

Systematic Phonics Instruction

Research has provided the following guidelines for teaching phonics:

1. Use lowercase letters for beginning instruction. Preschoolers' experiences with print include much exposure to uppercase letters; however, because of environmental print (e.g., signs and names), reading primarily involves reading lowercase letters. Thus, lowercase letters are recommended for beginning phonics instruction.

2. Introduce most useful skills first. Frequently occurring letter sounds such as /m/, /s/, /a/, and /i/ are taught before less frequently occurring sounds such as /j/, /v/, /x/, and /z/. This process usually involves teaching vowel sounds early, along with sounds for the consonants *b, c, d, f, h, m, n, p, r, s,* and *t*.

3. Introduce easy sounds and letters first. Easy sounds include /m/, /s/, and /a/, whereas the sounds /l/, /z/, and /y/, are more difficult to learn. Letters that are visually similar (e.g., *b, p,* and *d*; *m* and *n*; *p* and *q*, and *v* and *w*) should be temporarily spaced during instruction. Also letters with similar sounds (/b/, /d/, and /p/; /e/ and /i/; /f/ and /v/; and /m/ and /n/) should be separated for instruction.

4. Introduce vowels early, but teach consonants first. Research recommends introducing a new letter-sound correspondence every 2 or 3 days, with daily practice for students who have limited prior experiences. Once the initial five or more sounds are mastered, a new letter-sound can be introduced even if the student experiences difficulty with one of the prior correspondences. It is important that the new correspondence be unlike the prior one that still causes difficulty (e.g., if the child experiences difficulty with a vowel, introduce a consonant).

5. Emphasize the common sound of letters first. Because vowels are the most useful sounds and are essential for decoding words, they need to be presented early; however, vowels are also difficult because they frequently do not present clear letter-sound correspondences. Thus, it is helpful to present consonants first because they tend to have clear one-to-one letter-sound correspondences. Irregular consonant correspondences such as *c* in *cat* and *c* in *ice*, *g* in *goat* and *g* in *germ*, and *s* in *sure* and *s* in *six* should be taught later, after the alphabetic principle is established.

6. Emphasize the common sounds of letters first. With vowels, the short sound that occurs in most one-syllable words is the most common sound. The most frequently occurring sound is apparent for most consonants (e.g., /b/ in *bump*, /d/ in *dig*, /m/ in *mitt*, and /t/ in *top*), but the most frequent sounds for other consonants are less obvious (e.g., /c/ in *can*, /r/ in *rat*, /s/ in *sat*, /w/ in *wet*, and /z/ in *zoo*).

7. Teach continuous sounds prior to stop sounds. Continuous sounds can be voiced for several seconds without distortion. All vowels and some consonants (i.e., *f, l, m, n, r, s, v, w, y,* and *z*) are continuous sounds. Stop sounds primarily involve a puff of airflow and are pronounced only momentarily. Letters with stop sounds include *b, c, d, g, j, k, p, q, t,* and *x*. Continuous sounds are taught first because they are easier to pronounce and hear. Research suggests the

following instructional sequence for introducing lowercase letters: a, m, t, s, i, f, d, r, o, g, l, h, u, c, b, n, k, v, e, w, j, p, y, x, q, and z.

8. Teach sound blending early. Once students have mastered 4 or 5 sounds, instruction in sound blending is appropriate. Initial letter-sound correspondence can be used to decode consonant-vowel-consonant trigrams. When the student can blend simple c-v-c and v-c letter sounds into words, other word types are introduced. Research has a list of regular word types according to difficulty level as follows:

- Vowel-consonant and consonant-vowel-consonant words that begin with continuous sounds (e.g., *at, man*).
- Vowel-consonant-consonant words and consonant-vowel-consonant-consonant words that begin with continuous sounds (e.g., *ask, fish*).
- Consonant-vowel-consonant words that begin with stop sounds (e.g., *dot, cap*).
- C-V-C-C words that begin with stop sounds (e.g., *desk, push*).
- C-C-V-C words that begin with continuous sounds (e.g., *slap, frog*) and C-C-V-C words in which one of the initial sounds is a stop sound (e.g., *crib, stop*).
- C-C-V-C-C words (e.g., *cramp*) C-C-C-V-C words (e.g., *split*) and C-C-C-V-C-C words (e.g., *scrimp*).

This order provides a framework for sequencing blending instruction.

9. Introduce consonant blends. When students have mastered the ability to blend c-v-s words that start with continuous sounds (e.g., *fat*) and c-v-c words that start with stop sounds (e.g., *dig*), words beginning with consonant blends (e.g., *spot*) are introduced. Next, word endings with consonant blends (e.g., *sick*) are taught.

10. Introduce consonant digraphs. With blends, each consonant sound is heard; however the adjacent consonants in a digraph join to form one sound (e.g., *ship*). As with consonant blends, digraphs occur in both initial and final positions of words.

11. Introduce regular words prior to irregular ones. Beginning instruction focuses on words that are consistent with phonics rules in that they are pronounced according to their most common sounds. In addition to words that feature common letter-sound conventions, rules exist to help identify patterns for letter to produce blends or digraphs. Most students require much practice with each phonics rule with words in text.

12. Read connected text that reinforces phonics patterns. Phonics is much more effective if students immediately read connected text that reinforces the letter-sound correspondence being taught. For example, if a student is learning the short a sound, it helps if he reads stories or passages that highlight word containing that sound. Reading interesting or entertaining literature throughout phonics instruction reinforces the sound-symbol correspondences and fosters the enjoyment of reading.

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Source: *Teaching Students with Learning Problems, 6th Edition, Mercer & Mercer, 2001*