

## **Research, Practice and Teaching Children to Read**

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Only 5% of American children learn to read without effort. Another 20% to 30% learn to read with relative ease once exposed to formal instruction. That leaves 60% for whom learning to read is a major challenge. For 20% to 30% of those, reading is one of the most difficult tasks that they will have to master throughout their schooling. The ability to read provides the foundation for all school-based learning, and without it, the chances for academic and occupational success are severely limited.

The National Institute of Child and Human Development (NICHD) has supported research to understand normal reading development and reading difficulties continuously since 1965. During the past 33 years, NICHD-supported scientists have studied the reading development of 34,501 children and adults. The results of this comprehensive research are summarized in this article. Four factors that interfere with the development of reading proficiency among children, regardless of socioeconomic level and ethnicity, have been identified:

1. Deficits in phoneme awareness and the development of the alphabetic principle AND the application of these skills to fluency when reading connected text
2. Deficits in acquiring reading comprehension strategies and application of these skills to reading connected text
3. The development and maintenance of motivation to learn to read
4. The inadequate preparation of teachers

A close look at these findings provides an explanation for why the Slingerland Approach has been so successful in teaching many students to read.

### **Phoneme Awareness, Phonics, and Reading Fluency**

Children must understand the relationship between sounds and letters in order to read English. In order to learn how to translate printed symbols (letters) into sounds, it is necessary to understand that speech can be segmented into individual sounds (phoneme awareness) and that segmented phonemes (single speech sounds) can be represented by print (phonics). This is the essence of the alphabetic principle. Comprehending these relationships is absolutely essential to the development of accurate and rapid word identification skills. The Slingerland Approach explicitly and systematically teaches phoneme segmentation, under AUDITORY Part B: Encoding, of the daily lesson plan format, and phoneme blending, also essential to rapid and fluent word identification, under VISUAL Part B: Decoding, of the format.

In addition to learning how to decode unfamiliar words, the beginning reader must become proficient and fluent in recognizing larger units of print such as syllable patterns within multi-syllable words and meaningful roots and affixes when they are part of words in phrases and sentences. Eventually, the phrases are combined to form sentences and the sentences extend into paragraphs and larger units of concept. Strategies for decoding one-syllable and multi-syllable words include the teaching of vowel patterns, syllable patterns, syllable division and accent generalizations, and morphology - study of prefixes, suffixes, and roots.

The average child needs between four and fourteen exposures in order for recognition of a new word to become automatic. It is essential that children read large quantities of text at their independent reading level (95% accuracy) and that the text format provide specific practice in the decoding skills being learned. Decoding practice and practice in reading connected text, is included in the Slingerland Daily Lesson Plan Format providing practice for every student to read every day.

The development of phoneme awareness, phonics skills, and reading fluency are necessary but not sufficient for the construction of meaning from text - reading comprehension.

### **Strategies for Teaching Reading Comprehension**

To comprehend what they read, children need to have the ability to activate relevant background knowledge. They must be able to relate what they read to what they already know. They need to have adequate vocabularies because it is very difficult for children to comprehend what they cannot define. Stimulation of relevant background knowledge and reinforcement and expansion of vocabulary are actively and systematically taught under VISUAL Part C: Preparation for Reading, of the Slingerland format. Children who comprehend what they read are able to summarize and interpret what they have read. They can make accurate inferences and predictions. They often use questions to guide their understanding. They use knowledge of phrase concept and sentence structure.

The Slingerland Approach, from the very beginning days of reading instruction, carefully and skillfully builds a comprehensive understanding of the relevance of punctuation, phrase concept, word order, and sentence

structure. Students are explicitly taught how to answer questions with precision, in a single word or phrase. They are directly taught that every word and/or phrase in a sentence is there for a specific purpose - in a particular sequence - that relates to the message the writer has attempted to convey. Students are systematically taught how to chunk words into meaningful phrases. Guided practice is provided to students for responding to all levels of comprehension questions leading them to become reflective, purposeful, and confident readers.

### **Nothing Succeeds Like Success**

Successful students are motivated students. If students are taught what they need to know to become competent readers, and how to do what is expected of them, they will be motivated to read. I have never met a student who decided, before beginning school, that he or she did not want to learn to read. Students who appear to be "unmotivated" are those who, despite innate intelligence and consistent effort, are met with daily failure to attain success that is never within their reach. Slingerland teachers take the job of preventing their students from taking mistakes seriously. Knowing that some errors are inevitable, Slingerland teachers teach systematic proofreading strategies. Students are taught how to correct errors using an organized approach. The Slingerland Approach teaches students of all ages to learn to read before they are condemned to fail.

### **Inadequate Preparation of Teachers**

Several recent studies of teacher knowledge about reading development and at-risk readers indicate that many teachers are not adequately prepared to teach reading. Most teachers receive little formal instruction in reading development or reading disabilities during either undergraduate or graduate studies, with the average teacher completing only two reading courses. Often those two courses also include the teaching of all other language arts skills as well. Teacher responses to the survey indicate the following: (1) Teachers rarely have the opportunity to observe professors demonstrate instructional reading methods with students. (2) Course work is superficial and typically unrelated to teaching practice. (3) Supervision of student teaching and practicum experiences is fragmentary and inconsistent. Dedicated and motivated teachers, who realize they do not have the necessary skills to adequately teach their students, are left with no alternative but to independently seek opportunities for instruction that will provide them with specific skills for teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency and reading comprehension.

### **The Slingerland Teacher Training Model**

The Slingerland Teacher Training Model is a pearl in teacher education. This comprehensive teacher-training model may be the best-kept secret in the profession. The time has come to spread the good news. Teachers learning the Slingerland Approach are given the same painstaking care they are taught to provide for their students. The month-long introductory training course includes the following:

- Daily classroom demonstration of a complete lesson by master teachers
- Daily observation by teacher participants of the demonstration lesson taught by a master teacher
- Daily hour-long practicum opportunity for use of newly-learned multisensory strategies
- Daily observation of the teacher participants by master teachers with explicit and systematic teaching of instructional strategies
- Integrated multisensory structured language teaching techniques for speaking, listening, reading, spelling, handwriting and written expression
- Daily lectures on history, philosophy, rationales, and background information
- Explicit strategies for development of vocabulary, reading fluency and comprehension
- Overview of screening techniques for identification and assessment of progress
- Daily writing of lesson plans with written and verbal feedback
- Parent conferencing strategies
- Comprehensive instruction in the logic and structure of English

In summary, NICHD-supported research over the last 33 years has shown that, for 90% to 95% of poor readers, prevention and early intervention programs that combine instruction in phoneme awareness, phonics, fluency development, and reading comprehension strategies, provided by well-trained teachers, can increase reading skills to average reading levels. The Slingerland Teacher Training Model incorporates every one of these critical components and much more. We teachers who have had the benefit of teaching our students using the Slingerland Multisensory Structured Language Approach for teaching the skills of oral expression, listening, decoding, reading fluency, reading comprehension, handwriting, spelling, and written expression are indeed fortunate - and so are our students. What are we waiting for? We need to let the rest of the teaching profession in on our secret.

*Source: Lyon, G.R. (1998). Report on Overview of Reading and Literacy Initiatives. United States House of Representatives Committee Testimony, April 1998.*