

Tips for Teaching Word Recognition

Background

Before children can begin to read they need to understand the relationships between a symbol or a combination of symbols and the sound, or sounds, they represent. The ability to sound out or decode words is an important step in reading. When children correctly sound out a word, they are able to map it to their listening and speaking vocabulary. With a lot of practice, children begin to recognize many words automatically. The more words children recognize the easier it is for them to read. There will, however, always be unfamiliar words children must sound out. For this reason, decoding or sounding out words remains an important skill.

The understanding of sound/symbol relationships is complicated by the fact that some of the sounds in English are represented by more than one symbol or combination of symbols. For example the /f/ sound can be represented by the single consonant *f* as in *fat*, the consonant combination of *ph* as in *phone*, or *gh* as in *laugh*. There are many exceptions, especially when it comes to vowel sounds. For example the long *e* sound can be represented by *e* as in *me*, *ee* as in *bee*, *ei* as in *receive*, *ie* as in *believe*, *ea* as in *leaf*, and the e-consonant-silent *e* pattern as in *Pete*. Furthermore, some letters represent more than one sound, for example, the *c* in *car* and *circus* and *ea* in *dead*, *bead*, and *steak*. These exceptions faced by beginning and struggling readers make learning to read all the more challenging. However, it is important to point out that 84% of the words in English have regular and consistent spelling patterns, and only 3% are highly irregular.

There are strategies readers can use to read unfamiliar words. When you work with children who are having difficulty reading words, you can use the following strategies to help them decode, pronounce, and understand unfamiliar words. First help students attack words piece by piece. Remember, it is best to guide and model rather than tell. It is always good to ask if the word makes sense or sounds right in the sentence. But do not let the child struggle too long. If he or she cannot figure out a word after applying sound/symbol relationships and thinking about whether it makes sense, tell him or her the word and get on with reading.

Sound Out the Word

Beginning readers will know a limited number of sound/letter relationships, mainly beginning and ending sounds that they can apply to an unfamiliar word. As a tutor, you will want to guide them as they attempt to decode unfamiliar words

- ❑ Start with the first letter or letters, in the case of digraphs (*ch*, *sh*, *ie*, *ea*, *etc.*) and blends (*st*, *bl*, *dr*, *etc.*). Have the child sound out the letter(s). As needed, have the child sound out the letter(s) at the end and in the middle of an unfamiliar word. For example, if the child correctly sounds out the beginning letter and still does not know the word, have him or her sound out the ending letter(s). If a child has the beginning and ending sounds right but mispronounces the middle sound, point to or isolate the middle letters and ask him or her what sounds the letter(s) make.
- ❑ After sounding out the word, have the child blend the sounds together and try to say the word. Ask: *Does the word make sense in the sentence?*

Use Picture Clues

- Have the child look at the picture. This is a good strategy to confirm whether a word makes sense. For example, if they read *cat* instead of *cow* for the word *cow*, you can ask them to look at the picture and think about whether *cat* makes sense.
- Ask: *Are there people, objects, or actions in the picture that might make sense in the sentence?*
- A child can use a combination of sounding out a word and using picture clues to confirm. The following sample dialog between tutor and child uses banana as the unfamiliar word and demonstrates how to apply this approach.

T: What letter does this word start with?

C: *b*

T: Yes, it starts with the letter *b*. What sound does the letter *b* make?

C: No response

T: (after a 4-second wait) The letter *b* makes the /b/ sound. Say the sound with me: /b/. Again: /b/. What word that starts with *b* would make sense here? Look at the picture for a clue.

C: Banana

T: That's right, banana. Good job. Now read the whole sentence again.

Look for Word Chunks

- Have the child look for familiar letter chunks within a word. They may be sound/symbols, prefixes, suffixes, endings, whole words, or base words. Examples: *and* in *sand*, *eat* in *cheat*.
- Have a child read each chunk by itself. Then blend the chunks together and sound out the word. Ask: *Does this word make sense in the sentence?*
- Help a child to recognize common endings (*ing*, *ed*, *es*, *er*, *able*, *ness*, *tion*, *etc.*), and common prefixes (*un*, *re*, *in*, *dis*, *non*, *en*, *etc.*)

A sample tutor and child dialog on chunking follows. The unknown word is *dragging* in the phrase "dragging the jackal with him."

T: This word looks hard, but I think you can sound it out. Can you find an ending part that you know on this word?

C: *ing*

T: What sound does the *ing* make?

C: /ing/

T: Yes, it makes the /ing/ sound. Now cover the *ing* with your finger and see if you can sound out the rest of the word.

C: d...dr...drag

T: great. Now put that together with the ending sound.

C: dragging

T: Very good. Now read the phrase

C: dragging the jackal with him.

T: Good job. Do you think the phrase makes sense?

Apply Common Phonics Rules

Older readers can become familiar with certain phonics rules to help them decode. Since rules are not 100% reliable, a child should try the most common sound based on a rule first, and then check to see if the word sounded out makes sense. Common rules include:

- If there is one vowel between two or more consonants, try the short vowel sound. (*Examples: fat, flat, shack. Exceptions: mind, gold*)
- If there are two vowels between two or more consonants, try the long vowel sound. (*Examples: train, cheat, boat. Exceptions: bread, said, build*)
- If a one-syllable word ends with final e such as in cake, dive, and home, try the long vowel sound first. (*Exceptions: have*)
- If a vowel is followed by the letter r, it doesn't have the long or short vowel sound. (*Examples: bear, car, bird*)

Recognize Syllable Patterns

Older readers can learn to recognize syllable patterns in unfamiliar words. They can decode each syllable as if it were a single, smaller word then blend the syllables together. Often simply getting the first syllable will trigger the full word.

You can help children by helping them apply rules for dividing words into syllables. These rules include:

- If two consonants appear in the middle of a word try dividing the word between the two consonants, for example *mid/dle; nap/kin; won/der/ful*. In closed syllables the vowel sound is often short.
- When only one consonant appears between two vowels, have the child try dividing the word before the consonant. This makes an open syllable, or one that ends in a vowel. Often open syllables have a long vowel sound. Examples: *ti/ger; pa/per*. This rule works about 55% of the time. If it does not work, have the child divide the word after the consonant. In this case the vowel will be short. Examples: *nev/er; sec/ond*.
- Prefixes and suffixes will form a syllable. In words ending with *le* such as *simple* and *candle*, the *le* plus the preceding consonant form one syllable. Examples: *sim/ple; can/dle*

Tips for Teaching Word Recognition *(continued)*

Sample tutor and child dialogs on dividing a words (*hectic* and *reptiles*) into syllables follows.

Sample 1

T: Let's try dividing the word *hectic* into syllables and sounding out each syllable one at a time. I see two consonants *c* and *t*, in the middle of the word with a vowel on each side. I will try dividing the word between *c* and *t*. (Write the separated syllable on a piece of paper for the child.) This gives me two closed syllables. What do you know about the vowel sound in closed syllables?

C: It is usually a short sound.

T: That's right. Try the short sound in each syllable and see if that works.

C: /hec/ /tic/

T: Now put the two syllables together.

C: hectic

T: Great. Now reread the sentence to check if the word makes sense.

Sample 2

T: Look at this word: (*reptiles*). Where would you divide the word into two syllables?

C: Between the two middle consonants.

T: Good. Now let's look at each syllable. Is the sound long or short in the first syllable?

C: Short

T: That's right. Now look at the second syllable. What pattern does it have?

C: The vowel is followed by a consonant and a final *e*. I know that in this pattern the *e* is silent and the vowel makes a long sound.

T: Okay. Let's put the two syllables together and see if that works.

C: reptile

T: Good. Now read the sentence and see if that makes sense.

Connect to a Word You Know

- Ask the child if he or she knows of a word that looks like the unfamiliar word. Have him or her compare the familiar word to the unfamiliar word. Decide if the familiar word is a part of the unfamiliar word.
- Have the child use the known word in the sentence to see if it makes sense. If so, the meanings of the two words may be close enough for understanding.

Read again

- Have the student read the sentence more than once. Have him or her think about what word might make sense in the sentence. Try the word and see if the sentence makes sense.

Keep Reading

- Have the child read past the unfamiliar word and look for clues to help recognize the word.
- If the word is repeated, ask the child to compare the second sentence to the first. Ask: What word might make sense in both sentences?

Use Prior Knowledge

- Ask the child to think about what he or she knows about the subject of the book, paragraph, or sentence.
- Ask: *Do you know of a word that might make sense in the sentence? Say: Read the sentence with the word and see if it makes sense.*

As you guide the child in reading unfamiliar words use prompts. Example prompts include:

- Are there any letter sounds that you know in the word? What are they?
- What letter do you see at the beginning (end, or middle) of the word? What sound does it make?
- Can you think of a word that starts (ends) with this (these) sound(s) that would make sense in the sentence?
- Because that word has an *e* at the end what sound do you think the middle vowel makes?
- If the word was _____, what letter do you think would be at the beginning (end)?
- Look at the first letter(s) and sound it (them) out. Now try other letters. Blend the sounds together and say the word out loud. Does the word make sense?
- Are there any word parts in the word that you recognize? What are they?
- You read the word _____. Does the word make sense in the sentence?
- What word would make sense here?
- Read the sentence again and check each word.
- Look at the picture to see if that word makes sense.

Use the following prompt when working with word families or words with similar patterns.

- Does the word look like any other word you know? How is it different?

Use the following prompt when a child struggles with multisyllable words.

- Let's break the word into smaller parts and try to read each part. Then let's blend or put the parts together to make the word.

Remember, when a child reads a word incorrectly, ask if a word makes sense in the sentence. Help the child to self-correct. And always provide positive responses and praise him or her for trying.