



By James Clements, posted on 15th April 2020

Learning at home: Learning to read



Of all the important things that children go to school to learn, reading probably comes top of the list. But now, in these strange and unprecedented times, this crucial job has passed on to us parents.

It might seem like quite a responsibility, especially if your child is at the early stages of learning to read and has been making good progress at school so far. Mostly, we don't want that momentum to stall, but wouldn't it be wonderful if they could return to school (whenever that might be) even more proficient and confident?

Handily, with a little bit of knowledge and a little bit of time, helping your child to become a confident reader is very achievable – as well as being lots of fun.

What do I need to know?

Reading is a complicated business, but it can help if we think about learning to read being made up of two closely-related parts.

The first part is **word-reading**. This just means recognising the little squiggles on the page or screen. When they are first learning to read, children recognise some words as whole words (often starting with their name). At many schools, rather than being taught lots of individual words, children will be taught the word-reading part of reading through [phonics](#).

Phonics involves building words from sounds. A sound might be represented by an individual letter (such as 'b' or 't') or a group of letters (like 'sh' or 'air'). At school, children will start by learning the letters and the sounds those letters represent, and then learn how to blend them together to read simple words. For example, once they know the individual sounds for 'c', 'a', and 't', they can blend them together to form the word 'cat'.

You can find out more about phonics by watching this short film or reading the free [Oxford Owl parent guide](#).

Video: What is phonics?



Watch this fun animation to find out about phonics and understand the key aspects of learning to read using phonics.

With practice, children become quicker at recognising words and blending together sounds in unfamiliar words until they are fluent readers.

The second part of reading is **comprehension**. This just means being able to *understand* the meaning of the words on the page. Comprehension is about understanding all language, not just the words that children can read themselves. We build our comprehension skills by having conversations with family and friends; listening to language in songs, films, and on TV; [having books read aloud to us](#); and talking about the books we read.

To find out more, you can [read more about comprehension here](#) or watch this short film.

What is comprehension?



Find out how children build their understanding of a text using a combination of background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, and inference.

Comprehension and word-reading are both vital for reading and neither is much use on its own. When we set out to help our children to learn to read, we need to think about both strands of reading.

So, what can we do?

Learning to read takes practice. Lots of practice. At the moment, we might just be spending a bit more time at home, so we can try to find time for two key activities: listening to our children read and reading to our children.

1. Listen to them read every day

A small amount of reading practice every day is likely to be more useful than a large block all at once and then a long gap without any reading. If they're reading decodable reading scheme books, you can help by:

- **Linking the sounds to the letters.** Encourage your child to sound out the words, rather than just guessing. This is slow going at first, but it does get faster as they get the hang of it. Encourage them to say the sounds correctly, without an 'uh' sound on the end (so 'mmmm' instead of 'muh') as it makes blending them together easier. And don't forget that some words, like 'said' and 'the', are tricky and your child won't be able to sound them out with the sounds they know at the moment. Keep pointing these tricky words out to practise them.
- **Don't be afraid to reread.** It's sometimes good to ask your child to reread a word, a sentence, or even a page if it has been hard going. This helps to build confidence and to support fluent reading.
- **Practise reading away from reading books.** The world is full of text to read – words on other books, signs and notices when you're out for your daily walk, websites and games, lists stuck to the fridge, and things that siblings have written. If there are words in the environment that children can read, encourage them to read them as much as possible. There's nothing like the feeling of using your new reading powers in the real world!

2. Read to them every day

The books that developing readers can read themselves aren't the only books they should have in their diet. Quite the opposite – listening to books and stories that they can't yet read independently is vital for helping them to enjoy reading, develop their language skills and comprehension, and eventually become a confident reader themselves. We need to drench them in language!

- **Make a regular time.** It might be that at the moment, the usual

pattern of the day has changed a bit. Reading before bedtime might still be the best time, but there might be other opportunities too: listening to a story over breakfast (as no one has to rush to school or work), mid-afternoon while they have a snack (and energy is starting to flag), or while the bath is running. Finding an easy time to read can make things more manageable and help to make sharing a book a regular occurrence.

- **Choose a wide range of books.** A mix of fiction and non-fiction, real stories and magical stories, familiar characters and new experiences help to broaden children's interest and keep story time fresh. Sometimes you might choose a book, sometimes they might choose a book, and sometimes you might read both.
- **Don't be afraid to re-read.** Listening to the same book more than once is really important for children. As well as letting them encounter the same words and phrases enough times to remember them, re-reading helps children to think again about the ideas in the book, perhaps noticing things they missed the first time.
- **All join in.** Interactive reading – with your child joining in with phrases, sound effects, and actions – can help story time to become a shared experience full of fun

What might get in the way?

Hopefully, this all sounds achievable. But there might still be some barriers that get in the way:

- **I've run out of reading books.** Has your child finished all the books that came home from school in the first week? If so, there are plenty of reading scheme books available on [Oxford Owl](#), all organised by current reading level so you can gently increase the level of challenge as they become more confident. There are hundreds of free books available, so hopefully there's enough to keep you going.
- **It's hard.** Perhaps your child is finding reading especially hard. Perhaps they would rather do anything else than read. You can find advice to help [struggling readers](#) and [reluctant readers](#) on

the Oxford Owl site.

- **There's no time.** Even though the children are home at the moment, reading isn't the only thing to worry about. We're likely to be spinning lots of plates at the moment. All I would say is this: of all the educational activities that we might be doing with the children while they're at home, helping younger children to become fluent, confident readers is just about the most important. Being able to read is a gateway to the rest of the curriculum, as well a lifetime of learning and joy. If any learning activity should be prioritised, it's this.

As Emilie Buchwald famously said: 'Children are made readers on the laps of their parents.' At the moment, that's quite literally what's going to happen.

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Written by James Clements

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 home learning

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