

Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction

Phonics Overview

What Is Phonics?

Phonics is the relationship between written language and spoken language, and how to use these relationships to read and spell words. Written language is comprised of letters and graphemes (combinations of letters) which correspond to individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken language.¹ The process of converting a printed word into its spoken form is called decoding, and conversely, encoding is the reverse process which we refer to as spelling. Phonics incorporates both decoding and encoding. Effective phonics instruction develops understanding of the alphabetic principle, incorporates phonemic awareness, provides sufficient practice in reading words, leads to automatic word recognition, and is an essential part of a comprehensive reading program.

Why is Phonics Important?

Phonics instruction helps beginning readers understand the relationship between letters and sounds in order to make meaning of written language. It teaches students to use these relationships to read and write. Students who receive systematic and explicit phonics instruction are better readers than those who do not.² The National Reading Panel found that systematic and explicit phonics instruction:

- Significantly improves students' reading and spelling in Kindergarten and Grade 1
- Significantly improves students' ability to comprehend what they read
- Is beneficial for all students regardless of their socioeconomic status
- Is effective in helping to prevent reading difficulties among students who are at risk
- Benefits students who are having trouble learning to read³

Evidence-Based Instructional Methods to Improve Phonics Instruction

- Systematically teach letter-sound relationships in a clearly defined sequence
- Explicitly instruct students on the major sound/spelling relationships of both consonants and vowels
- Utilize blending routines⁴ that include sound-by-sound blending, continuous blending, and whole word blending
- Provide multiple opportunities for sounding out and reading words
- Provide frequent and substantial practice in applying knowledge of letter-sound correspondence as students learn to read and write.
- Engage students in activities that develop automaticity with decoding and reading words in isolation
- Provide opportunities for students to practice reading and rereading decodable texts to build automaticity
- Word work activities such as sorting, the use of Elkonin boxes with letters, word building and dictation will afford students opportunities to practice decoding and encoding through building, manipulating, and sorting words

¹ Honig, B., Diamond, L., & Gutlohn, L. (2013). *Teaching reading sourcebook*. Novato, CA: Arena Press.

² National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. NIH Publication No. 00-4769.

³ Armbruster, B.B., et. al (2006). *Put reading first*. National Institute for Literacy: The Partnership for Reading.

⁴ Florida Center for Reading Research. Phonics instructional routines. Retrieved October 12, 2017 from http://fcrr.org/assessment/ET/routines/routinesPhonics_K1.html.

- Provide opportunities for students in fifth grade and beyond to decode multisyllabic words⁵

What is a Strong Phonics Instructional Sequence⁶?

The following is a general guideline for an instructional sequence:

- Teach short-vowel sounds (in VC and CVC words) before long-vowel sounds (in CVVC words).
- Teach consonants and short vowels in combination so that words can be generated as early as possible.
- Continuous consonants should be taught first; *f, l, m, n, r,* and *s*. These are sounds that can be stretched or sustained without distortion and make blending easier, ensuring early success and mastery.
- Teach high utility letters such as *m, s,* and *t* before lower-utility letters such as *x* or *z*.
- Move from simple to complex sound-spellings. Teach single consonants before consonant blends and digraphs. Teach short vowels before long vowels, variant vowels, and diphthongs.
- Separate visually and auditorily confusing letters and sound (e.g., *e/l, b/d*) in the instructional sequence.

⁵ Florida Center for Reading Research. Phonics instructional routines. Retrieved October 12, 2017 from http://fcrr.org/assessment/ET/routines/routinesPhonics_K1.html.

⁶ Honig, B., Diamond, L., & Gutlohn, L. (2013). *Teaching reading sourcebook*. Novato, CA: Arena Press.