

# Strategies for Creating Independent Readers

**Phonological awareness** is a broad skill that includes identifying and manipulating units of oral language - parts such as words, syllables, and onsets and rimes. Children who have phonological awareness are able to identify and make oral rhymes, can clap out the number of syllables in a word, and can recognize words with the same initial sounds like *money* and *mother*.

**Phonemic awareness** refers to the specific ability to focus on and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words. Phonemes are the smallest units comprising spoken language. Phonemes combine to form syllables and words. The word *mat*, for example, has three phonemes, /m/ /a/ /t/. There are 44 phonemes in the English language, including sounds represented by letter combinations such as /th/. Acquiring phonemic awareness is important because it is the foundation for spelling and word recognition skills. *Phonemic awareness is one of the best predictors of how well children will learn to read during the first two years of school instruction.*

## 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.

**Vocabulary** refers to the words we must understand to communicate effectively. Educators often consider four types of vocabulary: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening vocabulary refers to the words we need to know to understand what we hear. Speaking vocabulary consists of the words we use when we speak. Reading vocabulary refers to the words we need to know to understand what we read. Writing vocabulary consists of the words we use in writing.

**Vocabulary** plays a fundamental role in the reading process, and contributes greatly to a reader's comprehension. A reader cannot understand a text without knowing what most of the words mean. Students learn the meanings of most words indirectly, through everyday experiences with oral and written language. Other words are learned through carefully designed instruction.

## What parents can do to help at home

- Engage your child in conversations every day. If possible, include new and interesting words in your conversation.
- Read to your child each day. When the book contains a new or interesting word, pause and define the word for your child. After you're done reading, engage your child in a conversation about the book.
- Help build word knowledge by classifying and grouping objects or pictures while naming them.
- Help build your child's understanding of language by playing verbal games and telling jokes and stories.
- Encourage your child to read on his own. The more children read, the more words they encounter and learn.

**Fluency** is defined as the ability to read with speed, accuracy, and proper expression. In order to understand what they read, children must be able to *read fluently* whether they are reading aloud or silently. When reading aloud, fluent readers read in phrases and add intonation appropriately. Their reading is smooth and has expression. Children who do not read with fluency sound choppy and awkward. Those students may have difficulty with decoding skills or they may just need more practice with speed and smoothness in reading. Fluency is also important for motivation; children who find reading laborious tend not to want read! As readers head into upper elementary grades, fluency becomes increasingly important. The volume of reading required in the upper elementary years escalates dramatically. Students whose reading is slow or labored will have trouble meeting the reading demands of their grade level.

#### What parents can do to help at home

- Support and encourage your child. Realize that he or she is likely frustrated by reading.
- Check with your child's teachers to find out their assessment of your child's word decoding skills.
- If your child can decode words well, help him or her build speed and accuracy by:
  - Reading aloud and having your child match his voice to yours
  - Having your child practice reading the same list of words, phrase, or short passages several times
  - Reminding your child to pause between sentences and phrases
- Read aloud to your child to provide an example of how fluent reading sounds.
- Give your child books with predictable vocabulary and clear rhythmic patterns so the child can "hear" the sound of fluent reading as he or she reads the book aloud. Use books on tapes

### Comprehension:

*Comprehension* is the understanding and interpretation of what is read. To be able to accurately understand written material, children need to be able to 1) decode what they read; 2) make connections between what they read and what they already know; and 3) think deeply about what they have read. One big part of comprehension is having a sufficient vocabulary, or knowing the meanings of enough words.

Readers who have strong comprehension are able to draw conclusions about what they read - what is important, what is a fact, what caused an event to happen, which characters are funny. Thus comprehension involves combining reading with thinking and reasoning.

#### What parents can do to help at home

- Hold a conversation and discuss what your child has read. Ask your child probing questions about the book and connect the events to his or her own life. For example, say "I wonder why that girl did that?" or "How do you think he felt? Why?" and "So, what lesson can we learn here?".
- Help your child make connections between what he or she reads and similar experiences he has felt, saw in a movie, or read in another book.
- Help your child monitor his or her understanding. Teach her to continually ask herself whether she understands what she's reading.
- Help your child go back to the text to support his or her answers.
- Discuss the meanings of unknown words, both those he reads and those he hears.
- Read material in short sections, making sure your child understands each step of the way.
- Discuss what your child has learned from reading informational text such as a science or social studies book.