

Chapter One

Starting to Read – the basics

To make this chapter easier to read, I will use “he” or “him” to refer to your child.

The tips and advice work for boys and girls!

The first part of this chapter is for you if your child missed out when the rest of the class learned to read. The other children and the teacher have moved on but he’s still struggling with letters or simple words. Here are some ways to help him learn his letters in the time you have together on evenings, weekends and holidays.

Ask the school what they are doing for him. He might be getting special help. But it will be much better if you can work with him at home. Chat to his teacher. If your child is still learning to read at school, keep in touch with the teacher and find if there are ways you can help with what he’s learning in class. Then you will be sure that he’s learning by one method only, and won’t get confused.

However, lots of the tips and games suggested in this chapter will work with any method of learning to read!

There are lots of ways to teach a child to read, and most of them are not right or wrong. One method doesn't suit every child.

Here are some ideas for what you can do if your child is still finding it hard to learn his letters. These ideas have three big plus points.

- They seem to work well for all children.
- They are easy for parents to follow.
- They are not likely to muddle a child who is being taught by a different method at school

If your child hasn't begun to read yet, these methods will help him to learn the basics. But first we must be clear what reading is all about. And you must begin right at the very beginning.

Step 1: Starting on letters

The basic facts about letters

The first thing a child must know about when he is learning to read are the shapes and sounds of all the letters used in the English language. Then he can put them together and find out what each word says.

- Every letter has a different **shape**. To read, we have to tell one letter from another: **d** and **o** and **g** do not look the same.
- There are also **big (capital)** and little letters, **D** and **d**. Don't confuse things by bringing that up yet. Stick to the small **a**, **b** and **c**.
- Letters have different **sounds**. You need to know which sounds letters make to work out what each letter in a word is saying: **d-o-g**.
- Each letter also has a **name**. D is called "dee". We use this when we go through the alphabet, "a-b-c", or spell out a word, "h-o-t". Leave these names for when your child has really got started.

Your child may use a 'phonics' programme at school, which will include this method of sounding out letters. Your child's school can tell you more about how they use phonics.

TIP 1 To remember them better, your child may like to give the letters nicknames like "Sammy Snake" for S.

He may have done this at school and be able to tell you what the nicknames are. If he can't remember, make up some new ones.

When I taught young men in prison to read, they chose "Busty Brenda" for B and "Sexy Susie" for S. You can guess what they had for F.

Vowels and consonants

Next, you need to teach your child which letters are vowels (a, e, i, o, u and sometimes y) and which are consonants.

TIP 2 Jam sandwiches.

I first got the basic idea of making "jam sandwiches" in the 1970s from a teacher and have been developing the idea ever since.

- Buy a set of plastic or wooden letters.
- Also buy two small pots of paint, one red, and one yellow. (Enamel modelling paint is best because it sticks to plastic or wood.)
- Now paint the letters red and yellow. Get your child to help. Read on before starting.

- Five letters must be red – a, e, i, o, and u. These are called the vowels. One more letter, y, is sometimes a consonant (like in "yes") and sometimes a vowel (like in "try") so paint it half red. The vowels are the jam in your word sandwiches. You can't have a word without at least one vowel in it – just as you can't have a sandwich without a filling.
- Now paint all the other letters yellow – they are the bread for your sandwiches. All these other letters are consonants. Don't forget to paint some yellow on the y to show it's sometimes a consonant.
- As you work at painting the letters, find out if your child knows any of their sounds or shapes. Don't waste time teaching him anything he knows already!

If it's too difficult getting plastic letters, you can do this with cards and write on them with red and yellow felt pen, but it doesn't work quite as well, because the child will learn faster if he can "feel" the shape of the letters.

Adding letters one by one

You're ready to get going. Remember, at this early stage always say the sound of the letter, **b**, and not its name ("bee").

Otherwise your child will get confused.

TIP 3 Start with the child's own name. Suppose it's Sam. Then **s** is his letter. Let him feel its shape. Trace it on his hand with your finger. Let him say its sound. Tell him it belongs to him. Now there are only 25 more letters left to learn!

TIP 4 Here are two more easy ones. Mum's letter is **m** and Dad's letter is **d**. Use the names of parents, carers, brothers, sisters and friends to extend the range of letters.

TIP 5 Get him to shut his eyes. Give him plastic letters of very different shapes – **s** and **k** and **m**. Get him to tell you which is which just by feeling them.

TIP 6 Write a big letter on his back with your finger. Can he tell you what it is? Then get him to write a letter on your back for you to guess. Tell him, "Wow, we're getting somewhere!"

TIP 7 Think of the food he likes best and find its letter. Pringles, pasta and pizza all share a first letter.

TIP 8 Get him to listen carefully to the first sound in a word and ask him to say what it is. Lion starts with **l** and elephant with **e**. Play guessing games. "I spy with my little eye something beginning with **b**..."

TIP 9 Pick out a letter and try to find an animal that starts with that letter. Remember to use the sound of the letter, not the name. ("I'm thinking of a wild animal that begins with a **t**. "Tiger!" "Well done! It's your turn now.")

TIP 10 Make letters together out of Plasticine so he can feel their shape.

Step 2: Starting on words

Next, your child needs to know that you can put letters together to make a word and that a word has a meaning. So **d-o-g** becomes a furry animal, which barks and wags its tail.

You can begin with very simple three-letter words. If the child has learnt the

sound of all the letters, he will be able to work most of these simple words out.

At this stage it all gets rather exciting because you put words together into sentences and all at once, you're reading. "His dog is fat."

TIP 11 The Word Bank.

It is a good idea to make a collection of all the words your child learns to read.

- You will need a box – a shoe-box will do. Write "word bank" on it – use small letters, not capitals. If your child feels like it, he can draw on some barred windows and a door with a large padlock. This is where you are going to keep the words he has learnt to read.
- Find some small white cards to write the words on.
- Make sure you write very clearly – handwriting can be hard for beginner readers.
- Are there any words your child can read already? Write each one on a white card and pop it in the bank.
- Now arrange the wooden or plastic letters in a line on the table in the order of the alphabet. You are going to

help your child to read some very simple words.

- Choose a familiar word like "cat". Pick out the letters, put them in front of him, and sound them out with him – **c-a-t**. Next you must teach your child that words have patterns, so that he can collect **word families**.

TIP 12 This is very important. I call it five for the price of one. If you can read *c-at* then you can read *f-at*, and *h-at* and *s-at* and *m-at* and *p-at*. From *s-am* you can make *h-am* and *j-am* and *d-am* and *r-am*.

Every time you make a new word, take the new letter from the alphabet line-up and put the old one back in its right place.

Every time your child learns to read a word, write it on a card and put it in his Word Bank. They will soon add up to quite a few. Even if you only do one word family a day, that will still give you five or more new words each day, and you will soon have 100 words in the Bank. Try *s-it*, *p-it*, *f-it*, *b-it*, *l-it*, or *in*, *b-in*, *f-in*, *p-in*, *t-in*.

Your child is getting words at a cheap price if he learns them in groups like this.

I once explained to a man of 30 I was teaching that you could learn to read and spell words in groups. He put his head on the table and started to sob. "Why did no one tell me this when I was seven?" he asked. "I've learnt every word as if it stood alone and it's taken me 30 years to get where I am."

Soon you can start putting two consonants in front of the vowel – *clip*, *spit*, *blot*. Lots more for the Bank.

However, words with no meaning are no use to anyone. So every time your child learns a new word, **discuss its meaning**. This is very, very important. A "fin" is what a fish uses to swim. A "sin" is something you do wrong. "Din" is a loud noise. Your "chin" is under your mouth. This way, you will not only be helping his reading but you will be helping the development of his speech and language too.

TIP 13 Remember to revise the words in the Bank every now and then to make sure he can still work them out. Don't worry if he can't – just keep going over them. He will get there.

Motivation, rewards and bribes

Rewards and bribes can work well, especially for younger children. Smaller goals along the way get small rewards – ten Smarties for ten words, for instance, or a small amount of cash. When your child has 100 words in the Bank, give him a larger reward – a meal out, a film or shopping trip, an extra bedtime story, 15 minutes of extra playtime, or a special DVD to watch. Make a big thing of it. He is on his way to being a reader.

Your child may drive a hard bargain with you. Ben was struggling with his reading. He made a deal with his mum. He would get 1p if he read one page. But she would double his money for every page he read. So if he read two pages, he would get 2p, and if he managed 3 pages it would be 4p. To his mother's surprise he read 15 pages. He only stopped because he had finished the book. Maths was not his mum's strong point. She was amazed when he pointed out with a wicked grin that she owed him £163.84, enough to buy a brilliant new bike. Don't fall for this one!

TIP 14 The tasks you set must not be too hard. If he can't do something, however much he tries, then he will just get upset.

TIP 15 If you take your child out as a reward, try to make sure there are only two in the party. Your child should be the important one. The last thing he wants is two adults talking over his head, or brothers and sisters demanding attention.

Barney, a dyslexic boy of 8, was moving on to another school. He was rather shy and would never read aloud. His mother was concerned that the teacher might be cross. "What can I give you to get you to read aloud to me?" she asked him. "A whole day alone with you, just me and you," was his reply.

Go on adding words to the Bank until your child has started on books. There will come a day, much later, when there are so many words in the Bank that you can't keep track of them all. Bin them with pride. They have done their job.

Words are not just in books

While your child is at the stage when he is just learning to read simple words, you will find plenty to practise on as you go about your everyday life. Words like "car park", "exit", "bus stop" on a trip. "Push" and "pull" on a door. "On" and "off" in the kitchen. Or "lift" and "sports" in a store.

TIP 16 When you go to the supermarket, send him off on his own to find "eggs", "butter" and "flour". And then, best of all, if you have time, go home and bake a cake! When you go to a large store, let him work out where the toy department is and take you there.

TIP 17 Leave notes for him at home. On the kitchen table: "Back at 6 to play footie with you in the park." On his pillow: "You are a star and I love you lots and lots."

TIP 18 When you go out for a meal, encourage your child to read the menu. If it is self-service, give him the money to buy his own food. Words like "fish" and "chips" will soon become familiar. And you've got some more entries for the Word Bank.

Learning longer words

Soon your child will want to read longer words. These can be broken down into units, or syllables. And each of these syllables will have at least one vowel in it!

“Stand” has one syllable.

“Un-der” has two syllables.

“Un-der-stand” has three syllables.

“Mis-un-der-stand” has four syllables.

Each syllable is, on its own, quite easy to read. But how can you tell how many syllables there are in a word?

TIP 19 An easy way to work out syllables. Some people think this is a mystery. But here is a simple trick for you and your child to try. Put one hand firmly under your chin. When you say a word, your chin will come down once for each syllable. Say “seal”. Your chin comes down once, so “seal” has one syllable. “Ti-ger” has two syllables. “Chim-pan-zee” has three syllables. “Rhi-no-cer-os” has four syllables. This will also be useful for spelling.

TIP 20 Now you can start adding longer words to the Bank. “In-to”, “car-pet”, “mar-ket”, “sis-ter”, “pa-per”. There are

lots and lots of words that can easily be worked out, once you understand how letters are put together into units and then built up into words.

Learning more difficult words

Unfortunately you can't work out all words as easily as this.

Over 90 per cent of words in the English language obey the “rules” and fit into a pattern.

The rest are tricky ones. They have to be learnt as “sight” words, which means that each is a one-off. For example, words like “does”, “said”, “because”, “your”, “many”, “water”, “some”, “walk”, “what”, “who”, “once”, “Tuesday” and “eight”. You cannot sound these words out. Many of these words are very common. A child will need to read them almost from the start.

TIP 21 You already have a Bank. Why not make a Prison, too? This could be a big money box with a lock and key. Difficult words can go in there as prisoners – 20 at a time, at most. When the child can prove that he really knows the word, it can be let out and another “prisoner” can go in.

TIP 22 Try having one or two “words of the week”. Have yellow stickies everywhere, on the fridge, on the mirror, on the TV, etc. As your child learns them, stick them round his room. See how long a line of them you can make and set a target – with, of course, a reward.

TIP 23 There are some good games you can play. Write words on cards, each one on two matching cards, and play Snap. Or turn them face down and play Pairs, where you have to turn them up two at a time and try to find the pair that are the same. (Never use more than 12 words at most. Start with fewer.) Or you can play a version of Snakes and Ladders, where you are saved from the snakes if you can read the top card from the pile on the table.

TIP 24 Let your child jump up and down (on a trampoline is good!), shouting out the letters of a hard word – “b-e-c-a-u-s-e”.

Step 3: Starting on books

This is when it really starts to be exciting – when your child can start to read books himself.

TIP 25 Does your child have a bookcase in his room? Give him a bookshelf of his own. Don’t wait till he’s reading fluently – even if he can’t read at all, you can use it for the books you read to him. Put on the shelf books that you love to read together, and books he can read to himself. Don’t put on any books that he finds boring, or that are long and difficult. This shelf should celebrate the fun of books.

First books should be easy and well-written. I think Richard Scarry is terrific for little ones. Get children to read aloud with you, to feel comfortable having books around. Get books from charity shops which sell them as cheap as chips; give a book every Christmas and birthday, so that they are recognised as treats and Good Things. Don’t rule out Enid Blyton, who has started more people reading for pleasure than anyone else.

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TIP 26 Sit beside him while he reads an easy book. Use the five-finger rule. Put a finger on each word that is too hard for him. If you find more than five

hard words on one page then the book is too difficult.

TIP 27 Let him point to the words as he reads them. If one is too hard, he should pause, and then you tell him the word. *Do not say*, “You can work that one out,” or, “We’ve had that word several times already.” It will stop him in his tracks and he will forget what the sentence is about. Just give him the word. The important thing at this stage is that he should understand the *meaning* of what he is reading, and go fast enough to make sense of the text.

Making his own book

This is a great thing to do. It’s much easier if you have access to a computer and can download pictures. You and your child can make something he’ll be proud of, using nice materials and taking lots of care. And you can both have fun doing it together. Use simple words, as few as possible, and practise reading them with him.

TIP 28 Once your child starts reading simple books, help him to make a book of his own. Not just a few scraps of paper, but sheets of A4 in a smart ring

binder. Let him make a bright cover for it. Put in a few stories or jokes you have shared (typed and printed out if possible). Include his own pictures, with a few speech bubbles that he can fill in and then read back to you. Stick in some holiday snaps or postcards or snippets from the newspaper. Let him write a line or two on every page.

Take a bit of trouble, so he will be keen to show it to other people. Encourage him to take it into school, and if possible warn the teacher first so he or she can make a fuss of him.

TIP 29 Let him tell a simple story for you to write down (in very clear writing) or type into the computer. Give him the page, or print it out. Then let him read it back to you. It will be much easier for him to remember a story he has written himself. Get him to draw some pictures to go with it. Show it off!

Making it fun

Remember that all the activities in this chapter should be fun for both you and

your child. You should both feel you are getting somewhere!

TIP 30 One of the best tricks is to get your child to teach you or someone else what he has learnt. It could be your partner, a friend, grandmother or grandfather, a younger brother or sister. Let him give you and others tests and see if he can spot your (perhaps deliberate) mistakes. He will enjoy telling you that you have got it wrong!

TIP 31 Keep on reading to him the books you both enjoy, even if he can read them by himself. Read funny ones so you can laugh together.

TIP 32 Be sure your child practises reading as often as possible. Ten minutes every day is much, much better than an hour once a week.

Susan was nine and could not yet read. Her mother went to their old Irish doctor in despair. "Don't you worry," he said, "or lose a wink of sleep. She's going to get there in the end. And then you are going to be more thrilled and more proud than you ever were with your other children, who have no difficulties to overcome." He was right.