

Reading: what it takes to succeed

There's a "right" way to teach reading, according to best-selling journalist Peg Tyre. So why are many students learning – or not learning - the wrong way?



By Peg Tyre

Some time, usually between the ages of 5 and 6, most children begin to read. Watching a child transition from a nonreader to one who can both entertain and educate herself with a book is, for many parents, one of the milestones and miracles of family life.

Learning to read accurately, fluidly, with good comprehension and stamina is also a crucial set of skills for school success. Schools know this. That's why in the best ones, the early years of primary education are devoted to teaching kids to read using scientifically proven methods to ensure that all kids are reading at grade level.

But in many schools, in all kinds of neighborhoods, there is a shockingly large chunk of kids — about one in three — who don't master the skills they need to learn to read in a sophisticated way. Their road is a difficult one: although many will try to use their intelligence to cover the holes in their skill set, as the work gets harder and the reading grows more complex, these children will find they are unable to keep up.

This is one of the great tragedies of the American school system. It is even more heartbreaking when you talk to scientists about how the human brain reads. Researchers estimate that somewhere between 2 and 5 percent of children, most of whom have developmental disorders or profound neurological problems, will never learn to read. The rest? If they are given what experts say is the

right kind of instruction, they will learn to read, and most of them will be able to read well.

Reading casualties

But what happens to these kids if they don't get the right kind of instruction? Reading experts call them "instructional casualties." Most of them don't have neurological problems. They are not disabled. Their schools and, specifically, their primary school teachers have failed them.

In terms of outcomes, longitudinal research, the kind that follows kids for decades, tells a sad story. If your child is experiencing reading failure, it is almost as if he has contracted a chronic and debilitating disease. Kids who are not reading at grade level in first grade almost invariably remain poor fourth grade readers. Seventy four percent of struggling third grade readers still struggle in ninth grade, which in turn makes it hard to graduate from high school. Those who do manage to press on — and who manage to graduate from high school — often find that their dreams of succeeding in higher education are frustratingly elusive. It won't surprise you to know that kids who struggle in reading grow up to be adults who struggle to hold on to steady work; they are more likely to experience periods of prolonged unemployment, require welfare services, and are more likely to end up in jail.

Even if your child is one of the lucky ones and is doing fine in reading, students who are poorly served by their primary schools end up being a drain on the public education system. Reading problems are the overwhelming reason why students are identified as having learning disabilities and assigned to special education, often an instructional ghetto of the worst kind.

The right way to teach reading

It doesn't have to be this way. No area of education has been as thoroughly studied, dissected, and discussed as the best way to teach students to read. Seminal research and longitudinal studies from the National Academy of Sciences and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, combined with MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) and computerized brain modeling from the nation's top academic labs, provide a clear prescription for effective reading instruction. And yet that information is virtually unknown among teachers, parents, and those who serve on school boards.

In nearly every conversation about reading instruction, educators talk about different pedagogical approaches and different philosophies, as if one is equal to another. And perhaps because some kids seem to learn to read like they learn to run, from observation and for the sheer love of it, it can appear like almost any kind of reading instruction can work with varying levels of success — for at least some kids. But researchers say they've come up with a straightforward formula that, if embedded into instruction, can ensure that 90 percent of children read.

What does the research show? It turns out that children who are likely to become poor readers are generally not as sensitive to the sounds of spoken words as children who were likely to become good readers. Kids who struggle have what is called poor "phonemic awareness," which means that their processor for dissecting words into component sound is less discerning than it is for other kids.

In practical terms it works like this: a child destined to become a poor reader and a child destined to become a good reader can both understand the word "bag," but the poor reader may not be able to clap for each of the three sounds in the word or to know that the last sound is what distinguishes "bag" from "bad." If a child struggles to hear individual sounds that make up words, that child is likely to stumble when you try to teach her, for example, that the letter *t* makes the "tuh" sound. This becomes a real problem when we ask those kids to execute the neurological triple backflip known as reading.

And here's a critical fact you need to know: scientists have shown again and again that the brain's ability to trigger the symphony of sound from text is not dependent on IQ or parental income. Some children learn that *b* makes the *buh* sound and that there are three sounds in *bag* so early and so effortlessly that by the time they enter school (and sometimes even preschool), learning to read is about as challenging as sneezing. When the feeling seizes them, they just have to do it. Other perfectly intelligent kids have a hard time locating the difference between *bag* and *bad* or a million other subtleties in language.

Many studies have shown that phonemic awareness is a skill that can be strengthened in kids. And following that instruction in phonemic awareness, about 100 hours of direct and systematic phonics instruction can usually get the job done and ensure that about 90 percent of kids have the fundamentals they need to become good readers.

Reading lessons

Many school districts have adopted what they call a "balanced literacy" approach to reading. If administrators at your child's school describe their reading program that way, you'll need to ask a few more questions.

In some schools, balanced literacy means that preK teachers work on letters and letter sounds. Kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers deliver an orderly progression of explicit phonics lessons and, as the children become competent and confident readers, push them to discover the best that literature and nonfiction have to offer while doggedly building up their comprehension through weekly word study, spelling tests, and story analysis.

In other schools, balanced literacy can mean something very different and something that looks a lot like what is called the "whole language" approach — which is now largely discredited. At these schools, teachers provide a portion of the kids with a smattering of phonics (most schools now concede that some kids do need phonics to help figure out the code) and also encourage them to guess words from illustrations, and later, from context. As the children (hopefully) get more competent at reading, teachers minimize the study of language and devote their time and energy to getting kids excited about words, reading, and books. If you care about your child's school success, you'll want more of the former kind of instruction — phonics and word study — and less of the latter.

Once you've seen science-based reading instruction delivered well, you'll want it for your kids. For six years, Kristina Matuskiewicz, a kindergarten teacher at [Edna C. Stevens Elementary School](#) in Cromwell, CT, believed that, like all the teachers at her tidy suburban school, she was helping to

make good readers. She read them stories, she identified words and described their meaning, she offered them a variety of good books and worked to shift them to independent reading. "Each teacher had their own approach to teaching reading," says Matuskiewicz.

The problem was, none of their approaches were working very well. In 2007, only 70 percent of the third graders were proficient in reading. Not only that, each year about 33 out of 489 kids in the preK through second grade classes required outside support in reading — a program that was costly for the school and for the district.

What the "right way" looks like

The principal, Lucille DiTunno, decided the school needed to take another approach. First, she asked her teachers to establish a "literacy block" — 90 minutes a day dedicated to reading. Three years ago, DiTunno paid \$28,000 to Literacy How, then a division of Haskins Laboratories in New Haven, to bring consultants to the school every week for a full year to teach teachers about the scientifically proven methods that help kids learn to read.

The first meeting, says Literacy How consultant Wendy North, was a disaster. "We got off on the wrong foot," says North. The teachers felt like they were being blamed for the struggles of kids they hadn't taught in years. Instead of directing the anger at the inadequate instruction they had been given at teachers college, she says, they felt humiliated and angry that outside experts were being brought in to teach what they already knew — how to teach reading.

North persevered. These days, kindergartners in Matuskiewicz's class get a different kind of instruction than their older brothers and sisters did. During the first week of kindergarten, Matuskiewicz sits with each child and determines if he or she knows the letters and their corresponding letter sounds. The skill levels of the children are variable. So, class work in the autumn has to do with "sorting" — identifying letters and connecting them to sounds.

Some of the kids with a keen sense of phonemic awareness are already moving on to what is called in teacher-speak "decodable text" — little books with single lines of text made up of words that can be sounded out with ease. After about thirty minutes, all the children stop their work and, using a broad hand motion for each sound, sing what is known as "the vowel song" with great gusto. When the chorus of cheerful voices begins to die away, North and Matuskiewicz look pleased. "The rap against phonics is that there is too much drilling," says North. "But look at this classroom. No one is suffering here."

First grade teacher Angela DiStefano, a 12-year teaching veteran, says the Literacy How approach to reading has changed her professional life forever. "Before that, I thought it was my job to teach kids to share my enthusiasm for reading." Now, she teaches them to read with explicit instruction on how to sound out words. Not long ago, she gave a seminar for first grade parents to teach them some rules about vowels (for example: vowels make their short sound in closed pattern words like *tap* and the long sound in open pattern words like *hi*, *so*, and *my*) so parents could reinforce the lessons at home.

The Literacy How approach has increased the scores on interim tests, and results from the first third

graders who learned to read this way are expected to be high. Already, only three children per year are now being referred for the costly reading support, a massive savings for the district.

DiStefano says that the new program has made her relationship with parents more straightforward. "Before, we might say, 'That child isn't reading!' And we'd shrug. We didn't know what to do. Now we can sit with a parent and say, 'Your child is struggling to understand the rule that when a word ends with e, the middle vowel says its own name.' And we can describe our plan to reteach that and get parents to emphasize that at home and get that child back on the path to reading success."

Seven tips for reading success

- Remember that learning to read and to read very well are crucial to your child's well-being.
- Find a school that uses scientifically based reading instruction. Find out what that is, and make sure your child's school is doing it.
- Make it clear to your child's teacher that you expect frequent, detailed reports on your child's progress in basic reading skills.
- If your child is not moving forward steadily, be prepared to take action. "Wait and see?" Nope. Watchful waiting is a good practice for many aspects of child rearing. Progress in early reading is not one of them.
- Be prepared to encounter some confusion and defensiveness from the people you'd think are the experts. Do not be deterred.
- Throughout elementary school and middle school, teachers should be engaging in increasingly sophisticated forms of word study.
- After second grade, surround your child with all kinds of books and make what she's reading a topic of dinnertime conversation. Listen to the way she talks about books to ensure that her comprehension continues to deepen.

This article is an excerpt from [The Good School: How Smart Parents Get Their Kids The Education They Deserve](#) by Peg Tyre. Tyre is an education journalist and the author of the *New York Times* bestselling book, *The Trouble With Boys*. Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, and other publications. Tyre is director of strategy at the Edwin Gould Foundation. You can follow her on Twitter [@pegtyre](#).