

# Top 10 Things You Should Know About Reading

By: [Reading Rockets](#)



Get the basic facts about what it takes for a young child to learn to read, best practices in teaching reading, the importance of oral language in literacy development, why so many children struggle, and more in this overview.

## 1. Too many American children don't read well

Thirty-three percent of American fourth graders read below the "basic" level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress reading test. The "basic" level is defined as "partial mastery of the prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade." ([NAEP Reading Report Card](#))

## 2. An achievement gap exists

Many students enter kindergarten performing below their peers and remain behind as they move through the grades. Differences in language, exposure to print and background experiences multiply as students confront more challenging reading material in the upper grades. There is a well-established correlation between prior knowledge and reading comprehension: students who have it, get it. Students who don't, don't. The differences are quantifiable as early as age 3 (Hart & Risley, 2003). For some subgroups of students, the reading failure rate is even higher than their same-age peers: 52% of black students, 51% of Hispanic students, and 49% of students in poverty all scored Below Basic on the NAEP assessment. High-need students have chronic difficulty in the classroom, and teachers must be prepared to meet the challenges they face.

## 3. Learning to read is complex

Reading is a complex process that draws upon many skills that need to be developed at the same time. Marilyn Adams (1990) compares the operation of the reading system to the operation of a car. Unlike drivers, though, readers also need to:

- Build the car (develop the mechanical systems for identifying words)
- Maintain the car (fuel it with print, fix up problems along the way, and make sure it runs smoothly)

- And, most importantly, drive the car (which requires us to be motivated, strategic, and mindful of the route we're taking)

Cars are built by assembling the parts separately and fastening them together. "In contrast, the parts of the reading system are not discrete. We cannot proceed by completing each individual sub-system and then fastening it to one another. Rather, the parts of the reading system must grow together. They must grow to one another and from one another."(Adams et al., 1990, pp.20-21).

The ultimate goal of reading is to make meaning from print, and a vehicle in good working order is required to help us reach that goal.

## 4. Teachers should teach with the end goal in mind

Because learning to read is complex, the most accomplished teachers learn to teach with the end goal of readers and learners in mind. Teachers working with young children learn to balance the various components of reading, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension in their everyday teaching. The very best teachers integrate the components while fostering a love of books, words, and stories.

## 5. Kids who struggle usually have problems sounding out words

Difficulties in decoding and word recognition are at the core of most reading difficulties. Poor readers have difficulty understanding that sounds in words are linked to certain letters and letter patterns. This is called the "alphabetic principle."

The reason many poor readers don't attain the alphabetic principle is because they haven't developed phonemic awareness — being aware that words are made up of speech sounds, or phonemes (Lyon, 1997). When word recognition isn't automatic, reading isn't fluent, and comprehension suffers.

## 6. What happens before school matters a lot

What preschoolers know before they enter school is strongly related to how easily they learn to read in first grade. Three predictors of reading achievement that children learn before they get to school are:

- The ability to recognize and name letters of the alphabet
- General knowledge about print (understanding, for example, which is the front of the book and which is the back and how to turn the pages of a book)
- Awareness of phonemes (the sounds in words)

Reading aloud together builds these knowledge and skills. As a result, reading aloud with children is the single most important activity for parents and caregivers to do to prepare children to learn to read. (Adams, 1990).

## 7. Learning to read is closely tied to learning to talk and listen

Families and caregivers need to talk and listen to young children in order to help them learn a lot of the skills they will need for reading. When a child says, "Cook;" and her father says, "Would you like a cookie?" he is building her knowledge of vocabulary, sentence structure, syntax, and purposes for communication — all of which will help her become a reader in later years. When a

caregiver sings rhymes and plays word games with the children she cares for, she is helping them recognize the sounds in words (phonemic awareness). Children with language, hearing, or speech problems need to be identified early so they can receive the help they need to prevent later reading difficulties.

## 8. Without help, struggling readers continue to struggle

Many children learn to read by first grade regardless of the type of instruction they receive. The children who don't learn, however, don't seem able to catch up on their own.

More than 88 percent of children who have difficulty reading at the end of first grade display similar difficulties at the end of fourth grade (Juel, 1988). And three-quarters of students who are poor readers in third grade will remain poor readers in high school (Shaywitz et al., 1997). These facts highlight the importance of providing a strong foundation for reading birth through age five.

## 9. With help, struggling readers can succeed

For 85 to 90 percent of poor readers, prevention and early intervention programs can increase reading skills to average reading levels. These programs, however, need to combine instruction in phoneme awareness, phonics, spelling, reading fluency, and reading comprehension strategies, and must be provided by well-trained teachers (Lyon, 1997).

As many as two-thirds of reading disabled children can become average or above-average readers if they are identified early and taught appropriately (Vellutino et al., 1996; Fletcher & Lyon, 1998). These facts underscore the value of having a highly trained teacher in every classroom.

## 10. Teaching kids to read is a team effort

Parents, teachers, caregivers, and members of the community must recognize the important role they can play in helping children learn to read. The research shows that what families do makes a difference, what teachers do makes a difference, and what community programs do makes a difference. It's time for all those who work with children to work together to ensure that every child learns to read. It is our shared responsibility.

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