

How we teach reading

What is Reading?

In order to give a good understanding of what reading is, the understanding of some basic concepts are needed.

Symbol - A symbol is a representation of an idea, thing, concept, or quality.

A word, for example, is a symbol of language which references its own definition. That is, it "stands for" some idea, thing, concept, or quality, as defined by its given language.

These are symbols: cat, dog, mommy, daddy, red, yellow

These are also symbols: a B d E f G

Alphabet - The 26 letters of the English language. The letters put together in different combinations and numbers; represent a thing or a concept. This representation is a symbol.

Phonetics - The art of representing vocal sounds by signs and written characters.

The study of the sounds made by the human voice in speech, and their representation by written symbols.

Memorize - To learn thoroughly so as to hold in memory.

Know - To perceive, understand, or experience directly.

Learn - To get to know or gain knowledge of through study, experience or research.

Read - Examine and comprehend the meaning of (something written).

To obtain meaning by looking at words or symbols.

To examine and understand the meaning of something written.

Education - The knowledge acquired through a learning process.

To gain knowledge or information of; to ascertain by inquiry, study, or investigation; to receive instruction concerning; to fix in the mind; to acquire understanding of, or skill; as, to learn the way; to learn a lesson; to learn dancing; to learn to skate; to learn the violin; to learn the truth about something.

How does it all come together that a child begins reading and then expands upon what they know and read even more?

At Elan Esprit a child begins learning the alphabet, the sounds, and sight words simultaneously. Why do we teach reading in this manner? Children see words all around them. They watch their parents, teachers, etc. read. They also hear them reading. Reading is a grown-up thing to do, so children are very interested in learning this skill.

At the beginning they are simply reading symbols and often don't realize how the sounds of our speech connect to words and letters. They do have a meaning and understanding of the symbols. A child reads cat and understands what a cat is. A child reads mommy and knows what a mommy is. The definition of reading accomplished!

What about phonics. Yes, phonics is useful in the right amount as a child progresses in their reading ability. If you watch and listen to your child from the time they first start reading a few words to a bit of time later when they reading more and more words, you will begin to hear them connecting the sounds to the first letter of the word. Dog starts with d (sound) or dog starts with d (letter). This is an increase of the understanding of how letters can represent the sounds of speech in written form—generally an increased understanding of the English language in its written form.

I am often asked, "How can a child read without knowing the entire alphabet yet, or sounding out all of the letters to read the words. So let me ask you this? When you read, at a level that is easy for you, do you think about the letters and sounds in the word before knowing the word, or do you just see a word and understand it? I expect your answer will be the latter.

The other area to address with you is the purpose and use of what the child is learning. Reading is usually a very high interest activity. It is a bit unfair to sit a child down in class to spend months and months learning the alphabet letters and all of the sounds and rules to figure out words, then convince the child that this must be done to learn to read. Even they quickly know this is not true. On the other hand, if the child learns to read at the start, it is much easier to establish the purpose and use of the alphabet and phonics. When they are not allowed to do what alphabet and phonics are for—READING, this is a bit of a betrayal. Look at this from a child's view; working arduously to learn the alphabet and sounds yet not being able to do anything with these—Reading. Phonics is certainly a useful tool—but it is only a tool to accomplish the purpose, which is reading and then expanding the ability to read and spell. There are so many sounds and combinations of sounds, and many exceptions to the rule, in the English language.

The fact is many young children will resist or just put up with, studying letters and sounds day after day and month after month. It takes a long time for this study to become useful to the purpose of actually reading and enjoying reading. They could be told this activity is important, but to them it is not yet important. Those that consent are usually doing what teachers and parents tell them to do; they are following orders.

Education should be very personal to the child or adult being educated, not just regurgitation of data; leaders are not born of this ilk.

Occasionally we have a child that knows the entire alphabet and the first letter sounds, even as young as two. The realization of now applying this to reading will usually not come in until later. The solution: sight reading, with understanding, then, phonetics workbooks when conceptually ready to do more than just parrot the sounds. The whole subject will come together much faster.

Read - Examine and comprehend the meaning of (something written).

To obtain meaning by looking at words or symbols.

To examine and understand the meaning of something written.

Now, what happens when a child is reading and understanding what is being read but others, out of school, tell him or even just think he is not reading? This happens all too often. The child may decide he doesn't really know, or learn more slowly, or just be confused about what reading really is. This is also a bit rough on the certainty and confidence of a child's personal abilities.

It's an odd thing, but have you ever watched a child read that was told he had to sound out every word? This can be a very sad situation as the child thinks he cannot just know the word. He believes it is only known if sounded out. It is painful to listen to a child read with this consideration in the way of just knowing. It can also get in the way of understanding what is being read, as so much attention is on sounding each word out, rather than the fun of enjoying the story.

The ideal situation would be children reading a fair number of words—enough that they can read simple sentences, with understanding. Our students read about 35 books before diving into phonics workbooks. However they do continue to drill the sounds and the alphabet several days a week. They are continually being taught that: alphabet is the name give for all of the letters, that letters are to make words that name things or ideas and that each letter has one or more sounds.

As students progress in their study of phonics, being given simple books to read that have maybe one word every couple of pages (that can be sounded out). If there are new words (that do not follow the rules), they can ask what they are. Children can practice learning to read new words in this manner. Of course they do need their teachers and parents telling them what these new words mean as they come up. We encourage our students to ask if a word isn't known for reading or understanding.

I hope this information is helpful to you as parents and educators.

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The following dictionaries were used in defining the words on the first page:

Cambridge Dictionary
Webster Dictionary, 1913
Wordsmyth Dictionary
Wordsmyth Children's Dictionary