

Learning to read

In a nutshell

- Learning to read builds on a foundation of spoken language. Therefore, it is important that reading instruction is given by using the local language that is spoken in children's homes by the parents.
- The child needs to become aware that spoken words can be broken down into syllables, and syllables can be segmented into phonemes or sounds.
- Knowing letter names and shapes helps children to begin processing graphic cues in printed words.
- The acquisition of alphabetic knowledge and ability with letter-sound correspondence are of crucial importance to be able to read words.
- The term 'reading difficulties' is usually employed in reference to a broad group of different types of reading problems, including accurate and fluent reading and reading comprehension. The child has problems in learning to read in spite of proper reading instruction using the language the child knows well.

In most countries, formal reading instruction begins when children enter school. However, literacy development starts to emerge long before then. Literacy skills build on a foundation of spoken language and it is assumed that when children start school, their spoken language is sufficient to support learning to read.

The acquisition of alphabetic knowledge and ability with letter-sound relationships are of pivotal importance to

beginning reading. The beginning reader has to discover how printed words relate to spoken words, because reading involves translating printed symbols into pronunciations. This process requires mapping across modalities from vision (written forms of letters) to audition (spoken sounds). When a child sees and hears spellings paired with the pronunciation of a word, they need to pay attention to how at least some of the letters symbolise phonetic units detected in the pronunciation. Knowing letter names and shapes helps children to begin processing graphic cues in printed words and phonetic associations between word spellings and pronunciations. Therefore, the aim of reading instruction is to help the learner 'crack' this code to fully utilise connections between the letters and sounds they encounter in words¹Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K. (2018). Ending the reading wars: Reading acquisition from novice to expert. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 19, 5–51..

Children need to become aware that words can be broken down into constituent parts (such as syllables), and that in turn, syllables can be segmented into phonemes. The acquisition of 'phoneme awareness' is a critical step in the development of decoding skill to enable the identification of syllables and words, particularly where they are unfamiliar.

However, in every classroom in every country we can recognise children who struggle to master reading skills. Some of these children gradually overcome their initial difficulty and acquire basic reading skills by practicing reading. But many struggling readers continue to encounter reading difficulties throughout their school years, and some continue to struggle with reading in adulthood²Eklund, K., Torppa, M., Sulkunen, S., Niemi, P., & Ahonen, T. (2018). Early cognitive predictors of PISA reading in children with and without family risk for dyslexia. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 64 (2018), 94-103.³Elliot, J.G. & Grigorenko, E.L. (2014). The Dyslexia

Debate. Cambridge University press..

The term 'reading difficulties' is usually employed in reference to a broad group of different types of reading problems, including accurate and fluent decoding and reading comprehension. Children who have severe problems with single-word reading (decoding) and/or reading fluency of text are most often diagnosed with dyslexia or reading disability⁴Elliot, J.G. & Grigorenko, E.L. (2014). The Dyslexia Debate. Cambridge University press..

Reference

Research briefs

[Early Cognitive Predictors of PISA Reading in Children with and without Family Risk for Dyslexia](#)

[Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition from Novice to Expert](#)

[Dyslexia – Early Identification and Prevention: Highlights from the Jyväskylä Longitudinal Study of Dyslexia](#)

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