

The National Reading Panel: Five Components of Reading Instruction Frequently Asked Questions

Phonemic Awareness

What is a phoneme?

A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in a word. For example, the word *cat* is made up of three phonemes (or three sounds): /c/ /a/ and /t/. The word *fish* is also made up of three phonemes (or three sounds) even though *fish* has four letters: /f/ /i/ /sh/.

Test your phoneme knowledge: How many phonemes are in the word *school*? How many phonemes are in the word *family*?

What is phonemic awareness?

Phonemic awareness is the *knowledge* that words are made up of a combination of individual sounds. For example, the word *cat* is made up of three sounds (phonemes) /c/ /a/ and /t/. When these three sounds are combined fluidly, they make up the word *cat*. If a child knows that *cat*, *car*, and *caboose* all have the same sound at the beginning of the word, she has phonemic awareness. In other words, she is aware that the /c/ sound (phoneme) begins each of those three words.

Phonemic awareness is more than recognizing sounds. It also includes the ability to hold on to those sounds, blend them successfully into words, and take them apart again. For example, in addition to the knowledge that the word *cat* has three separate sounds, phonemic awareness is the ability to blend these three sounds together to form the word *cat* and, when asked, to identify and separate the sounds within the word.

Do all children need instruction in phonemic awareness?

Some children have a good sense of phonemic awareness, but to differing degrees. It is important to determine the child's level before beginning instruction. While all reading programs should devote some time to phonemic instruction, phonemic awareness is usually acquired naturally through exposure to print. The NRP found that during the kindergarten year, 18 hours total of phonemic awareness instruction — just 30 minutes a week, six minutes a day — provided maximum advantage.

Phonics

What is phonics?

Phonics is the relationship between a specific letter and its sound, *only* as it relates to the written word. Phonics is used, for example, when a reader comes across an unknown word. With knowledge of phonics, he can try to read the word by focusing on the specific sound of each letter or combination of letters. For example, if a child does not recognize the word *chant*, he might break the word apart into pieces, such as /ch/ /a/ /n/ /t/ (or /ch/ /a/ /nt/, or /ch/ /ant/), assigning an appropriate sound to each separate letter or combination of letters. Then, the child combines those sounds to create the word *chant*.

Phonics is also used in writing, or encoding text. For instance, if a child is trying to spell *smart*, she might begin with the /s/ sound and write *s*. Then, she goes to the next sound /m/ and writes *m*, and so on. An early phonics learner often achieves a close approximation of correct spelling rather than complete accuracy. For example, she may attempt to spell the word *smart* using the method above but end up with *smrt*, simply because she only heard the dominant /r/ sound in the /ar/ sound-letter combination.

What is phonological awareness?

Phonological awareness is the knowledge that there are patterns within words that can aid in both reading and writing. For example, those who have good phonological awareness can use rhyme, beginning and ending sounds, specific phonemes, etc. to read and write words.

Does learning phonics inhibit reading comprehension?

No. If a child learns to identify the relationship between the sounds of our language and letters, he will have an easier time identifying words, leading to improved reading comprehension. Failure to master phonics is the number one reason that children have difficulty learning to read.

However, phonics instruction does have limitations, especially since English does not have a pure phonetic base. The most obvious example of this is sounding out the words *cough*, *though*, *tough*, and *through*. A successful reading program should include both explicit phonics instruction and comprehension instruction. One without the other can delay or impede success in learning how to read.

How important is phonics instruction?

According to the NRP, systematic phonics instruction is only one component of the reading process — a means to an end. Children need to be able to blend sounds together to decode words, and they need to break spoken words into their basic sounds in order to write them. However, phonics should never become the overriding component in any reading program.

Fluency

What is fluency?

Fluency is the ability to read text accurately and smoothly. When fluent readers read aloud, their expression, intonation, and pacing sound natural — much like speaking. This does not mean that fluent readers never make mistakes. Fluency develops from reading practice. The same reader may read a familiar text fluently and a new, more challenging text less fluently.

Why is fluency important?

Since fluency depends on higher word recognition skills, it helps children move from decoding words to sight-reading. This means that less energy is spent on deciphering each word and more is spent on comprehending what is read. If children are struggling to decode individual words, they cannot concentrate on other strategies that support their overall understanding of what they read.

How does fluency increase?

Practice, practice, practice. Repeated oral reading is the best way for children to improve their fluency. This can include re-reading a familiar text several times, listening to models of fluent reading, or engaging in choral, or unison reading with a big book. Choose books that children can read with a high degree of success. If the book is too difficult, children will be bogged down with vocabulary and comprehension questions and their fluency will be hindered.

Vocabulary

What role does vocabulary play in learning to read?

When children learn to read, they begin to understand that the words on the page correspond to the words they encounter every day in spoken English. That's why it's much easier for children to make sense of written words that are already part of their oral language. While we don't have to know every word on the page to understand what we are reading, too many new or difficult words make comprehension impossible. As children's reading level improves, so does the number of words they need to know.

How do children learn new words?

Children increase their vocabulary through both direct and indirect instruction. Children continually learn new words indirectly through listening and speaking to the people around them, being read to by others, and reading on their own. Sometimes children need to be taught new words explicitly, especially when they are crucial to their understanding of a story or concept. Study in content areas, such as science and social studies, adds to a child's vocabulary development.

Text Comprehension

What is text comprehension?

Text comprehension is the interaction that happens between reader and text. More than merely decoding words on a page, comprehension is the intentional thinking process that occurs as we read — it's what reading is all about!

What strategies support comprehension?

Good readers are purposeful and active. They use a wide variety of strategies, often simultaneously, to create meaning from text. Some of the most important are:

- *Monitoring comprehension:* Successful readers know when they understand a passage and when they don't. When they don't understand, they know to pause and utilize strategies to improve their understanding.
- *Using prior knowledge:* Thinking about what is already known about the subject helps readers make connections between the story and their knowledge.
- *Making predictions:* Good readers often make predictions as they read through a story, using both the knowledge they bring to a text as well as what they can derive from the text.
- *Questioning:* When children ask questions about what they read and subsequently search for answers, they are interacting with the text to construct meaning. Good questions are based on a child's knowledge base and what further information she desires.
- *Recognizing story structure:* Children will understand a story better if they understand how it is organized (i.e., setting, plot, characters, and themes).
- *Summarizing:* When they summarize a story, readers determine the main idea and important information and use their own words to demonstrate a real understanding of the text.

When does comprehension instruction begin?

Since the ultimate goal of reading is to interact with the text, comprehension should be emphasized from the very beginning, not only after a child has mastered decoding skills. For example, reading aloud provides an opportunity for children to hear a story and respond to the content — the characters, their feelings and motivations, and the setting, and to relate it to their own experiences. Children begin from an early point to understand that comprehension is the point of reading.

Other Questions

Is there a sequence to teaching the five components?

No. Reading or learning how to read is a combination of all the skills mentioned in the report. The interconnectedness of each of the five components makes it impossible to teach them in isolation or in a particular order. It is more important to use the individual child's knowledge and stage of development as a starting point for instruction. However, since there is a constant give and take among the components, one will sometimes be emphasized over another.

Is it still important for children to read and discuss excellent literature?

Absolutely. The NRP report states that “quality literature helps students to build a sense of story and to develop vocabulary and comprehension.” Tutoring activities that focus on comprehension as their ultimate goal lead to increased student interest and motivation.

Discussions based on excellent literature do two things: (1) allow for a more interesting/relevant discussion; and, (2) deepen a child's basic comprehension. By engaging in a discussion around a text, the reader is exposed to multiple views of interpretation and is forced to create a deeper personal connection with the text.

What role does writing play in a literacy program?

Writing is an important part of the literacy process. As children discover writing as a form of communication, they will begin to express themselves to the best of their ability. At first this may be scribbles, which then become letters, which eventually resemble more and more the accurate symbols for the sounds represented. This process allows children to explore the spelling system of our language.

Reading and writing have a reciprocal relationship — one is used to learn and enrich the other and vice versa. As a writer, the reader has a more intimate knowledge of the writing process, allowing her to have a greater connection to another author's text.

Writing also supports reading comprehension and recall. When a student writes about something he has read, he must take time to reflect and organize his thoughts. The literature children read influences their writing. A child will use his writing as a place to try out styles, language, new words and even spellings he has come across in reading. To be literate requires proficiency in both reading and writing.

Can reading sub-skills be taught in isolation and then transferred to authentic text to improve comprehension?

In an ideal world, the answer would be yes. Unfortunately (or fortunately) that is not the case. Remember that each sub-skill really relies on other sub-skills. Reading is a combination of many sub-skills combined to achieve the common goal of comprehension. Teaching reading sub-skills in an authentic setting ensures that there is never a moment when comprehension is not a factor.

What is authentic text?

Authentic texts are texts that one might encounter in a typical reading situation, such as a book, magazine article, or newspaper. In good reading instruction, authentic texts are used to teach specific skills. For example, one might use a picture book to practice vocabulary — allowing the child to see and understand new vocabulary in its natural context. This way, the reader learns specific literacy skills in a meaningful and motivating context that demonstrates how such skills are actually applied.

What constitutes an integrated reading program?

The NRP states that a program that overemphasizes phonics instruction is less effective in teaching a child to read than a program that integrates a systematic phonics program with other reading instruction (e.g., phonemic awareness, fluency, text comprehension). This underscores the importance of using phonics instruction as a means to an end — to advance oral reading and reading comprehension.