

It is often difficult to know where to start when you are supporting your child as they learn to read. We get so much advice from friends, teachers and other well-meaning sources that it can create a lot of confusion. A few basic suggestions may help you develop your own confidence as you support your child on their reading journey. Learning to read will open up a whole new world of information and wonder for your child.

A great place to begin is ensuring your child has a strong phonemic awareness. It is best not to begin with the alphabet but rather to start with developing their phonemic awareness and phonics. This means your child needs to understand the sounds they are hearing in words as they say them. They do not need to have any knowledge of letters, reading or writing to develop this awareness. Phonemic awareness is very much like the 'syllable' work we used to do when we started school. Start by saying their name and have them clap out the chunks of sounds they can hear. For example: Julie would clap out into Ju-lie.

Developing confidence with phonics becomes foundation for our children. Ensuring that they understand first the sound a letter makes before they focus on the name we give to that letter. The latest research has moved us back to the phonics programmes we might remember from our own childhood. You can help your children develop this knowledge in a number of different ways. Research shows that if we first develop and utilise our children's oral language skills then they find it much easier to develop their decoding (reading) and encoding (writing) skills. You can use YouTube songs, I spy (sounds not letters) games and even work this into your phonemes as well. Keep things short. Small blocks of time as often as it is suitable work far better for a child's retention than working solidly for a long time.

Once a child has learnt the phonics (letter sounds) and phonemes (sound chunks) you can bring them to learning the letter names as well as how to record (write) the letters and sounds. Again, research tells us that we need to develop this through their oral language so take advantage of their interests, your conversations with them, the world around you (street signs, supermarket shopping, etc) to make this learning more enjoyable.

Once all of these skills are in place, learning to decode texts will become much easier for your child. They can use their knowledge of phonemes and phonics to stretch new words out 'like bubble-gum' into sound chunks, which will enable them to solve many new words. However, some words in the English language exist to trick us. Make sure you tell your child that there are some words we simply can't stretch out and those ones they need to remember. Words like 'you' will need to be told to your child. 'Y-o-u' will never stretch out to 'you' and yet it is how we pronounce it.

When going over a new story with your child, get them to have a look at the pictures first, drop in that you have noticed some tricky words such as 'elephant' and show them the word on the page. This way you are planting the seeds for them without explicitly telling them, "This is how you say this word." We find children tend to remember these words much easier by using this method. Once you have explored the text and illustrations with your child, you will find they are able to decode the text with greater confidence. From here you can encourage your child to read 'easier' texts for enjoyment, model your own love of reading by sitting down with your own book or e-reader while your child is around and even share this reading time together, each with your own book or reading aloud to each other. The more a child reads, the better they get at it. Enjoy this journey.

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