

## Learning to read

Knowing how to read is key to success in almost everything kids do in school and, of course, into adulthood. Only about 5% of kids learn to read easily, another 20 to 30% learn to read relatively easily, and about 60% of kids face real challenges in learning to read.

There are two main strategies for teaching reading: phonics (teaching the alphabet and sounds of letters and blends of letters) and whole language (learning whole words often with pictures, using kid's experiences to create words and sentences, using good illustrated books interesting to kids). There is no one best way to teach kids to read, and research shows both phonics and whole language are necessary.

The phonics approach is most familiar, but phonics alone will not prepare a child to read, at least not in English. The English language is just not phonetically consistent. For example, the word *read* can be pronounced with either with a long or short e sound. And phonics won't help sort out *too*, *to*, and *two*. The best reading teaching seems to be when phonics skills are taught in interesting and stimulating contexts, with real literature, and focusing on meaning. This approach is called balanced literacy.

Whatever happens when kids get to school, research suggests that early literacy experiences are important. Giving books to infants, reading to and with toddlers, focusing on vocabulary, and choosing literacy skills focused television programs (like Sesame Street or Reading Rainbow) are helpful.

As students move beyond fourth grade, teaching reading is still important but focuses more on comprehension and is most effective when it is integrated with other subject matter, like socials, science or math.

To learn more about balanced literacy see *Classrooms That Work: They Can All Read and Write* by Patricia Cunningham and Richard Allington.

Sandra Mathison  
Professor of Education, UBC and McBride parent  
sandra.mathison@ubc.ca