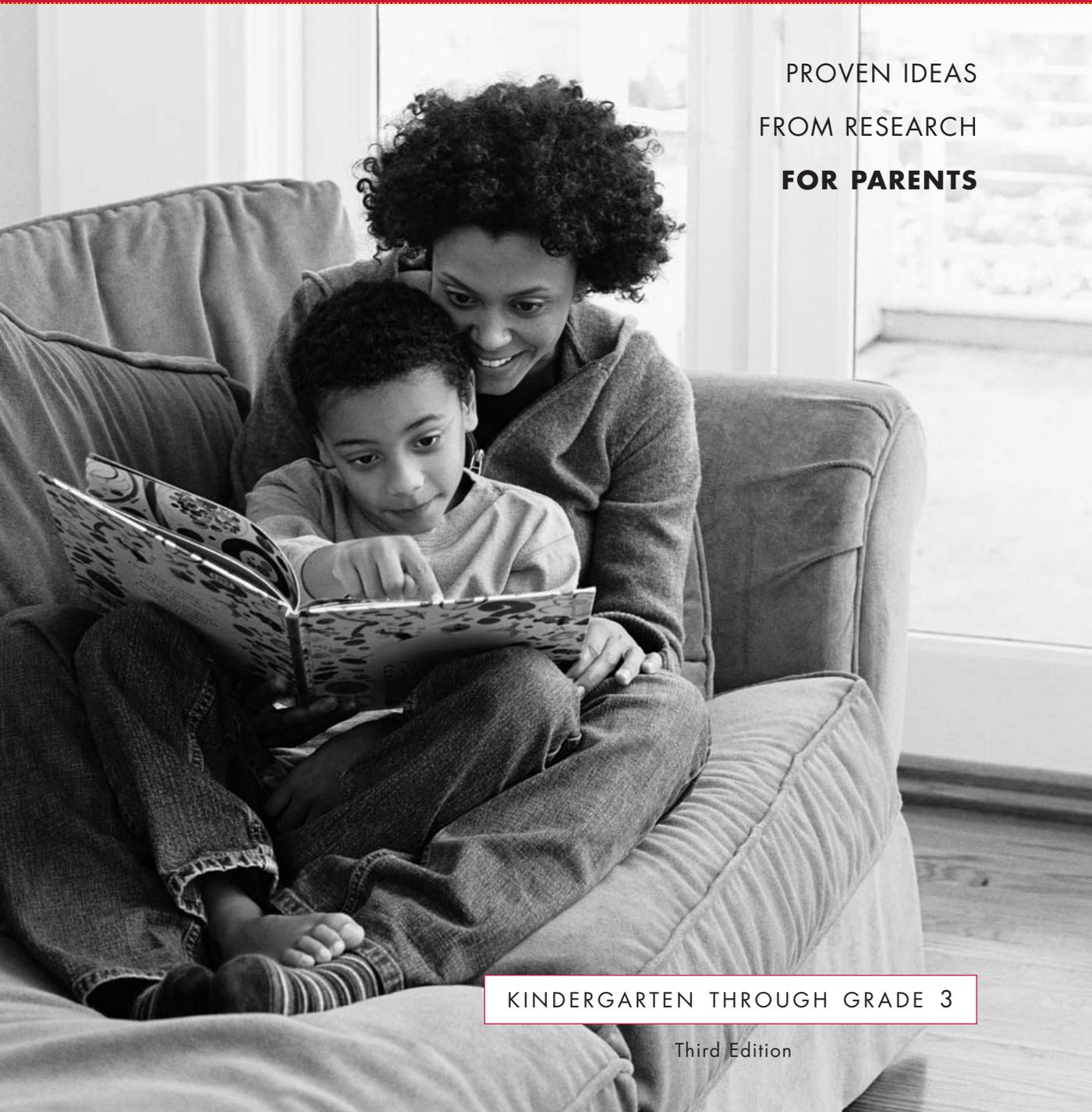


A Child Becomes a Reader

PROVEN IDEAS
FROM RESEARCH
FOR PARENTS



KINDERGARTEN THROUGH GRADE 3

Third Edition

The Building Blocks of Reading and Writing



From several decades of research, we have learned a lot about how children learn to read and write. This research tells us that to become more skilled and confident readers over time, children need lots of opportunities to:

- Build **spoken language** by talking and listening
- Learn about print and books
- Learn about the sounds of spoken language (this is called **phonological awareness**)
- Learn about the letters of the alphabet
- Be read to and read on their own
- Learn and use letter-sound relationships (this is called **phonics**) and be able to recognize words when they see them
- Spell and write
- Develop their ability to read quickly and naturally (this is called **fluency**)
- Learn new words and build their knowledge of what words mean (this is called **vocabulary**)
- Build their knowledge of the world
- Build their ability to understand what they read (this is called **comprehension**)

Talking and listening

Remember the old saying “children should be seen and not heard”? Research tells us that for children to become readers, they should listen and talk a lot.

By the time children are one year old, they already know a lot about spoken language—talking and listening. They recognize some speech sounds. They know which sounds make the words that are important to them. They begin to imitate those sounds. Children learn all of this by listening to family members talk. Even “baby talk,” which exaggerates the sounds and rhythms of words, makes a contribution to children’s ability to understand language. Children who do not hear a lot of talk and who are not encouraged to talk themselves often have problems learning to read.

The main source of information in this booklet is the report of the National Reading Panel, Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction. This report, along with the other reports and books listed at the back of this booklet, offers more research-based information about how children learn to read and write.

Print and books

Even though books don't come with operating instructions, we use them in certain ways. We hold them right-side up. We turn the pages one at a time. We read lines of words starting at the left and moving to the right. Knowing about print and books and how they are used is called **print awareness**.

Print awareness is an important part of knowing how to read and write. Children who know about print understand that the words they see in print and the words they speak and hear are related. They will use and see print a lot, even when they're young—on signs and billboards, in alphabet books and storybooks, and in labels, magazines, and newspapers. They see family members use print, and they learn that print is all around them and that it is used for different purposes.

Sounds in spoken language

Some words rhyme. Sentences are made up of separate words. Words have parts called **syllables**. The words *bag*, *ball*, and *bug* all begin with the same sound. When a child begins to notice and understand these things, he is developing phonological awareness—the ability to hear and work with the sounds of spoken language.

When a child also begins to understand that spoken words are made up of separate, small sounds, he is developing **phonemic awareness**. These individual sounds in spoken language are called **phonemes**. For example, the word *big* has three phonemes, /b/, /i/, and /g/.*

Children who have phonemic awareness can take spoken words apart sound by sound (the name for this is **segmentation**) and put together sounds to make words (the name for this is **blending**). Research shows that how easily children learn to read can depend on how much phonological and phonemic awareness they have.

The ABCs

Singing the alphabet song is more than just a fun activity. Children who go to kindergarten already knowing the shapes and names of the letters of the alphabet, and how to write them, have a much easier time learning to read. Knowing the names and shapes of letters is sometimes called **alphabetic knowledge**.

Reading aloud

Reading aloud to children has been called the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for success in reading. Reading aloud, with children participating actively, helps children learn new words, learn more about the world, learn about written language, and see the connection between words that are spoken and words that are written.

* A letter between slash marks, /b/, shows the phoneme, or sound, that the letter represents, and not the name of the letter. For example, the letter *b* represents the sound /b/.

Phonics and word-study skills

Phonics instruction helps beginning readers see the relationships between the sounds of spoken language and the letters of written language. Understanding these relationships gives children a tool that they can use to recognize familiar words quickly and to figure out words they haven't seen before.

Word-study instruction is the step that follows phonics instruction. It helps older children learn to apply their phonics knowledge and knowledge of word parts (such as **prefixes**, **suffixes**, and **root words**) as they read and write words. Rapid **word recognition** means that children spend less time struggling over words and have more time getting meaning from what they read, which, of course, is the real purpose for reading.

Spelling and writing

Children learn more about how print works when they spell and write on their own. When they begin to write, children draw and scribble. Later, they use what they are learning about sounds and letters when they try to write words. This often is called **invented**, or **developmental, spelling**. Because invented spelling encourages children to think about the sounds in words and how the sounds are related to letters, it can help preschool and kindergarten children develop both as readers and writers. However, after kindergarten, children need well-organized, systematic lessons in spelling to help them become good spellers.

Fluency

Fluency is the word for being able to read quickly and accurately. Fluent readers recognize words automatically. They are able to group words quickly to help them get the meaning of what they read. When fluent readers read aloud, they read smoothly and with expression. Their reading sounds natural, like speech. Readers who have not yet developed fluency read slowly, word by word. Sometimes, their oral reading is choppy and plodding. They may make a lot of mistakes.

Most beginning readers do not read fluently. However, by the end of first grade, children should be reading their grade level books fluently.

Vocabulary and knowledge of the world

Vocabulary is the name for words we must know in order to listen, speak, read, and write effectively. Time and again researchers have found strong connections between the size of children's vocabularies, how well they comprehend what they read, and how well they do in school.

Children who are poor readers often do not have the vocabulary knowledge they need to get meaning from what they read. Because reading is difficult for them, they cannot and do

not read very much. As a result, they may not see new words in print often enough to learn them. Good readers read more, become better readers, and learn more words; poor readers read less, become poorer readers, and learn fewer words.

Children learn vocabulary in two ways: *indirectly*, by hearing and seeing words as they listen, talk, and read; and *directly* by parents and teachers teaching them the meanings of certain words.

Vocabulary and knowledge of the world are, of course, very closely tied together. Children who know something about the world are much better able to understand what they read about in school.

Comprehension

Comprehension means getting meaning from what we read. It is the heart of reading. Research shows that knowledge of letter-sound relationships and comprehension go hand-in-hand. If children can sound out the words but don't understand what they are reading, they're not really reading.

Children can build their comprehension by learning to use mental plans, or strategies, to get meaning as they read. These strategies include using what they already know to make sense of what they read, making predictions, paying attention to the way a reading selection is organized, creating mental pictures, asking questions, and summarizing.

Kindergarten



WHAT TO DO AT HOME

Talk often with your child to build listening and talking skills

1. **Talk with your child often...as you eat together, shop for groceries, walk to school, wait for a bus.** As she gets ready for school, ask about the stories and poems she is reading and what projects she has in science or art time. Ask about friends and classmates (encourage her to use their names) and to describe the games they like to play together. Ask questions that will encourage her to talk, and not just give “yes” or “no” answers.
2. **Have your child use his imagination to make up and tell you stories. Ask questions that will encourage him to expand the stories.**

PARENT TALK

“Why didn’t the dog just run away?”

“Where did the boy live?”

“What kind of eyes did the monster have?”

3. **Have a conversation about recent family photographs.** Ask your child to describe each picture: who is in it, what’s happening, and where the picture was taken.
4. **Listen to your child’s questions patiently and answer them just as patiently.** If you don’t know the answer to a question, work together to find one (look things up in a book or on the computer, for example).
5. **Talk about books that you’ve read together.** Ask your child about favorite parts and characters and answer his questions about events or characters.
6. **Pay attention to how much TV your child is watching.** Set aside “no TV” time each day and use that time to talk together.

7. **Tell stories about your childhood.** Make a story out of something that happened, such as a special birthday or a visit to a zoo or city.

Show your child how books and print work

1. **As you read with your child, have him point out such things as front and back covers and the title.** Have him point out the names of authors and illustrators and tell what those people do. Have him show you where you should start reading on a page.
2. **Help your child make connections between print and pictures as you read.** Have him find details in the pictures, then help her find and point to the words that name those details.

Focus your child's attention on the sounds of spoken language

1. **Sing or say nursery rhymes and songs.**
2. **Play word games.**

PARENT TALK

*"How many words can you say that rhyme with **fox**? With **bill**?"*

3. **Read a story or poem and ask your child to listen for words that begin with the same sound.** Have her say the words. Then have her say another word that begins with that sound.
4. **As you read, stop and say a simple word.** Have your child say the sounds in the word, write the letters for the sounds, and then read what she wrote.

PARENT TALK

*"'The dog is big.' **Big**. Can you say the sounds in **big**? Now can you write the letters for the sounds? Good. Now read the word to me."*

Have your child identify and name the letters of the alphabet

1. **Point out letters and have your child name them.**
2. **Make an alphabet book with your child.** Have her draw pictures or cut pictures from magazines or use old photos. Paste each picture into the book. With your child, write the first letter of the word that stands for the object or person in the picture (for example, B for **bird**, M for **milk**, and so on).

Support what your child is learning in school about the relationship between letters and sounds

1. **Point out labels, boxes, newspapers, magazines, and signs that display words with letter-sound relationships that your child is learning in kindergarten.**
2. **Listen to your child read words and books from school.** Be patient and listen as your child practices. Let your child know you are proud of what he is learning.

Encourage your child to spell and write

1. **When your child is writing, encourage her to spell words by using what she knows about sounds and letters.**
2. **Encourage your child to write notes, e-mails, and letters to family members and friends.** You may have your child tell you the message for you to write and include with her original work.
3. **Have your child create his own picture book made with his own drawings or with pictures that he cuts from magazines.** Help him to label the pictures. Include pictures that illustrate the new words he is learning.

Help your child build vocabulary, knowledge of the world, and comprehension

1. **As you read aloud, pause from time to time to ask him about the meaning of the book.** Help him make connections between his life and what's happening in the book. Explain new ideas and words to him. Encourage your child to ask questions about the book. Ask him to retell the story, or to tell in his own words what the book was about.

PARENT TALK

"What was your favorite part of the story? Why did you like it?"

"What new things did you learn from this book?"

"Why do you think Sam got lost? Sam said he wanted to explore the forest.

Explore means he wanted to find out what was in the forest."

2. **Use and repeat important words such as names of buildings, parks, zoos, cities, and other places that you visit.**
3. **Help your child develop an interest in the world.** Read to her from your magazines and newspapers, as well as from informational (nonfiction) children's books. Help her to explore ideas and interests by using appropriate web sites.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOMS

In effective kindergarten classrooms, you will see literacy instruction that focuses on:

Developing talking and listening abilities

The teacher shows children appropriate ways to talk and listen, ask and answer questions, and give and follow directions.

The children talk with teachers and classmates about what they have read and heard. They retell stories that they have heard read aloud. They make up and tell their own stories. They may pretend to be characters in play centers.

"Let's play restaurant!"
"I like this book. It's about snakes!"
"I'll be the princess, and you be the prince."

Teaching about books and print

The teacher shows children how books should be handled, how they are read from front to back, from the top to the bottom of a page, and from left to right on a page. He talks about the various kinds of print in the classroom, including their meaning and purpose.

The children enjoy books and reading. They see lots of print around them being used in many ways. They are curious about the print and eager to learn what it means.

"What does this word say?"
"You're supposed to write your name on your folder."
"See that list over there? I know those color names!"

Teaching about the alphabet

The teacher helps children learn the names and shapes of all the letters of the alphabet and encourages the children to play with letters and to write using letters.

The children listen to the teacher read them an alphabet book, then sing the alphabet song. Some children play with plastic letters, while others say the letters as they write their own names.

*"That's **M!** **M** is the first letter in my name."*
*"I'm going to find all the **e**'s on this page."*
"This is my favorite ABC book."

Teaching the sounds of spoken language

The teacher provides explicit instruction in phonological awareness and phonemic awareness. The teacher has children put together sounds (blending) to make words and break words into separate sounds (segmentation). As the children write, he promotes phonemic awareness by encouraging them to use what they know about the sounds that make up words.

The children have fun with the sounds of words. Early in the year, they tell which words in a story rhyme; they may make up their own nonsense rhymes. A little later in the year, they listen for the beginning sounds of the words in a poem. They also may clap out the number of syllables in their names and in words. Late in the year, they put together and take apart the separate sounds in words. They begin to relate sounds to letters and to write the letters for the sounds that they hear.

Teaching phonics

The teacher uses **explicit instruction** to teach children a set of the most useful letter-sound relationships.

The children read easy books that contain words with the letter-sound relationships they are learning. They are also writing the relationships they know in words, sentences, messages, and their own stories.

PHONEMIC AWARENESS

What blending and segmentation look like

Phoneme blending: Teachers say a word **phoneme** by **phoneme**, then have the children repeat the sequence of **phonemes** and combine the **phonemes** to say the word.

Teacher: /s/ /u/ /n/

Children: /s/ /u/ /n/; *sun*.

Phoneme segmentation: Teachers say a word, then have the children break it into its separate **phonemes**, saying each one as they tap out or count it.

Teacher: *Slim*

Children: /s/ /l/ /i/ /m/.

Teacher: How many sounds are in *slim*?

Children: Four sounds.

Developing spelling and writing

The teacher has children practice their new writing skills in groups with other children and at learning centers. She makes spelling development a part of writing activities.

The children depending on the time of the year, scribble, draw, label pictures, and use their growing knowledge of sounds and letters to write messages. They are becoming aware of correct spellings for some words, especially their names.

Building vocabulary and knowledge of the world

The teacher talks with the children about important new words and ideas as she reads aloud. She helps them connect the new words to their own knowledge and experiences. She discusses words that are most important for understanding the reading selection. She emphasizes words that the children are likely to see and use often and teaches children the meaning of new words over an extended period of time. She thinks about the content of the books that she reads to the children and chooses books that build on and expand children's knowledge.

The children learn lots of new words and like to share their new words with their families. They see the teacher's enthusiasm for words and enjoy playing with words and language. They use words that are important to their schoolwork, such as the names for colors, shapes, and numbers. They explore new ideas and learn new words.

*"This is the picture I drew today. It's an octopus.
I'll show you—it has eight legs!"
"We learned about circles today. This plate is a circle."*

Building comprehension

The teacher reads aloud to children often and discusses books before, during, and after reading. She reads many different kinds of books, including "make-believe" (fiction), "real" (nonfiction), and poetry. She shows children how good readers get meaning from what they read.

The children listen to and understand what is read to them. They answer the teacher's questions. They make connections between what they already know and what they are reading about. They talk about what they learned from nonfiction books they have read, and they retell or act out important events in stories. They identify the characters, settings, and events in stories.

*"I learned that you can't see across the ocean!"
"I have a cat that looks just like the cat in that story!"
"I want to be the Little Red Hen!"*

WHAT CHILDREN SHOULD BE ABLE TO DO BY THE END OF KINDERGARTEN

The following is a list of some accomplishments that you can expect of your child by the end of kindergarten. This list is based on research in the fields of reading, early childhood education, and child development. Remember, though, that children don't develop and learn at the same pace and in the same way. Your child may be more advanced or need more help than others in her age group. You are, of course, the best judge of your child's abilities and needs. You should take the accomplishments as guidelines and not as hard-and-fast rules. If you have concerns about your child's reading development, talk to his teacher.

Books and print

By the end of kindergarten, a child:

- Knows the parts of a book and how books are held and read
- Identifies a book's title and understands what authors and illustrators do
- Follows print from left to right and from top to bottom of a page when stories are read aloud
- Understands the relationship between print and pictures
- Understands that the message of most books is in the print and not the pictures

The alphabet

By the end of kindergarten, a child:

- Recognizes the shapes and names of all the letters in the alphabet (both uppercase and lowercase letters)
- Writes many uppercase and lowercase letters on his own

Sounds in spoken language

By the end of kindergarten, a child:

- Understands that spoken words are made up of separate sounds
- Recognizes and makes rhymes
- Identifies words that have the same beginning sound
- Puts together, or blends, spoken sounds into simple words

Phonics and word recognition

By the end of kindergarten, a child:

- Knows a number of letter-sound relationships
- Understands that the order of letters in a written word represents the order of sounds in a spoken word
- Recognizes some common words on sight, such as *a, the, I, said, you, is, are*

Reading

By the end of kindergarten, a child:

- Listens carefully to books read aloud
- Asks and answers questions about stories
- Uses what he already knows to help him understand a story
- Predicts what will happen in a story based on pictures or information in the story
- Retells and/or acts out stories
- Knows the difference between “made-up” (fiction) and “real” (nonfiction) books and the difference between stories and poems

Spelling and writing

By the end of kindergarten, a child:

- Uses phonemic awareness and letter knowledge to spell and write words
- Begins to spell some words correctly
- Writes his own first and last name and the first names of some friends, classmates, or family members
- Writes some letters and words as they are said to her

Vocabulary and knowledge of the world

By the end of kindergarten, a child:

- Plays with and is curious about words and language
- Uses new words in her own speech
- Knows and uses words that are important to school work, such as the names for colors, shapes, and numbers
- Knows and uses words that are important to daily life, such as street names and addresses and names for community workers

The main source for this list of accomplishments is Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children. For more information about this book, see Bibliography in the back of this booklet.