



Understanding a Sounds-First Approach to Reading

A Toolkit for Families

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Introduction

Welcome to **Understanding a Sounds-First Approach to Reading: A Toolkit for Families**. We are thrilled to partner with you to support your child’s education. In this toolkit, we have gathered resources to help you better understand the components of a sounds-first approach to learning to read.

Within this toolkit, you will discover helpful information including:



The Meaning of Common Reading Terms



How Children Show They are Fluent Readers



The Importance of Reading Comprehension

Please remember that you are not alone. Your child’s school, teachers, and our entire educational community are here to support you every step of the way. We encourage you to explore this toolkit, ask questions, and engage with your child’s teacher and school.

Thank you for being committed to your child’s education. Together we can create a bright future filled with endless possibilities.



A Sounds-First Approach to Reading

Before most children learn to read, they already hold an important piece of the puzzle: the sounds of words they speak every day. From the time they are newborns, they have heard many sounds and have learned the difference between sounds like the “mmm” sound in the word mom or the “ddd” sound in the word dad.

As they grow, young children learn to say words made up of the many sounds they hear. Later, they learn to connect these sounds to letters, understanding that letters represent the sounds they hear. Next, children learn to put letters together to form a word.

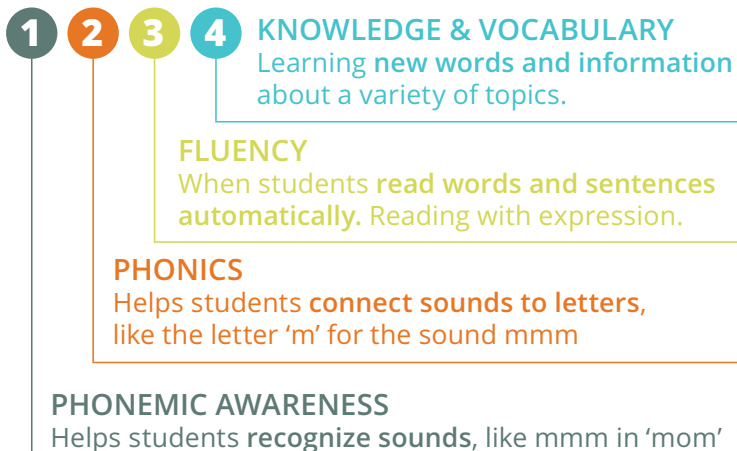
Understanding sounds and their connections to letters is the foundation for reading, the first step in learning to read. We call this the “Sounds-First” approach.

Learning to Read with the Sounds-First Approach

- To recognize sounds, children need **phonemic awareness** instruction.
- To connect sounds to letters, children need **phonics** instruction.
- Consistent instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics will lead to **fluency** in reading.
- Fluent reading, building knowledge and vocabulary, and understanding how language works will lead to **reading comprehension**.

Let’s break down these important terms to gain a better understanding of how everything works together.

READING COMPREHENSION





What is Phonemic Awareness?

To recognize individual sounds in spoken words, children need phonemic awareness practice.

Phonemic awareness is the ability to notice, think about, and work with the smallest sounds in spoken words. We call those small sounds phonemes. For example, in the word *pat*, the “p” sound is one phoneme, the “a” sound is another phoneme, and the “t” sound is the last phoneme in that word.

Before children learn to read, they need to become aware of how the sounds in words work. Children need practice manipulating or changing the sounds in words. They do this by combining sounds (*blending*), breaking sounds apart (*segmenting*), and even replacing one sound for a different sound (*substitution*).

Children can show us that they have phonemic awareness in many ways, including:

- Recognizing which words begin with the same sound; such as: dog and drum
- Identifying the first or last sound in a word; such as: d – og; cu – p
- Combining or blending all the sounds in a word to say the word; such as d-o-g, dog
- Breaking apart or segmenting a word into its sounds; such as cup, c-u-p

Families can help develop their child’s phonemic awareness through rhyming games and games that encourage identifying the beginning, middle, or ending sounds in words.



DID YOU KNOW?

Children who have strong phonemic awareness skills are likely to have an easier time learning to read and spell.



What is Phonics?

To connect the sounds of spoken language to letters, children need phonics instruction.

Phonics is the connection between letters and sounds of spoken language. Practicing phonics helps children use their knowledge of letters and sounds to read and write words. Knowing these relationships will help children read and spell words when writing.

In kindergarten through second grade, teachers provide phonics instruction daily. Students have many opportunities to practice and apply what they are learning about letters and sounds to the reading of words and sentences when using decodable readers. These books match the phonics skills children have previously learned or are currently practicing.

Phonics lessons are also systematic and explicit. Systematic means the letter-sound relationship is taught in an organized way and in a logical sequence. Explicit means the teacher's lessons are direct and focused on specifically teaching the letter-sound relationships.

Children can show us that they understand phonics in many ways, including:

- Recognizing which words begin with the same letter.
- Identifying the first or last letter in a word.
- Connecting the sounds and letters in a printed word to read the word out loud.
- Using sounds and letters to spell words correctly when writing.

Families can help develop their child's phonics skills through reading words, phrases, and decodable books as well as writing words, phrases, and sentences using what they know about letters and sounds.



An Interactive Decodable Book Series is available for free for all Tennessee families of K-2 children to encourage at-home reading practice to help young learners become stronger readers.

DID YOU KNOW?

Children who have strong phonics skills are more likely to read fluently.





What is Fluency?

To easily read words and sentences without mistakes, at a good pace, and with expression, children need to practice their reading fluency.

Fluency is the ability to read words automatically, with appropriate speed and expression, which helps children understand what is being read. Fluency results from accurate word reading. Daily instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics will lead to better fluency in reading.

Families can help develop their child's fluency skills by reading aloud expressively to their children and having children read books to them with expression.

Children can show us that they read fluently in many ways, including:

- Reading text without making many mistakes.
- Correcting their mistakes when reading.
- Grouping words to help them understand what they read.
- Reading quickly enough to sound as if they are speaking.



DID YOU KNOW?

Children who read fluently are likely to have an easier time comprehending the texts they read.

What is Reading Comprehension?

Comprehension means understanding what you read. It is the reason for reading. Good readers have the skills to understand what they read and make sense of it. Strong readers think actively as they read. They use their experiences and knowledge of the world to understand books, stories, and other texts. They also use words they know, or their vocabulary, to make sense of what they read. Vocabulary is key to reading comprehension.

As part of knowledge-building, vocabulary is important to reading comprehension. Readers cannot understand what they are reading without knowing what most of the words mean. As children learn to read more difficult stories, they must learn the meaning of any new words that they come to.

Children can show us that they comprehend what they are reading in many ways, including:

- Monitoring their own understanding as they read; such as pausing to think about what they read and if it makes sense.
- Retelling the events of the story correctly.
- Reading between the lines to draw inferences about hidden meanings, such as why characters behave in a certain way, what the characters are thinking, and what might happen next in the story.

Families can help develop their child's comprehension skills by asking their children questions about the book they just read.

DID YOU KNOW?

Children who comprehend the texts they read are likely to have an easier time learning in school and in life.





Glossary

This glossary contains terms found in **Understanding a Sounds-First Approach to Reading: A Toolkit for Families** from the Tennessee Department of Education.

Decodable. A special kind of book that helps kids learn to read. In these books, the words are made up of the letters and sounds that kids are learning in their reading lessons.

Fluency. The ability to read words automatically and meaningfully; at a good pace and with expression.

Foundational Literacy Skills. When learning to read, foundational literacy skills are considered the building blocks of reading and include phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency.

Phonemes. The smallest individual sounds in spoken words.

Phonemic Awareness. The ability to notice, think about, and work with phonemes, or the smallest individual sounds in spoken words.

Phonics. The connection between letters and sounds. For example, the letter ‘a’ can make the /ah/ sound like at the beginning of “apple.”

Phonological Awareness. The ability to recognize and play with the sounds of spoken language, like breaking words into parts or swapping sounds to make new words.

Reading Comprehension. The ability to understand and make sense of what is being read.

Sounds-First. An instructional approach that teaches sounds (phonological and phonemic awareness) and the connection between sounds and the letters that represent those sounds (phonics) before we expect students to read whole words.

Vocabulary. Understanding the meaning of words that are said aloud, read, or written.

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