Helping Your Child Become a Reader

2024 Edition

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Cover art by Laura Morrill

Introduction

Learning to read and write is exciting for children. The goal of this booklet is to provide caregivers with some information about how they can help young learners become readers and writers. We address some of the common questions and concerns that caregivers pose. The questions often focus on how to help children learn to read and spell individual words. While this is certainly important, it is also important to keep in mind that communication is the ultimate purpose of reading and writing. Therefore, when reading and writing to or with children, it is important to help them think about the meaning of what is being read or written.

The booklet addresses questions that caregivers have asked us as reading researchers, psychologists, teachers, and parents. You might want to begin by scanning through the **Table of Contents** to find the questions that most interest you about your young reader at this point.

A Note about Written Materials

There are lots of materials available to help children develop reading and writing skills. These include books (both those meant to be read *to* children and those intended to be read *by* children), magazines, song lyrics, websites, road signs, cereal boxes, etc. In this booklet, we use the word 'text' to refer to written materials that are longer than a single word or phrase. Thus, books, magazines, internet articles, poems, song lyrics, etc. are all considered to be 'texts' as are the things that children write that are longer than a word or phrase.

1. How can I encourage my child to like reading?

We are all more enthusiastic about doing things we enjoy. Children who develop a love for reading (and writing) are more likely to become strong readers and writers. Therefore, encouraging children to like/love reading and writing is extremely important. Below we describe some of the things that caregivers might do to encourage this love when reading to and with children.

BE ENTHUSIASTIC!! Share your love of reading and your interest in and excitement about the things you read for your own purposes and the texts you read to/with children.

Read, enjoy, and learn from texts together. It is important to read to children both before they begin to read on their own and as their reading skills develop. Reading to children allows them to experience more complicated texts than they can read on their own. It will also allow them to focus more on enjoying, understanding, and learning from texts. Choose texts, authors, and topics that are of interest to children including both texts that tell stories and texts that provide information about areas such as science, nature, and history. Reading multiple texts on the same or related topics can help children to better understand and learn about that topic and expand their vocabularies.

Discuss and enjoy the texts you read together. Some ideas to prompt discussion during and after reading include:

- Talk about what the characters are doing and why.
- Make predictions about what will happen next in the text based on what has already happened. Explain the thinking behind your predictions and encourage the child to do the same. For example, you might say something like "I think that….because….." Or, you might ask "What do you think will happen next? …. What makes you think so?" Then, read to find out if your thinking and/or the child's matches the author's thinking. Conversations such as these help children to develop into active readers who think about the author's message as they read.
- Compare characters, events, and/or information from different texts to people and experiences in your own and/or the children's lives.
- Share your feelings about what happens in texts and ask children to share their feelings as well. Talk about characters' thoughts and feelings and invite your child to do so.
- Help children understand the purposes for reading and writing. To encourage interest in learning to read and write, children need to understand that people use reading and writing every day and in all kinds of ways. Children need to know that people read to get information AND for pleasure**.** Try engaging children in reading and writing for everyday purposes such as: leaving/sending messages, making and using shopping lists, making plans, accessing information on the internet, sharing their learnings, etc.

- Talk about what you learned from reading, especially what you found fascinating/puzzling/surprising, etc. Have genuine conversations about the interesting parts of the text you read. Consider developing questions based on what you have learned that you may attempt to answer by reading another text. For example, "I was so surprised to learn that a big whale eats the equivalent of 80,000 Big Macs in one day! I wonder how much a shark eats?"

When listening to a child read:

Be a supportive partner. When children begin to read texts on their own, be encouraging and enthusiastic. Listen carefully to their reading and help them when they come to words they don't yet know. Even though you may, at times, be surprised that a child has trouble identifying some of the words, be careful not to make the child feel pressured or anxious. Rather than saying something like "You know that word! You just read it on the other page!" consider saying something like "Let's think about that word, what are the sounds for the letters?". Then, you might say "Now let's think about a word with (some of) those sounds that would make sense here."

Note that, early on, children may only know the sounds for a few letters and, depending on the instruction they receive in school, may only have had the opportunity to read texts that include the sounds that have been taught. However, in reading with caregivers, children will often be interested in reading texts that include words which they cannot yet fully sound out. In these instances, it can be useful to read the text to the child and then offer the child the opportunity to read part (or all) of it themselves, relying on the letters and sounds they do know and their familiarity with the text.

Of course, if children know little or nothing about printed language, they are apt to "read" books by retelling stories that have been read to them. They do not know what printed words are, but they know what adults do with books and want to do the same.

It is also important to note that, in English, there are many words that cannot be accurately sounded out by beginning readers. Consider, for example, the words *was* and *they* which, when "sounded out", would rhyme with *pass* and *key,* respectively. For such words, it can be useful to tell children the word and, particularly for words that occur often, to encourage them to name the word and name the letters in the word a few times. This conversation can help them learn the word so that they can identify it more easily in the future.

Avoid asking children to read when they are tired. For beginners, reading takes a lot of concentration and effort. Asking a tired child to read can lead to unpleasant experiences. If such experiences occur often, the child might come to think of reading as being unpleasant.

Promote intrinsic motivation. Motivation plays an important role in learning to read and write and in learning more generally. We want children to be "intrinsically" motivated to engage in reading and writing – that is, to want to read and write because of the pleasure and satisfaction that they bring. Motivation can be promoted when the caregiver is supportive, gives children some choice about what they read and write, helps them to pursue their interests, and provides lots of opportunities for easy reading.

In addition, it is important to avoid offering rewards to children for reading or to do so only on a *very* limited basis[1]. We want children to see reading as a source of pleasure and as a form of entertainment. Rewarding them for engaging in reading can send just the opposite message (it is something one does to get a reward). Instead of saying things like "Let's get your reading done and then you can watch TV" (which makes reading a job and TV the reward), caregivers can treat reading as a reward. For example, "Let's get this room cleaned up and then we'll have time for two books!"

Noticing what children do well and telling them also helps to promote intrinsic motivation. It is helpful to be specific and focus on children's efforts. Tell children exactly what was done well. For example, rather than saying, "Great reading!" caregivers might say "You're thinking like a reader! You thought about the sounds of the letters in the word. That helped you figure out what the word might be, then you checked to see if your word made sense in the sentence."

As children's reading and writing skills develop, it is useful to engage them in thinking about how they are changing as readers and writers. It might help to remind them of how easy it is to do something that was once challenging to them (like walking or riding a bike). Helping them understand that this progress will happen with reading and writing too can be very motivating… as long as they are not frequently being asked to read or write things that are too challenging for them.

2. What kinds of texts should my child be reading?

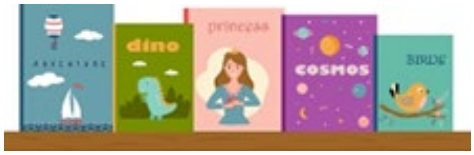
Texts the child chooses. Let children have some choice in what to read – even if it is the same text(s) over and over again. We are all more interested in reading things that we like. Further, for children who are in the process of learning to read, the sense of fluency that comes with repeatedly reading the same text can be very encouraging.

Easy texts. Provide lots of opportunities for children to read texts that are fairly easy for them. This can make reading more enjoyable and help to build motivation for reading. When children are asked to read texts that are too hard, they can become frustrated and lose confidence.

[1] Rewards may be necessary to get some very reluctant readers to read. But, if caregivers are successful in finding reading materials that interest them and that they can read without too much difficulty, the rewards should be eliminated/forgotten about as soon as possible.

Children's teachers and librarians can help with selecting texts that are right for children's current reading skills.

More challenging texts. Sometimes, because children are interested in a topic, they might want to read something that is too challenging. For example, they might want to read about the life cycle and/or behaviors of a particular animal, how to assemble a toy, or how to get to the next level of a game. In these cases, caregivers can provide support by reading the more challenging parts out loud with children. Or, caregivers might read the text to children first and then listen to them read it. Providing an appropriate level of support can help children see the importance and benefits of reading to learn and keep them motivated.



Dictated Stories. Many children enjoy telling stories or composing messages that someone else writes for them (or types on a computer or phone). These stories sometimes become long and involved and often include the child as a main character (for example, as the star of a sporting event or as the subject of an adventure story or fantasy). Often children are able to read these stories even though they contain many words they might not otherwise be able to identify – especially when they have multiple opportunities to read them (with assistance). Stories children have created are easier for them to read because they already know the storyline. After all, the child is the author and so has a sense of what words to expect. Children who enjoy writing/dictating stories will often enjoy reading them over and over to family members and friends. The more reading children do, the easier reading gets and the more likely that previously unfamiliar printed words will be readily identified.

Note that children who are inclined to dictate lengthy stories sometimes forget aspects of the story as they get deeper into it. This can make it difficult for them to read the story. In such cases, it can be useful to have the child read each sentence after it has been written – "to make sure it says what they want it to say". Then, every few sentences or so, the child can be encouraged to read everything that has been written so far. This process will help them remember the story as far as it has gotten and decide what should come next. This process may have the added benefit of helping them to learn to read some of the words in the text effortlessly.

3. Sometimes my child brings home books to practice reading that they have already memorized! What should I do?

Children at the earliest phases of learning to read have a lot to learn about printed language. They need to learn concepts such as:

- Spoken language is composed of individual elements called "words." In speech, individual words may not be evident. For example, the phrase "I want to" which is three words could be perceived as one "iwanna." As they are learning about print, young readers need to learn to perceive these individual elements and where individual words begin and end.

- The letters in printed words stand for sounds in spoken words.
- In English, print goes from left to right, and, when there is more than one line of text, the reader moves back to the left for each new line of text.
- There are small spaces between letters within a word and larger spaces between words.

Teachers sometimes use very simple books to help children develop these basic understandings. These books sometimes follow a pattern, with many of the same words on each page (I see the mouse. I see the pig. etc.). The word that changes from page to page is signaled by the picture. These books allow children to focus their attention on learning and practicing some of these understandings without having to struggle to figure out how to pronounce every word.

When listening to children read memorized books, keep the purposes of these kinds of books in mind.

- Focus on helping children point to each word as it is said. This will help them to develop an understanding of what a printed word is and to understand that, for each word said, there is a corresponding printed word on the page. As needed, demonstrate how to point and say each of the words. (As an added benefit, having children point to the words may make it more likely that some of the most frequently occurring words in the book, such as *the, is, like,* and *see*, will become familiar to them. Over time, this may allow children to read those words in other contexts without relying on a repeating pattern.)
- If they have the needed knowledge, encourage children to use the first letter of the word that changes from one page to the next to help identify the word. For example, if the picture shows an animal that could be either a mouse or a rat, if a child knows the sound for the letter *M* and is looking at the word "mouse" in the book, it is useful to encourage the child to think about what the first sound in the word will be and then use the picture to help settle on the word.
- Occasionally ask children to count the number of words on a page or the number of letters in a word. This helps them learn the difference between letters and words. The difference between letters and words can be confusing for beginning readers because some of the first words they learn (*I* and *a*) are single letters.

In addition, be sure to talk about what is happening in the books. For these types of books, it is necessary to pay attention to the pictures to understand what the book is about. From early on we want children to understand that the purpose of print is to communicate.

What Not to Do

On occasion, caregivers report having covered the pictures in books with repeating patterns and/or asking children to start at the end of the book and read the book "backwards." These practices can confuse children about the concepts such books are designed to help teach. Further, doing so can frustrate children and thereby interfere with their reading progress. The goal is for beginning readers to view reading as pleasurable and interesting activities.

4. Sometimes my child seems to spend more time looking at the pictures than reading. Is this a prblem?

No. At early points in development, the letters in printed words should be used in combination with the pictures to determine the identity of unfamiliar printed words. In books written for beginning readers, the pictures are often intended to help children figure out the words that they cannot yet read by using only the letters and their sounds. Also, the pictures often provide the beginning reader with important information about what's happening in the book that the words do not tell. Therefore, children will understand the book better, and find reading easier and more interesting, if they look carefully at the pictures. Looking at the pictures is generally something to encourage while also encouraging the child to increasingly attend to the letters in unknown words. Early on, they may only be able to pay attention to one or two letters in an unfamiliar word – typically the first letter(s). As they gain experience, children increasingly need to look carefully at more of the print information. If your child is not looking at the words while "reading," encourage them to run their finger under the print and/or demonstrate how to do this when you read to them. This may help your child begin to focus on the print and realize that readers read the printed words.

5. Children's teachers often talk about phonics instruction. What is phonics and what does it have to do with reading and spelling development?

Phonics skills involve knowing the connections between individual letters and the sounds they represent and groups of letters and their sounds – such as *th*, *sh*. Some letters and letter combinations represent more than one sound such as the *ai* combination in *paid* and *plaid*. Learners use phonics skills to "sound out" or "decode" words that have not been directly taught. This is an important way in which they learn to effortlessly identify the thousands of printed words they ultimately need to know. While the variability in the relationships between some of the letters and their sounds can sometimes make it challenging for children to use their developing phonics skills, engagement in reading and writing can help them to become more accurate and automatic with these skills.

6. Why is my child sometimes reluctant to sound out unknown words. What should I do when this happens?

Sometimes children are reluctant to sound out words because they do not yet have the needed phonics skills (see Question 5). They can also get confused or frustrated by words that cannot be fully sounded out. Or they may not be familiar with the sentence structure in which the word occurs or the word may not be in their spoken vocabulary.

When readers have a lot of experiences in which they cannot accurately identify words, they can lose (or not develop) confidence in their ability to figure out unknown words and, therefore, may be unwilling to try. This is one of the reasons we encourage caregivers to provide children with lots of opportunities to read books that are easy for them – that is, books in which they can already identity most, if not all, of the words, either because they already know them or because they have the skills to figure them out. When children encounter words that they cannot sound out completely, they can be encouraged to use the context (e.g., the rest of the sentence) to help adjust their attempted pronunciation so that the word **does** make sense.

Since beginning readers do not have fully developed knowledge of the relationships between letters and the sounds they can represent nor of larger spelling patterns (such as *ight*), figuring out unfamiliar words can be challenging. Further, as noted in Question 5, English includes some spelling patterns that are pronounced in multiple ways. For example, the *ea* combination is pronounced differently in *beat*, *bread*, and *break*.

Because the English writing system is not entirely consistent in terms of how sounds are represented, sounding out words can be frustrating and may lead learners to be reluctant to try. Helping learners recognize and use additional sources of information (such as sentence meanings and pictures) that are available in the text can help. The suggestions below can be used *in addition to* encouraging children to use their phonics skills. These other sources of information can be especially helpful for words that have spellings that are somewhat irregular/unusual – such as the words *said* and *they* or words that include letter combinations with variable pronunciations – such as the different ways that the *ow* combination can be pronounced – as in the words *snow* and *how*.

Note

Many skilled readers perceive words as being decodable when the words are not entirely so. As a result, skilled readers may encourage learners to sound out words that cannot be accurately identified using phonics skills alone. For example, using their existing phonics skills, children might pronounce the 'ou' in the word 'young' in the way it is pronounced in the word 'out'. This would, of course, not produce a real word.

- **Think of a word that would make sense in the sentence**. It is important for learners to understand that the purpose of reading is to understand what is written. Encouraging readers to check whether their attempt at a word makes sense in the sentence is critical to promoting reading comprehension – which is the ultimate goal of reading. If a child's first attempt doesn't result in a real word and/or is a real word that doesn't make sense in the sentence, there are a number of options learners can be encouraged to try[2]:

  - **Check the pictures –** Especially for readers at early points in development, pictures are provided in texts to help them "read" words that they do not yet have the phonics skills to identify. Readers at this point should consider the picture AND the letter-sound information they already know. This suggestion would only be useful IF the picture provides information that could be helpful in identifying unknown words.

    Try saying…

    "Sometimes the pictures can help you figure out what a word could be. Let's think about the sounds for the letters in this word and think about what this picture could be."

  - **Read past the puzzling word –** Sometimes reading past a puzzling word, to get the broader context of the sentence, will give the reader a better idea of what the puzzling word might be. (Note that using the word *puzzling* when talking about an unknown word is intended to convey that there are strategies readers can use to figure it out. Talking about unknown words as being *tricky* or *hard* may cause some children to feel defeated.) However, if a child is puzzling over a word that has an unusual spelling element – such as the *k* in the word *know* – it is appropriate to provide assistance. For example, you might say: "Let me help you with that word…the *k* is silent." Alternatively, you could simply tell the child the word.

    Try saying…

    "Try reading to the end of the sentence to see if it gives you some ideas about what that puzzling word could be. Then go back to the word, think about the letters in the word again, and what would make sense."

  - **Reread** - In most cases, after an unfamiliar word has been correctly identified, readers should be encouraged to reread the entire sentence in which it occurred to make sure that everything fits. Doing so emphasizes the letter/sound relationships in some words, the sense-making purpose of reading, and increases the likelihood that words that were initially puzzling will be identified more readily on future encounters. Rereading can also promote fluent, smooth reading.

    Try saying….

    "Now that you've figured out the word(s), read the whole sentence to make sure that it makes sense and that everything fits."

  Note that it is fine to simply name an unfamiliar word for the child if it is unlikely that the word can be identified using a combination of the child's phonics skills and the other sources of

[2] Note that the "Suggested Guidance" can be abbreviated as children become accustomed to the conversation around puzzling through unknown words.

information (such as pictures and the meaning of the sentence). It is also fine to name the word for the child if the child has encountered several unknown words and/or seems frustrated. In such instances, it can be useful to have the child reread the sentence in which the unfamiliar word(s) occurred. This re-reading will help the child better understand the text and will increase the likelihood that the child will be able to read those unfamiliar word(s) when they are encountered again.

7. What should I do when my child makes a mistake while reading?

It is a good idea to let the child continue reading to the end of the sentence when they have misread a word. Often, by then, they will notice the mistake because they realize that the sentence doesn't make sense. A child who understands that reading is supposed to make sense will often go back and try to fix the error. This is exactly what we want children to do. When children begin to make these corrections, it is helpful to recognize their problem-solving success. For example, you might say: "Nice job figuring out that word!" or "You noticed that it didn't make sense and you went back and fixed it. You're really thinking like a reader!"

If a child reaches the end of a sentence and doesn't realize a mistake has been made, it is fine to point it out – especially if the mistake will make it hard to understand what's going on in the text. For example, you might say: "Nice reading, there was just one word that gave you a little trouble. Let's think about that word again." Alternatively, the child might be asked to identify which word they were unsure about. Or you might choose to simply provide the correct pronunciation of the word. The decision about how to respond would depend on the child's skills and knowledge about the word(s). For example, if the word is one that is totally unfamiliar to the child (e.g., *koala*, *relieve*), providing the pronunciation of the word and a brief explanation would be appropriate the first time the word comes up.

The general point is – don't be overly focused on accuracy or on having the child do all the work. You are not the teacher. In listening to beginners, your purpose should be to provide comfortable and non-stressful opportunities for the child to practice reading.

8. Sometimes my child reads a word correctly on one page but can't figure it out on the very next page. Why does this happen?

Beginning readers draw on a lot of sources of information when they are trying to figure out words they can't immediately identify. Sometimes these sources of information work together well to help the child figure out the word and sometimes they don't. Reading is a complicated process, especially for beginners. Caregivers should try to avoid expressing impatience when difficulties such as these occur. We do not want children to feel frustrated by or anxious about reading.

When a child reads a word correctly in one place but not in another, on occasion, it can be helpful to look back to the page where the word was read correctly and say something like, "When you saw this word here, you figured it out – which is great!" Encourage the child to reread the sentence in which the word was read correctly. Then, take the child back to the page where the word was challenging and encourage the child to try the sentence again.

9. Is it OK for children to skip over words they don't know?

Yes, if they go back to them after reading on a bit. When children come to unknown words and can't figure them out using their phonics skills and word identification strategies, it is often helpful for them to read past the unknown word as this may help them figure out the puzzling word. Often when beginning readers read out loud, they may skip over unknown words and silently read past them. Children are often taught to use this strategy as one tool in figuring out unfamiliar words. Since using this strategy may take a while, be sure to give children enough time to figure things out when they want to try. Skipping over the occasional word is only a problem if the child doesn't go back to the skipped word to try again. Also, note that when a child skips over words frequently it is likely that the text is too challenging and/or that the child isn't using helpful strategies. Offering easier texts should help.

10. On some days my child seems to have more difficulty reading than on other days. Should I worry about this?

Do not worry. Children may read very well one day and not read as comfortably the next. Why this happens is not entirely clear, but it may frustrate them when they experience more difficulty than usual. Providing a little more help or picking easier books to read should help. This may also be a time to give children a short break by reading aloud to them as a reminder that reading is enjoyable and interesting. As a reminder, it is best not to make children read when they are tired.

11. Sometimes my child seems to have trouble reading a whole sentence without going back and re-reading parts of it. Is this a problem?

Typically, children go back and start over in a sentence because they are having some difficulty with understanding the sentence and/or with identifying the words in the sentence. Going back and starting over is a very good strategy for dealing with such difficulty and should be encouraged. For example, you might say: "I see you trying to figure out that word. Going back to the beginning of the sentence and starting again can help. Nice thinking!"

The boy rrr…
The boy ran…

12. Sometimes my child gets annoyed if I provide a word she/he doesn't recognize. Why?

For beginning readers, figuring out unknown words can often be an enjoyable challenge – like solving a puzzle. If they are told the words too quickly, it may take away the fun. Therefore, when children are trying to figure out a word, it is useful to allow at least 5 or 10 seconds (or more if the child doesn't seem frustrated) before offering help. Be encouraging about their attempts, even if they are unsuccessful. For example, you might say, "That is a puzzling word, but it is good practice to try to figure it out on your own." (If it is clear what the child tried, you might name it. For example, "I noticed you trying some different sounds for the ….", or "I noticed you reading past the word you weren't sure of…".)

13. How much time should my child spend reading?

Once they have begun to learn to read, it is often recommended that children spend 15 or 20 minutes reading each day (in addition to the reading they do at school). However, the *amount* of reading children do is most important, not the amount of time they spend doing it. So, if a child spends 20 minutes reading a book that is very challenging, the child will read less, in terms of the total number of words read, than if the same 20 minutes are spent reading easier text.

While 15 to 20 minutes is often the recommended amount of reading time, if children are interested in and enjoying what they are reading, it is fine to encourage/allow more time. However, we do not want children to become too tired. It can take readers many months of practice to build up the stamina they need to read for longer periods of time.

Note also that beginning readers generally benefit from reading to someone and many will not be interested in reading alone. Finding time to listen to children read every day is important. Also, especially when children are first learning to read, reading will take energy and concentration. Therefore, it will be helpful to find a time when the child is not too tired and is in a place where reading can be done without too many distractions (such as the TV or other conversations).

However, it is not necessary to be sitting right next to children while they read. You can ask them to read to you while you are driving, folding laundry, preparing meals, etc. If children need help with a word, they can simply spell the word out for you. Doing so actually has the potential to help them learn to identify the word more readily in the future because they have looked at and thought about all the letters in the word.

14. What should I do if/when my child tries to avoid reading?

There are several useful ideas that can help children develop enthusiasm for reading. Many of them were addressed in previous questions. Here we briefly review those earlier suggestions and add others.

Choose easy reading materials. Children will enjoy reading more when they are able to identify most (almost all) of the words easily and can concentrate on understanding and enjoying what they read.

Offer both fiction and non-fiction reading materials. Some children prefer informational (non-fiction, fact-based) texts. Selecting texts about topics that interest individual children has the potential to support an interest in reading.

Take turns reading to each other. When an adult reads with a child, it creates a more enjoyable experience. The child is likely to want to read more, especially when reading more difficult texts. When taking turns, the adult and child might read every other page or paragraph or the adult might read the entire text to the child first (for very short books) and then listen to the child read what the adult just read.

Talk about what is read. Having conversations about the characters, events, and/or information in the text will help to encourage an interest in reading. Conversation can/should occur before, during and after reading a text. And, discussions should be conversational, not test-like. Remember, the goal is to get children interested in reading and to view it as a form of entertainment and a way to learn about the world. Recall conversations you have with others about your own reading. Think about how you've talked with your child about television shows and videos you've watched together. Try to have similar conversations around the materials you read together. For example, you might say things like:

- I wonder what will happen next.
- What do you think is going to happen?
- I bet he's going to….
- Huh, that isn't what I expected. How about you?
- Look at her face! She looks….(mad, excited, confused…) Or – what do you think she's feeling?
- What would you do if that happened to you?
- Interesting! I never knew….
- I'm confused about what the author just told us. Let's read it again to try to figure it out.
- Why do you think…?

Read the same text more than once. Many children enjoy, and benefit from, reading the same text multiple times. This can be a real confidence builder because children are likely to find it easier and easier to read the text each time. When a text is easy to read, readers are likely to read it smoothly and to sound more like a storyteller than like someone who

is learning to read. The feeling of reading smoothly builds confidence. Further, repeated readings can help children to increase the number of words they can read without effort. For informational texts, reading the text more than once increases the likelihood that children will remember the information encountered in the text.

Engage children in playful practice activities. Beginning readers need to learn lots of details about the workings of written English such as the names and sounds of the letters, how to write them, and how the letters in printed words are related to the sounds in spoken words. When children become fast and accurate with such skills, they will be able to devote most of their thinking to making sense of the things that they read and to creating meaning in the things they write. Therefore, it can be helpful to engage them in some playful practice activities to help them become automatic with letter- and word-level skills. For example, for children who are learning the names or sounds of specific letters or to read specific words, the letters/words can be written on cards and used to play games. (It is important to make sure that the children view the cards in the proper orientation [right side up]. Putting a dot at the top of each card can help with this.)

Below are some examples of games that children often enjoy and that help them build skill with letters and words. Note that it is useful to try to ensure that children are frequently the winners in these games. Because a lot of their attention will be focused on letter or word identification, they will have less attention to devote to focusing on the games' strategies and/or remembering the locations of specific items. We want these games to be motivating!

- **Tic Tac Toe** – This version of the game is played with the letters or words children are learning. Each player uses a different color marker/pencil/crayon to write their letter or word. On their turn, each player picks a card from the deck, names the letter (or sound of the letter) or the word (with help if needed) and then writes the letter or word in one of the squares on a Tic Tac Toe board.
    - If the game is focused on **practicing letter names**, players name the letter they pick, write the letter, and then name the letter again.
    - If the focus is on **practicing letter sounds**, players name the letter they pick, name the sound, write the letter, and then name the letter and the sound again.
    - If the focus is on **practicing words**, each player would name the word they pick, name the letters in the word as they write it, and then name the word again.

  The winner is determined by having three items of the same color in a row. (Using a dry-erase board with the Tic Tac Toe grid marked off with tape can save paper and decrease the time needed to play each game. Further practice with letter or word identification can be provided by asking the child to erase specific letters or words at the end of each game.

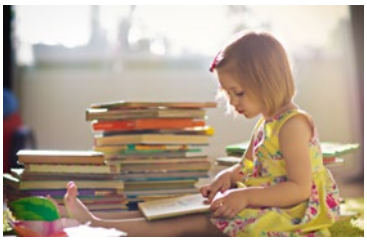
- **Concentration/Memory** – Two copies of each letter or word are needed for this game. The cards would be shuffled and laid out in rows with the letter/word side down. On their turn, players would turn over two cards in hopes of finding a match.
    - If the game is focused on **practicing letter names**, players name the letters they turn over.
    - If the focus is on **practicing letter sounds**, players name each letter they turn over and name the sound.
    - If the focus is on **practicing words**, each player would name the words they turn over.

  When a match is found, the player takes the cards. The winner is the player with the most cards when all the cards have been picked up.

15. What kinds of texts should I read to my child?

For children just beginning to learn to read and write: Alphabet books can help children learn the names and sounds of letters. Also, books with a lot of rhyming words, like many Dr. Seuss books, can help children learn to notice the sounds in spoken words. This ability will help them as they learn how the letters in printed words are connected to the sounds in spoken words. Beginning readers will also enjoy and benefit from the kinds of books appropriate for all readers (see below).

For all readers: It is useful to provide children with access to a wide variety of written materials including all kinds of books and items accessible via the internet. The goal is to capture children's interests and to help them develop both a fascination with reading and the knowledge that supports comprehension.



It is useful to select texts that are a good match for children's interests as indicated by what they talk about, ask about, and/or do (e.g., sports, collections, etc.) and/or authors whose books they enjoy. Below we have listed some links that can be helpful in choosing and/or accessing reading materials. Children's teachers and librarians are generally very happy to help caregivers select books as well.

- **ColorÍn Colorado** (colorincolorado.org) enables users to search for books by categories such as age, language, country, and theme. It also provides resources for families including families of English Learners/Multilinguals.

- **Unite for Literacy** (uniteforliteracy.com) provides books that can be read and/or listened to online. Many of the books can be listened to in English and one or more other languages.

- **Reading Rockets** (readingrockets.org/books-and-authors/books) provides suggestions for texts that can be read to or by children, lists of books by popular children's authors, and collections of themed texts on popular topics.

As you read books (and other materials) to or with children be sure to engage in conversations about what happens or is learned. Afterwards, leave the texts that have been read available for children to look at. Using the illustrations, children are likely to be able to remember what the texts were about and perhaps some of the things that were learned while listening to the text.

Books, Books (and other reading materials), Everywhere! Having reading materials available wherever children spend time will provide many opportunities for children to enjoy them.

16. What can I do to help my child understand what is read – both when we are reading together and when my child reads independently?

Obviously, talking about the things that are read will help children understand the texts. However, there are other things, that don't even involve texts, that can help to support children's comprehension. Two of the most important things are described below.

Talk with children - a lot. Reading is a language skill and spoken language is the foundation. Research shows that children's ability to understand what they read in middle and high school is related to the number of words in their spoken vocabulary in the early grades.

Reading to children often and talking about what is read will certainly help to increase their vocabulary and language skills. However, conversations that occur throughout the day are also extremely important. Be thoughtful about the words you use when speaking with children. Using some more sophisticated vocabulary in day-to-day conversations will help to build children's vocabulary. For example, you might use words like "scrumptious" and "feast" when talking about a meal, or words like "exhausted" and "fatigued" at bedtime. Children learn the words they hear the most often, so sprinkle some more sophisticated words into your conversations.

Help children learn about the world. As children move through the grades, they are expected to read and learn about things that go beyond their day-to-day experiences. The more they know about the world, the easier it will be for them to understand and enjoy the wide variety of texts they will encounter.

While reading aloud to children is a great way to build knowledge and language skills, there are other ways to do so as well. Watching educational videos on television (such as nature and history channels) and visiting educational websites (such as www.nationalgeographic.com/kids, www.Kidsclick.com, and PBS KIDS), and taking trips to museums and local places of interest will help children learn more about the world. Of course, children will benefit most from such activities when you do them – and talk about them – together.

17. Should I engage my child in writing at home? If so, how?

Yes. Writing is an important way to help children understand that print is a form of communication and to help them learn how the writing system works. Scribbling and drawing are the starting points for learning to write. With experience and some guidance from others, children generally begin to produce more mature forms of writing and, over time, they develop better understandings of how writing can be used. You can encourage this development by:

Providing access to writing and drawing materials: Make sure that paper, pencils, dry erase boards, markers, etc. are available in multiple locations such as the child's room, the kitchen, and the car.

Suggesting and supporting writing projects: Sometimes children enjoy keeping journals or writing stories and illustrating them. Some children like to write and illustrate books that can then be bound by simply sewing or stapling the edges of the pages together. There are also several apps that enable these kinds of writing and illustrating activities[3].

Early on, these projects will be quite different from the conventional forms of writing that children will ultimately produce. Think of early attempts at writing as being a bit like the babbling that babies do before they learn to speak. We encourage babies' babbling and, through our enthusiasm and guidance, help them to gradually become better at communicating. Similarly, with experience and a bit of guidance, children's early writing/printing efforts will become more and more like conventional writing – although it will be some time before most children routinely spell in conventional ways.

[3] We do not name specific apps as their characteristics and quality can change over time and we do not choose to endorse commercial resources.

Encouraging the use of writing for various purposes: Some children will not want to write stories or other lengthy pieces. However, they might be happy to write things on a shopping list, make signs or labels, address and sign their artwork, etc.

Writing to children and inviting answers: When writing notes to beginning readers, use mostly words that children can already read. You might add pictures above a word that children do not yet know. Keep the notes short and leave them in interesting places (lunchbox, breakfast table, mirror, refrigerator, etc.). When possible, invite simple responses.

Note

Once children begin to use letters in writing attempts, do not expect perfect letter formation nor perfect spelling. Let children experiment with writing and spelling and provide spelling assistance when asked. Once children know something about letter names and sounds, it is useful to encourage beginning writers to think about the sounds in the words they want to write and then choose letters that can represent those sounds.

18. What should I do when my child spells some words incorrectly when writing?

Young children's unconventional/inaccurate spellings are referred to in various ways including: *invented* or *inventive spelling*, *kindergarten spelling*, *temporary spelling*, and *sound spelling*. It is OK for children at early points in developing their reading and writing skills to spell in unconventional ways. When children are first attempting to write, they often spell words using only a few of the letters in the word and/or using letters that are not correct. They use letters to stand for the sounds they notice in words.

However, as they do more reading and writing, they begin to represent more of the sounds in the words for which they do not yet know the conventional (accurate) spelling. They usually get to the point where it is possible to understand what they have written. For example, this message: "I lik to swm in the oshin" (*I like to swim in the ocean*) can be read even though some of the words are misspelled. Referring to these attempts as ***sound spellings*** can help children understand that, when they write, it is useful to think about the sounds in the words they don't yet know how to spell and use letters that often stand for those sounds.

When children demonstrate the ability to spell in this way, they typically begin to move toward more conventional (correct) spelling for more and more of the words they write.

It is important to keep in mind that we want children to learn to spell so that they can communicate in writing. Allowing sound spelling at early points in development encourages children to focus more on the

communication aspect. They may attempt to write longer and more interesting messages when there's no pressure to spell every word correctly. As their writing and knowledge of sound/letter relationships matures, their spelling attempts will also become more conventional. They are also likely to learn and use the conventional spellings for the words they encounter frequently in their reading and/or learn through the explicit instruction they receive in school.

19. Why does my child sometimes have trouble remembering how to accurately spell common words?

There are many words in English that cannot be spelled correctly by simply thinking about the sounds and the letters. For example, the words *the*, *of*, and *you* are likely to be misspelled by beginning writers (perhaps as *thu (or du)*, *uv*, and *u*) unless they have been specifically taught to spell them or they have encountered them many, many times in their reading. Indeed, extensive reading is important for spelling development as the more times learners see and read correctly spelled words the more likely they are to store the spellings of those words in memory.

Note that when children produce sound spellings, it can be useful to point out aspects of the spellings that are accurate. For example, a child who spells the word *of* as *uv* has accurately analyzed the sounds in the word and has represented those sounds with letters that often stand for those sounds. In such a case, on occasion, commenting on the accurate analysis and providing the accurate spelling can be helpful - especially for words that the child uses frequently when writing. For instance, for the *uv* spelling for *of*, you might say, "It does sound like *of* should be spelled that way, but *of* is spelled *o - f*."

In both spelling and word reading, at the earliest points, children typically accurately spell/read the beginning sounds of unfamiliar words. Later, they tend to represent/identify both the beginning and ending sounds. With reading and spelling experience, they start to represent/identify all the sounds in one-syllable words – although the sounds, especially the vowels, may not be spelled in conventional ways.

20. What can I do to help my child learn to spell more accurately?

Beyond encouraging and engaging children in reading and providing them with opportunities to write using sound spelling, some of the following suggestions can help with spelling development:

Notice and comment on the sounds that are accurately spelled in sound spellings. For example, you might say "You're right! That is the way to spell the first sound in that word."

Encourage children to use handy resources. If children are writing about something in a book or completing a homework paper, encourage them to find the correct spellings of words in the available resources. For example, if a child is doing a homework paper for math and needs to write out an answer for a question like, "How many loaves of bread were left?" the

child can use the spellings in the question and thereby avoid an answer like "Six lovs uv bred wer laft."

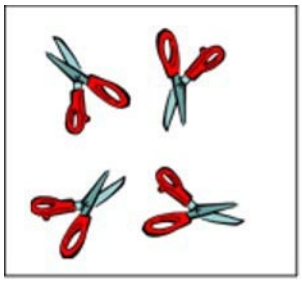
Encourage children to use the spellings of known words for ideas about the spellings of unknown words. For example, if a child knows how to spell *night* and wants to spell *light*, you might point out the similarity: "It's just like *night* except for the first letter."

Provide a list. If children frequently misspell common words that "should" already be known, provide a short list of the correct spellings for the most frequently used words that the child tends to misspell. Encourage children to refer to it when they write. As children master the spellings of the words on the list, replace the known words with other words that are frequently misspelled – as needed.

Provide correct spellings when children ask. As a first step, encourage the child to think about how the word could be spelled if they are at a point where they are likely to be able to do so and/or refer them to available resources. Comment positively on what they figure out and provide the complete spelling if need be.

21. When a child confuses letters like *b* and *d* and words like *was* and *saw*, does it mean they may be dyslexic?

No, such confusions are common at early points in development and are not an indication that children may be dyslexic. These errors happen because some letters look a lot like other letters (for example, *b, d, p*, and *q*) and some words look a lot like other words (for example, *was/saw*, *on/no*, *from/for*). It takes children a while to remember which is which and to remember that the direction that letters face and the sequence in which letters in words appear matters.



Part of the problem with remembering is that, until children start learning about print, just about everything they see is called by the same name no matter which direction it faces. For example, scissors are called scissors, no matter how they are oriented. This, of course, is not how letters and words work. Rotating the letter *b* can make the letter *d, p*, and *q* – depending on how it is turned. So, as children learn to read, they need to learn to pay attention to the direction of print.

As children have more experience with reading and writing, these kinds of confusions usually become much less frequent and generally disappear altogether. Caregivers can help children to get past this normal phase by providing gentle correction (for example, "That's a b.") when errors occur.

Note that the most frequently confused letters are the lowercase versions of the letters B and D. This likely happens because they look so much alike and probably also because their names rhyme [bee, dee]). Because children tend not to confuse the uppercase versions of these letters, it can be useful to provide them with a B/D chart (see the example to the left). When children are unsure about whether a letter encountered in print is a *b* or a *d*, and when they can't decide how to write a *b* or a *d*, they can simply refer to the chart. It is useful to portray referencing the chart as a privilege rather than a requirement ("you get to" versus "you need to").

22. What is dyslexia?

There was a time when dyslexia was widely believed to be a "visual processing problem" that caused individuals to "see" things differently (backwards or upside down) which in turn interfered with their ability to learn to read. This was a common belief for a long time. However, scientific research has clearly shown that children who make these kinds of mistakes have normal visual abilities. They DO NOT see things differently. Rather, their difficulty is with remembering which letter or word is called by which name.

Today, the term dyslexia is often used to refer to extreme difficulty learning to read words – when that difficulty continues even though the learner is provided with lots of extra help with developing reading skill and when there are no physical or intellectual causes that might explain the difficulty. Research over the last few decades has clearly shown that early intervention for reading difficulties can dramatically reduce the number of children who experience long-term word reading difficulties.

23. What can I do to help if I am told that my child is having difficulty learning to read?

Many children who have difficulty early on do not experience difficulties over the long term. However, many do need extra instructional support and extra reading and writing practice to overcome their early difficulties. To try to ensure that early difficulties do not become long-term difficulties, it is important to make sure that children receive extra help with reading in school. Additionally, it is helpful to provide children with lots of non-stressful opportunities to practice reading at home.

Listening to children read and discussing what is read with them are extremely important ways to support their development. Also, depending on what children already know – which determines what they are ready to learn – there are a variety of game-like practice activities that can help them learn such things as the names and sounds of letters and how to read and write the words that occur most frequently in written language (see "Playful Practice Activities" in Question 14).

Some Final Thoughts on
Helping Children Become Readers

You have probably heard the expression "Parents are their children's first teachers." This is absolutely true! It is also true that parents/primary caregivers, siblings, and extended families have a huge role to play throughout their children's schooling. Therefore, it is very important to establish positive and productive relationships when it comes to helping children learn to read and spell as well as for other school-related activities.

With regard to reading and writing, we encourage caregivers to be enthusiastic supporters of children's efforts while practicing developing skills. Beginners need to coordinate many different sources of knowledge and skill. Caregivers are encouraged to be patient; it takes time for children to become fluent with reading and spelling. The more opportunities they have to engage in reading and writing with one-to-one guidance from a caregiver, the faster they are likely to grow as readers and writers. The more enjoyable these opportunities are, the more likely it is that children will develop a love of literacy which can serve as an important foundation for success in school and in life.