

# Phonemic Awareness and Phonics

By

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The role of phonics in learning to read has been a matter of some controversy. Phonics proponents have argued that reading success depends on the early mastery of the alphabetic principle (the idea that letters and letter combinations represent the sounds of language), while opponents have challenged this idea, claiming English spelling patterns are too complex and inconsistent to support successful learning. But what does the research say? Does phonics instruction improve children's reading development or not?

## National Reading Panel Findings

The National Reading Panel (NRP) examined the research on phonics instruction for the U.S. Congress (NICHD, 2000). NRP was required to determine what the research findings were in an objective and systematic way, and its summary is the best and most current review of phonics published. The findings of the NRP phonics report are consistent with earlier examinations of the



research (most notably the landmark reviews conducted by Marilyn Adams [1990] and Jeanne Chall [1967]). Something that makes the NRP phonics findings even more convincing is the fact that a rereview of the evidence by critics of the report resulted in similar outcomes (Camilli, Vargas, & Yurecko, 2003).

The National Reading Panel examined 38 studies on the teaching of phonics and found that it provided young children with a clear benefit in learning to read—students who were taught phonics made faster early progress and ended up with higher reading achievement. Additionally, NRP looked at studies of phonemic awareness instruction (instruction that teaches children to hear the sounds within words—an important prerequisite to developing phonics skills). NRP found, on the basis of 52 studies, that phonemic awareness instruction also conferred a clear learning benefit to children. The panel concluded that phonemic awareness and phonics both should be taught and that it was important to carefully coordinate the teaching of these skills to ensure that students made maximum progress in reading.



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## Applications

Phonemic awareness instruction should begin in kindergarten and first grade and should continue until children develop the ability to hear the sounds (or phonemes) within words. A word like *cat* has three phonemes (three distinct language sounds), and a word like *ship* has three as well (it is the number of distinct speech sounds, not the number of letters). For beginning readers the goal is to develop full segmentation ability, which means children must learn to divide words or nonsense words into all of their sounds: *sh-i-p*. With this degree of phonemic awareness proficiency, students can hear the sounds sufficiently to be able to make clear connections between sounds and letter patterns. Studies indicated that children learn phonemic awareness best in small groups and that knowledge of letter names should be taught simultaneously with phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness programs were most effective when they were kept simple—not trying to teach too many skills at one time—and when objects (such as counters or letter cards) were used to help students think about the sounds. Most children can develop sufficient phonemic awareness skills in kindergarten and first grade, but if they fail to do so, later instruction was still found beneficial.

The teaching of phonics is most important in grades K–2, the years when phonics instruction was found to improve all aspects of reading and spelling ability. In the upper grades, phonics can still help students with word recognition. Phonics instruction includes the teaching of letter-sound correspondences, the pronunciations of spelling patterns, and decoding skills (that is how to apply this phonics knowledge to the reading and spelling of unknown words, including how to blend the sounds together). Effective

phonics instruction should be systematic; that means it should be based on a well-planned, sequential phonics curriculum that supports daily teaching. As with phonemic awareness, it is best to teach simpler concepts (such as the sounds of individual letters, the *b sound* or the *s sound*) prior to introducing more complicated ones (e.g., when the letter *c* sounds like a *k* or an *s*). Similarly, it is best to teach patterns that have a high frequency in written English prior to focusing attention on those patterns that are less useful (the consonant-vowel-consonant pattern in words like *mat, bed, sip, top, cup* is more common than the *-tion* pattern used in words like *nation*). Phonics instruction should have clearly specified learning goals and sufficient numbers of lessons to ensure those goals can be accomplished successfully.

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It should be obvious that a sound program of phonemic awareness and phonics instruction is an essential ingredient in early reading success. This instruction needs to be systematic and well coordinated, ensuring that children can hear the language sounds within words prior to trying to match those sounds with letters.

## Biography

Timothy Shanahan is Professor of Urban Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago where he is Director of the UIC Center for Literacy. He recently returned from a leave of absence that allowed him to work as the Executive Director of the Chicago Reading Initiative for the Chicago Public Schools, a school improvement initiative serving 437,000 children. His research focuses on the relationship of reading and writing, school improvement, the assessment of reading ability, and family literacy. Dr. Shanahan is currently Vice President of the International Reading Association and

is on the Board of Advisors of the National Family Literacy Center. He has published more than 100 books, chapters and articles on reading and writing. He served on the White House Assembly on Reading, and the National Reading Panel, a group convened by the National Institute of Child Health and Development at the request of Congress to evaluate research on successful methods of teaching reading. He currently chairs two other federal panels: one that is reviewing literacy research on language minority children and one on preschool and family literacy. He is co-editor of the *Illinois Reading Council Journal*.

A former primary grade teacher, Dr. Shanahan earned his M.A. at Oakland University and his Ph.D. at the University of Delaware in Reading Education. He received the Albert J. Harris Award for outstanding research on reading disability and the Milton D. Jacobson Readability Research Award, both from the International Reading Association. He earned the Amoco Award for Outstanding Teaching and the University of Delaware Presidential Citation for Outstanding Achievement. He was inducted into the Illinois Council Hall of Fame in 2002.

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