



Target the Problem: Word Decoding and Phonics

Decoding is the ability to apply your knowledge of letter-sound relationships, including knowledge of letter patterns, to correctly pronounce written words. Understanding these relationships gives children the ability to recognize familiar words quickly and to figure out words they haven't seen before. Although children may sometimes figure out some of these relationships on their own, most children benefit from explicit instruction in this area. Phonics is one approach to reading instruction that teaches students the principles of letter-sound relationships, how to sound out words, and exceptions to the principles.



What the problem looks like

A kid's perspective: What this feels like to me

Children will usually express their frustration and difficulties in a general way, with statements like "I hate reading!" or "This is stupid!". But if they could, this is how kids might describe how word decoding and phonics difficulties affect their reading:

- I just seem to get stuck when I try to read a lot of the words in this chapter.
- Figuring out the words takes so much of my energy, I can't even think about what it means.
- I don't know how to sound out these words.
- I know my letters and sounds, but I just can't read words on a page.

A parent's perspective: What I see at home

Here are some clues for parents that a child may have problems with word decoding and phonics:

- She often gets stuck on words when reading. I end up telling her many of the words.
- His reading is very slow because he spends so much time figuring out words.
- She's not able to understand much about what she's read because she's so busy trying to sound out the words.

- It's as if he doesn't know how to put the information together to read words.
- Saying "sound it out" to her just seems to make her more frustrated.
- He guesses at words based on the first letter or two; it's as if he doesn't pay close attention to the print.

A teacher's perspective: What I see in the classroom

Here are some clues for teachers that a student may have problems with word decoding and phonics:

- She has difficulty matching sounds and letters, which can affect reading and spelling.
- She decodes in a very labored manner.
- He has trouble reading and spelling phonetically.
- She has a high degree of difficulty with phonics patterns and activities.
- He guesses at words based on the first letter or two.
- Even though I taught several short vowel sounds (or other letter sounds or patterns), the corresponding letters are not showing up in his writing samples.
- Even though I taught certain letter patterns, she isn't able to recognize them when reading words.



How to help

With the help of parents and teachers, kids can learn strategies to overcome word decoding and phonics problems that affect their reading. Below are some tips and specific things to do.

What kids can do to help themselves

- Play with magnetic letters. See how quickly you can put them in alphabetical order while singing the alphabet song.
- Look at written materials around your house and at road signs to see if you can spot familiar words and letter patterns.
- Write notes, e-mails, and letters to your friends and family. Represent each sound you hear as you write.
- When you're trying to sound out a word, pay close attention to the print. Try to look at all the letters in the word, not just the first one or two.

What parents can do to help at home

- For a younger reader, help your child learn the letters and sounds of the alphabet. Occasionally point to letters and ask your child to name them.
- Help your child make connections between what he or she might see on a sign or in the newspaper and the letter and sound work he or she is doing in school.
- Encourage your child to write and spell notes, e-mails, and letters using what he knows about sounds and letters.
- Talk with your child about the “irregular” words that she’ll often see in what she’s reading. These are the words that don’t follow the usual letter-sound rules. These words include *said*, *are*, and *was*. Students must learn to recognize them “at sight.”
- Consider using computer software that focuses on developing phonics and emergent literacy skills. Some software programs are designed to support children in their writing efforts. For example, some programs encourage kids to construct sentences and then cartoon characters will act out the completed sentence. Other software programs provide practice with long and short vowel sounds and creating compound words.

What teachers can do to help at school

- Have students sort pictures and objects by the sound you’re teaching. At each stage, have children say the letter sound over and over again.
- Teach phonics in a systematic and explicit way. If your curriculum materials are not systematic and explicit, talk with your principal or reading specialist.
- Be sure to begin the systematic and explicit phonics instruction early; first grade would be best.
- Help students understand the purpose of phonics by engaging them in reading and writing activities that requires them to apply the phonics information you’ve taught them.
- Use manipulatives to help teach letter-sound relationships. These can include counters, sound boxes, and magnetic letters.
- Provide more of your instruction to students who you’ve divided into need-based groups.

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