

Questions & Answers About Teaching Children to Read

When is a child ready to begin formal reading instruction?

Some children are ready to read and write at the age of four, while others are still struggling with readiness at the age of seven or eight. Your position as the parent provides you with the best opportunity to observe your child and to determine when he is ready to begin the formal reading and writing process. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Have I modeled interest in books by reading to my child frequently?
- Does he show interest in letters and numbers?
- Can he use a pencil/crayon comfortably?
- Has his artwork progressed from mostly scribbles to detailed figures?
- Is he able to sit still and concentrate on a project for several minutes?
- Does he have a good vocabulary?
- Can he repeat a complex story and get all the events in proper order?

If you answered "Yes," to at least four of the above questions, your child is probably a good candidate for Sound Beginnings. It is important to remember that the *Sound Beginnings* program is not just a reading program. This program ties *reading, handwriting, listening, spelling* and *phonics* all together into an integrated process.

Will it slow a child down to tie his reading progress to his writing, listening, phonics and spelling ability?

Yes, but... At the outset of this program, the child's ability to read is directly tied to his ability to spell, to listen attentively and to manipulate paper and pencil. Through the daily dictation exercises and the handwriting practice, the child builds a broad, strong base of sound/symbol identification. During the first several weeks, the child reads only those sounds that he is able to write. The initial result of such an approach is that the child learns

to write and spell at a slightly faster pace than he learns to read. This is desirable. The excitement of writing new words and of reading what he has written, provides enough motivation for the child to labor faithfully over forming the letters carefully and learning all the sounds of the common phonograms. By late first grade, all normal children using this approach will have better developed word attack skills than students using a sight or whole-word method,¹ plus they will be better spellers, better listeners, and have better handwriting.

Will this method require more time and effort than other methods?

Not when you consider that *Sound Beginnings* is more than just a reading program. The author has explored and used a number of different methods for teaching language arts. The old adage about killing two birds with one stone applies here--only the count is *five*, not two. When properly done, this method covers five important curriculum areas: reading, spelling, handwriting, listening and phonics. The parent who has purchased separate programs for these subjects, and used separate time-frames for teaching them will discover that *Sound Beginnings* saves both time and money while achieving a superior result.

An important feature of *Sound Beginnings* is that it is designed to educate the parent at the same time that it educates the child. Each lesson asks that the parent work right along with the child in writing and saying the sounds and repeating the rules. The parent who has absolutely no training in phonics or who feels herself to be a poor speller will have no difficulty using this program. In the experi-

¹Journal of Educational Research, Volume 58, Number 8, April 1965. *Intensive Phonics vs. Gradual Phonics In Beginning Reading: A Review*, a Reprint of the Reading Reform Foundation

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ence of the author, the extra time taken to sit and work with the child is without parallel for providing interest, enthusiasm and concrete results.

How much preparation time is required?

This program was designed to meet the needs of the average nonprofessional. The beginning lessons are written out step-by-step. Nothing is left to guess work or imagination. Specific directions for preparation are listed in the Instruction Schedule. Some lessons require several minutes to read through. Several more minutes may be required to listen to the audio tape and practice repeating the sounds, writing the phonograms or repeating the spelling rules. As both parent and child progress, preparation time will diminish.

Why are letters referred to as *phonograms*? What's the difference?

A letter is any one of the twenty six characters which make up the Roman alphabet. We identify letters by their names. A phonogram is any letter, or combination of letters, which represents a single speech sound. Letters have names, phonograms have sounds. For example, the letter o stands for the last sound in the word 'go.' It is a single-letter phonogram. The letters ough stand for the last sound in the word 'dough'. They constitute a four-letter phonogram. There are five letters in the word 'dough', but only two phonograms. It is critical that the reader learn to recognize and read these various combinations of letters as *single sounds*. Knowledge of the names of letters merely allows a person to recite the alphabet. Knowledge of all the phonograms and their sounds enables a person to read and write the English language.

Why begin with the lower case letters?

The reason behind this is two-fold. First, all handwriting and type are primarily made up of lower case letters. Because most of the reading the child will do in the beginning stages will

be his own hand writing, he uses the kind of lettering that would normally constitute the printed page. A second reason is that capital letters have very specific uses, such as the first letter in a sentence or the first letter in a proper name. Teaching the capitals only in conjunction with their proper use is an excellent preventative measure for the very common problem of random capitals. At the point in the program where the child begins writing original sentences, he is introduced to capital letters along with the rules for capitalization.

Teaching all the common sounds of the basic phonograms seems overwhelming. Why not start with short vowel and single consonant sounds and build gradually?

At first glance, it does seem as though a gradual approach would make sense. However, this idea has been repeatedly proven false. A short history of the "great debate" will help clarify the answer. The whole-word method for teaching reading was introduced to this country by Horace Mann in the middle of the last century. He had observed this method in his European travels while visiting a school for deaf-mutes. It made perfect sense to teach these students to read by showing them pictures matched to whole words. The senses of hearing and speech were not available as avenues of learning. However, it was a serious pedagogical error to apply these same techniques with children who had the use of all their senses; and the unhappy effects have continued to plague public and private education ever since. One hundred years later, Rudolph Flesch startled the education establishment in the 1950's with his best selling book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*. He clearly pointed the accusing finger at reading methods which neglected phonics. *The Journal of Educational Research* compiled the results of 22 independent studies that compared intensive phonics approaches with gradual phonics. They reported their findings in April of 1965. Three of the studies did not show a clear benefit for either reading method,

but the remaining nineteen studies all showed a significant benefit for the intensive phonics approach.² In 1967, Jeanne S. Chall published *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. Her conclusion? The phonetic approach is superior. Similarly, a number of long term studies were done on the effectiveness of the Spalding Method which employs a rigorous intensive phonics. The results were widely available to professional educators via Robert Auckerman's work, *Beginning Reading Methods*. The comparisons show that an intensive phonics approach consistently yields higher scores in reading and spelling.³ In 1990, Marilyn J. Adams published *Beginning Reading*. This work covered virtually all the research and methodology for the last 150 years. The first third of the book reads like a promotional piece for intensive phonics. As mentioned in the introduction, Adams reports, "By an overwhelming margin, the programs that included systematic phonics resulted in significantly better word recognition, better spelling, better vocabulary, and better reading comprehension. More over, the advantage of systematic phonics, though a bit slower to kick in, was just as great and perhaps greater with children of lower abilities or socio-economic back grounds as it was with reader and more privileged children."⁴

Body and hand position are repeatedly stressed. Is so much attention to detail really necessary?

Yes, yes, yes! Handwriting is a physical endeavor that requires certain physical accommodations if it is to be done correctly. One would not attempt to learn to play the piano standing up or to ballet while wearing boots. A common fault found among homeschoolers is not providing the sort of work space needed to produce beautiful handwriting. The greatest

difficulty is in not having properly sized chairs and tables for the various sizes of children. Proper accommodations need not cost a great deal nor take up much space. If child-sized furniture is not available, put telephone books on the seat of the chair, and a box of laundry soap under the child's feet. Even these simple measures, done consistently, will go a long way toward helping a child achieve beautiful handwriting.

What are the details of proper position?

The child should sit with his feet flat on the floor (or on the soap box) with the table top about elbow height. The margins of his paper should be parallel to his writing arm. His non-writing hand (helper hand) should rest comfortably across the top corner of his paper to hold it in place as he writes. The underside of his writing arm should touch the table top. His pencil should point over the shoulder of his writing arm at about a forty-five degree angle. His writing hand should always be *below* the base line on which he is writing. The lower half of his back should be supported by the back of the chair. His tummy should be close to, but not touching the edge of the table.

The best way to hold a pencil is open to some debate. Some experts prefer the "dart throwing" position in which the thumb and middle finger rest on opposite sides of a six-sided pencil with the index finger resting on top of the pencil. This position clearly lessens cramping and fatigue. Another good position is the one taught in the old Palmer Method. The pencil rests on the side of the middle finger with the curved index finger and thumb providing direction. Plastic pencil grips are available that encourage one or the other of these two positions. The triangular shaped grips lean toward the "dart throwing" position, and the molded variety produces the Palmer position. Because a poor hand position can easily become a habit, and because busy homeschooling parents cannot always be vigilant in observing their child's hand position,

²Ibid.

³Robert Auckerman, *Beginning Reading Methods*, 1989.

⁴Marilyn J. Adams, *Beginning Reading*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1990.

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the pencil grips are recommended for beginning students. In this way the child's hand is directed to a perfect position every time he picks up the pencil. After a few weeks or months, the grips can be eliminated. Even if the child's position slips from time to time, a little reminder brings it back immediately. Regardless of which hand position is used, the important thing is to pick one position and be consistent.

Should the child be allowed to use an eraser?

Some programs make it a major point not to allow the child to use an eraser. The reasons for this have some validity when the teacher is dealing with thirty or more children in a classroom situation--she simply cannot be everywhere at the same time. But in a homeschool setting where lessons are usually given one-to-one, it is not so critical. Mistakes can be caught and corrected before they are reinforced by repetition. It is therefore very important that the parent observe the child carefully while he is practicing the phonograms. If the child is occasionally disappointed with a letter he has made and wishes to erase it, let him. However, if errors are very frequent, some other solution is called for. Either he is not understanding the verbal directions he is hearing, or he needs more practice with the basic strokes.

One last detail about errors. Some experts claim that if a child attempts to correct an error by retracing a letter *in the wrong direction* or if he crosses his t's and f's in the wrong direction, this can lead to or intensify, already existing reading problems. If this is really true, an ounce of prevention would be worth a great deal.

Are primary pencils helpful?

No. Primary pencils have a much greater diameter than a standard pencil. Apparently, it is believed that a fatter pencil is easier for a child to manipulate. This is not the case. A child's

hands are considerably smaller than an adult's, thus the effect of giving a child a primary pencil is comparable to giving an adult a pencil the thickness of a garden hose. Would it help or hinder? There are two additional concerns. Like the primary pencil, the lead is also fat. Unless kept very sharp, it is difficult to produce a clean precise line. Lastly, a primary pencil will not fit in a standard pencil sharpener.

Is there any advantage to beginning with cursive writing rather than printing?

The simple block style printing is, in the opinion of the author, the best style to teach in the beginning. From time to time it has been popular to begin cursive writing in the first grade or even earlier. This is not the wisest route for two reasons. A very important part of this program is the connection between writing each phonogram while hearing and saying its sound. Writing each letter as a separate unit allows for a clearer sound/symbol identification. This connection would not be as evident with cursive writing where all the letters are connected. Also, beautiful printing is a necessary skill for later in life. All job applications and many other important documents require printing. If the child does not learn to print in the early grades it is not likely he will take the time and the effort to learn this skill later.

Some experts recommend using unlined paper. Would this be easier for the child?

It is never easier to learn something incorrectly and then have to learn it all over again. If the child is truly ready to begin formal reading instruction, using lined paper should not present impossible demands. In fact, it aids him in his task. The lined paper that comes with the *Sound Beginnings* program offers maximum control of error. In the initial lessons, the child is introduced to the parts of the page and gains an understanding of the function of these parts. Thus he is freed to concentrate on the more difficult tasks of letter formation and spelling.

In addition, the child's own writing is his reading material for many weeks. It would be very difficult for him to write legibly enough for reading purposes without the guidance of lined paper. (How many adults would find it easier to produce beautiful work on unlined paper?)

The letters of the alphabet are not introduced in order. Why not?

The order in which the letters are introduced is determined by the way in which each letter is formed, the goal being beautiful handwriting. By grouping the letters into four categories according to their formation, the child focuses on a particular handwriting difficulty in a way that alphabetical order would not allow. The use of a "clock face" as a kind of map, gives the child the necessary language to *talk* and *think* about the formation of each letter rather than depend-

ing primarily on visual recognition. The first eight letters introduced all begin with a counter clockwise curve that begins at *two on the clock*: o, a, c, d, f, g, q, s. Each of the next six letters begins with a straight line followed by a curved stroke that comes off the straight line at *ten on the clock*: b, h, m, n, p, r. Putting a strong emphasis on the point at which each letter begins helps prevent letter reversals later on. The letters which give the most difficulty are b, p, and d. The child will learn that each of these letters starts at a different place with respect to the lines on the page. If these facts are well learned, confusion will be much minimized. The third group of letters is composed of only straight lines: i, k, l, t, v, w, x z. The fourth group of letters is a miscellaneous bunch that do not have strikingly similar characteristics: j, u, e, y.