for any child to become a proficient reader. Once this system of sound symbols has been mastered, then all new vocabulary words can be spoken aloud with meaning and can be understood as new subject matter is taught. Some would say reading to learn.
  - 7 There are a significant number of words beyond the spoken vocabulary that a child already has mastered orally; that is, what they “can talk about and understand”.
  - 8 For many years, children were encouraged to do “uninterrupted sustained silent reading (USSR)”. The problem with this approach is that a teacher could not know if a child was really reading and understanding the words. The value of this approach is certainly questionable unless the ability to decode the words and the ability to attack new words and learn their meaning is taught. Reading aloud is the only way that a teacher can really know if a child is truly ‘reading’. Even the tests given that measure reading ability are flawed, in my view, because they do not accurately measure how well a child has mastered the skill of reading.
  - 9 Learning to read is a skill. It is not a ‘natural’ process like learning to speak. And yet the dominant philosophy and approach to reading instruction for the past half century and more has assumed that it IS a natural process. Thus, many children never break free and learn new vocabulary words beyond what they can memorise. With more than a million words in the English lexicon, and at least 60,000 or more used in an adult vocabulary, the handicap placed on children who are never taught the decoding skills, hampers many for life.
  - 10 I know of NO one who believes that learning to decode the English spelling system is an end in itself. This is a straw man that has been promoted to discredit those who encourage learning the code and how it works early in the formal education of ALL children. As it is often said, decoding is an essential, although not sufficient, step in learning to read.
  - 11 If ALL children entering formal schooling were taught this decoding skill early, systematically, and completely, then the number of students labeled as dyslexic, or as struggling readers would be dramatically diminished. It has been proven, beyond any reasonable doubt, that ALL children would benefit from this practice.
  - 12 All of the interesting and very helpful discussions on listservs like the DDOLL network contribute to the mechanics of how to apply a more effective way to teach a child to read. However, until there is a ‘sea change’ in how reading educators accept the fact that reading is a “skill” then not much will change. We will continue to deny children the ability to become truly ‘literate’. Reading science has settled this endless war over methodology. It is up to the adults among us to apply it in the classroom.
  - 13 In my view, and experience I think this is one way to describe the ‘natural’ way and progression for how one acquires the skill of reading proficiently, and thus help all children become truly literate individuals.
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- Robert Sweet founded the National Right to Read Foundation in 1993, of which he is currently the President. He has held positions at the US Department of Education, the National Institute for Education, and the White House Domestic Policy Council. He has also held the positions of Administrator for Juvenile Justice and Associate Director for the Children’s Bureau at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In 2005, he retired from public service after serving for eight years as a Professional Staff Member on the US House Committee on Education and the Workforce where he focused on improving reading instruction in the United States. He was the primary author of Reading First and Early Reading First.  
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