



The Big Six: a guide for families

Research has shown that there are six key components that contribute to successful beginning reading. Because of the importance of these components, they have become known as 'The Big Six': oral language, phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. In the early years of schooling, literacy lessons will incorporate The Big Six.

Oral language

How does oral language contribute to reading success?

Oral language is the foundation of all literacy skills. If children experience rich oral language when young by talking with and listening to adults and other children, they will have a large 'bank' of spoken vocabulary, words they understand when used in spoken communication (see [Vocabulary](#) below).

Children will have heard and joined in word play and rhyming and be aware of the sounds of English (see [Phonological awareness](#) below). They will be familiar with lots of different sentence types and understand how language can change in different situations (see [Fluency](#) below). They understand that words have meanings and that we use language to communicate information, ideas, feelings and thoughts (see [Comprehension](#) below).

What can parents can do at home to encourage oral language?

Parents can support children in their oral language development by providing a variety of opportunities for children to listen and talk for different purposes.

Here are some of the best ways parents can encourage oral language:

- Talk to your child and listen responsively. Ask and answer questions.
- Read aloud to your child at least once a day. Good books expose children to vocabulary and sentence structures that they won't hear in everyday situations. Research has shown that reading aloud to children is a major factor in their success in learning to read at school.
- Talk about the books you read aloud with your child. Ask your child about the characters, plot or setting; the themes and ideas raised by the book; topics they'd like to read or learn more about as a result of reading aloud.

You'll find more suggestions for things parents can do to support oral language development in the For families section on the Literacy Hub.

Vocabulary

How does vocabulary contribute to reading success?

When children have a large 'spoken' vocabulary, meaning they use and understand lots of different words, they are well placed to recognise and understand those words when they see them when reading.

Words can be broken up into three groups, sometimes called 'Tiers'.

Tier 1 vocabulary is the words most frequently used when speaking and writing; words like *the*, *and*, *was*, *some* and 'everyday' words like *dog*, *happy*, *play*, *go*. These words are also called 'high frequency' or 'sight words' because readers will see them in lots of different texts and need to be able to recognise them automatically, by sight. Many Tier 1 words can't be 'sounded out', their spelling doesn't directly correspond to the way we say them; for example, **was** is pronounced /**wɒz**/, this is another reason they need to be learnt 'by sight'.

Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary contains more sophisticated and subject-specific words. Children who hear a wide range of words used in talk and through books read aloud will be better able to understand those words when they begin to read them in books.

What can parents can do at home to assist with vocabulary learning?

As with oral language, parents can best support their children in learning vocabulary by encouraging them to talk and listen for a range of different purposes and reading aloud to them often. Children learn new words by hearing them used meaningfully many times and by being encouraged to use new words in their own talk. Other ways to support vocabulary learning include the following:

- Become 'word aware' as you read aloud. One of the best places for children to hear new words used meaningfully is in great children's literature. Comment on words you know are new to your child. What do they sound like, what could they mean, what do they remind you of?
- Get your children to become 'word detectives' when out and about. Notice new and interesting words on street signs, at the zoo or museum, on menus or on pamphlets.
- Use a wide vocabulary when speaking to your child. Encourage children to ask the meanings of unfamiliar words and to use new words in their own spoken communication.

Phonological awareness

How does phonological awareness contribute to reading success?

Phonological awareness is the ability to hear the sounds within language. Children with good phonological awareness can hear:

- words and word spaces in language
- syllables (a unit of pronunciation with one vowel sound, **cat** has one syllable, **water** has two syllables)
- rhyme (two or more words with the same ending sound, **ring, sing, thing**)
- alliteration (two or more words with the same beginning sound, **Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers**)
- phonemes (the individual sounds within a word, **dog** has three phonemes, **d-o-g**).

Being able to hear or 'isolate' these sounds gives children a foundation for learning to manipulate the sounds of sentences and words as they learn to read and spell.

What can parents can do at home to encourage phonological awareness?

- Read aloud books or poems with rhyming words at the end of lines or sentences. Allow children to join in and predict the next rhyming word.
- Listen for and clap with the syllables of familiar and new words, for example, **jump-ing, wa-ter, ha-ppi-ness, fab-u-lous**.
- Sing songs, say nursery rhymes, chants, riddles, silly poems, tongue twisters and jokes.

Phonics

How does phonics contribute to reading success?

Phonics builds on phonological awareness. During phonics lessons at school, children learn to connect the sound or phoneme to the letter of the alphabet or group of letters that is used to represent it. Learn more about phonics in the Guide for families on the For families section of the Hub.

What can parents can do at home to assist with phonics learning?

- Teach children to write their name. Use a capital letter at the beginning and lower case for the rest of the letters. Write it for them and let them trace it, copy it, make it from play dough or draw it in sand.
- Point out words and letters when reading together. 'There's the letter *M*, it says mmm for Mummy. Can you see the *S* that says sss for Sam?'
- Encourage children to find the letters in their name or the names of family members and in other places such as books, signs, product packaging and shop windows.
- Point out different fonts, different ways to write the same letter, when reading and in your local environment.

Fluency

How does fluency contribute to reading success?

Reading fluency refers to the ease with which children read. When reading aloud, fluency is affected by accuracy, rate and expression. To assist children to practise reading fluently in the early years of school, teachers often ask them to read aloud easier or familiar books. This lets children read confidently as they automatically and accurately recognise words, read at a rate that sounds more like spoken language and use a range of expression, intonation, pauses and rhythm.

Fluency makes oral reading more lively and allows the author's message to be communicated more clearly. Being able to read fluently gives young readers confidence in their own ability as readers and helps them to be interested, motivated and enjoy reading.

What can parents can do at home to encourage fluency?

The best thing parents can do to encourage fluency at home is to demonstrate it.

- Read and reread favourite books.
- Read aloud with emotion in English or your first language.
- Invent sound effects when reading.
- Use different voices to indicate the characters and narrator.
- Change your voice volume, tone and pace as you read different parts of a book; perhaps slow down at a scary bit or speed up at a tense point.
- Have fun and enjoy yourself and your child will enjoy themselves too.
- Listen to audio books together with your child. Many children's books can be downloaded in audio form from your local library.

Comprehension

How does comprehension contribute to reading success?

Comprehension or understanding what we read is the whole aim of reading. (See Phonics: a guide for families for a diagram that explains the reading process.) Good readers comprehend in different ways depending on the book, article or website they are reading. Some of the ways readers comprehend include:

- predicting before reading and as they read
- making connections between what is being read and the reader's past experiences of books, life and the world
- asking questions about what is being read. What is this character going to do in this situation? Why did that character do that?
- monitoring meaning, checking predictions, confirming them, correcting them, re-predicting and rereading
- creating a mental summary of key parts of the story or information
- creating a mental picture of characters, setting
- inferring, interpreting and reading 'between the lines'
- considering the text purpose. Why did the author write this book? How does the author intend for me to respond to this article?

What can parents can do at home to encourage comprehension?

To help children to see that the aim of reading is meaning making, read together for lots of different purposes then discuss and reflect on the things you read together. Comprehension shouldn't be forced, it should come naturally from reading.

- Share your response to a book read together with your child, for example: I liked the part when ... What did you like? I was surprised by the part when ... What surprised you?
- Talk about other books or experiences that you are reminded of when reading aloud. You could say: This is like that other book we read about ... That part of the story reminded me of when we went to visit Grandma and ...
- Pause and predict at interesting points in a story, when reading aloud, for example: Oh, that's an interesting situation. I wonder what the character is going to do now? How do you think that character is feeling right now? What might happen next?
- Retell stories to each other after reading. Make stories part of play using dress-ups, dolls or figurines, drawing and craft, sand play or play dough.

References

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