

How should we prepare children for learning to read?

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What is already known?

- Phonics is widely accepted as the best way to teach early reading. Children learn to translate letters into sounds and then blend them together to read a word. With practice, children learn to recognize words, and parts of words, enabling them to read fluently.
- Children with good phonological skills (working with sounds; e.g., say “bat” without the “b”) tend to become better readers than children with poorer phonological skills.

What do we add?

- **Children need good phonological skills in order to benefit from phonics teaching**
 - Shapiro & Solity (2016) compared an intensive phonics programme (Letters and Sounds) with a less intensive programme that teaches only consistent letter-sound mappings plus frequent words by sight. We found a stronger relationship between phonological skills and reading for children receiving the more intensive phonics methods, suggesting that intensive phonics relies heavily on a child’s phonological skills. Children with poor phonological awareness responded less well to intensive phonics teaching.
- **The most critical phonological skills are being able to segment (and blend) words out loud**
 - Cunningham et al., (2015) compared matched sets of tasks that isolated key components of phonological tasks to find out which were most strongly predictive of reading at age 6-7. We found that three components were critical. (i) working with speech sounds (rather than other sounds, e.g., musical notes) (ii) segmenting words into sounds (rather than working with individual speech sounds) (iii) saying the sounds out loud (rather than pointing to a picture).

What are the implications for policy and practice?

- During pre-school and early primary, we need to focus on supporting phonological skills (working with sounds out loud) as well as linking letters to sounds (phonics teaching).
- Children who don’t respond well to phonics may need extra support with phonological skills.
- Activities to support phonological skills should focus on segmenting (and blending) words out loud.

References: Shapiro, L. & Solity, J. (2016) Differing effects of two synthetic phonics programmes on early reading development. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 86(2), 182-203. Cunningham, A. J., Witton, C., Talcott, J. B., Burgess, A. P., & Shapiro, L. R. (2015). Deconstructing phonological tasks: The contribution of stimulus and response type to the prediction of early decoding skills. *Cognition*, 143, 178-186 **Personal website:** <http://www.aston.ac.uk/lhs/staff/az-index/shapirol/>