

The “Big 5” of Teaching Reading

Reading is an extremely complex cognitive process. “K12 Reader,” an online reading instruction resource for parents and teachers explained it this way, “While we often think of reading as one singular act, our brains are actually engaging in a number of tasks simultaneously each time we sit down with a book.”

Research has shown us that in order to become successful readers, children must develop skills in five essential areas of reading. Often referred to as “The Big 5,” these include (as identified by reading experts and chronicled in publications from the Kansas State Department of Education):

1. **Phonemic awareness.** Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate individual sounds in spoken words. Phonemic awareness includes blending sounds to make words, such as combining three separate sounds— / b/ /a/ and /t/ —to make the word *bat*. It includes segmenting a word into separate sounds. For example, the word *bat* has three sounds: /b/ /a/ and /t/. Teaching phonemic awareness helps children learn to read and spell.
2. **Phonics.** Phonics teaches students about the relationship between sounds and printed letters and explains how to use that knowledge to read and spell. Readers regularly come across unfamiliar words. Advanced phonics or word study skills help them to understand what words mean. They are able to break words into smaller meaningful parts.
3. **Fluency.** Fluency is the ability to read words easily and automatically. To do this, readers must recognize many words “by sight.” Readers who read smoothly and accurately can focus on the meaning of what they read. Readers who struggle to decode, or identify, words are less likely to understand what they read.
4. **Vocabulary.** Vocabulary refers to the words we use for listening, speaking, reading and writing. Good readers recognize and know the meaning of many words. Learning new words is important for readers at all levels.
5. **Comprehension.** Comprehension is the ability to understand what is read. Children use many skills to understand the meaning of what they read. This is important for all types of reading, from stories and fiction to non-fiction and textbooks. Whether reading for fun or to learn something new, good readers think as they read. Sometimes readers must make self-corrections while reading in order to understand what they have read.

Both Renae Willey, kindergarten teacher, and Maria Nuss, first grade teacher, admit that even equipped with the latest research on how children learn to read, there are challenges. Mrs. Nuss explained, “We have kids coming in with varying degrees of exposure to reading. Some have been read to and some have not. Some know all their letters and sounds and some do not. They have to be taught that letters go together to

make words, that words have meanings, and that words go together to make sentences.” Mrs. Willey pointed out, “Another challenge is finding the time to fit it all in.” Not only are teachers in charge of teaching but they must also individualize instruction, monitor results and record scores.

Our teachers continually improve the way they teach and motivate students, and we all know that “practice makes perfect.” So, next week I’ll share some advice from educational experts on how parents and caregivers can team up with teachers to help children learn to read.