

Phonics vs. Sight Reading

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The controversy between phonics and sight reading has been a long standing argument. Phonics usually wins out in homeschool circles. Despite a strong stance in favor of phonics, many parents find themselves at a standstill in terms of their child actually being able to learn the phonics and then read. It is fine to stand up for phonics, but if you can't make it work, then it is time to learn more in-depth about the brain that processes phonics.

The brain has two main pathways with which to process information. They are the visual and auditory systems. Each of these has both a long and short term memory capacity. It is the auditory short-term memory that I would like to address in this article.

When phonics was introduced many decades ago we lived, primarily, in an auditory society. The children grew up with family dinners, listening to radio and stories of the old days from their grandparents. Children in this rich auditory environment had the opportunity to develop excellent auditory processing ability (short-term memory). Today we live in a very visual society-the likes of Nintendo, VCR's, T.V., billboards etc. None of these things is necessarily negative, but it contributes to the development of children with stronger visual processing ability and reduced auditory processing ability.

Phonics is an auditory learning system. It is imperative to have a sufficient auditory short-term memory in order to learn, utilize and understand reading using the phonics method. So, if a family is convicted that a child must learn reading by phonics, then they also must provide the opportunity for the child to develop a well functioning auditory short-term memory so that it can be utilized.

A two-year-old should have a short-term memory of 2, a three year old of 3, etc. up to seven years old. The average in our society for a 7 year old to adult is 7. In order to begin to utilize phonics beyond memorizing a few individual sounds, a child must have an auditory short term memory close to 6. If it is below this, you will see a child who can say all the sounds of the phonemes and possibly put a few together into words; however, at the end of the sentence or paragraph cannot understand what they have just read. To test your child's auditory processing ability, follow these instructions: In a monotone voice, slowly (at one-second intervals) give them either numbers or objects. For example: You say, "5...8...1...7" and have the child repeat these numbers back to you in the order in which you spoke them. The child must be able to say a 4-digit sequence back correctly 75% of the time on the first try to be considered at a short-term memory of 4. It is the same for each higher digit.

Children who have an auditory digit span of 4 may (with drill) learn all the sounds of the letters, but they will not be able to efficiently utilize phonics to sound out words. The reason is that short-term memory is a reflection of holding pieces together. For phonics to work you must be able to hold individual auditory pieces (sounds) together and then transform them into a word.

When a child gets to a digit span of 5, they will begin to be able to sound out words more efficiently. By the time they get to the end of a sentence and/or paragraph, the comprehension will be lost. It is not until a child has an auditory digit span of 6 that phonics begins being utilized in an effective manner. So if you are convicted to teach your child phonics, you must first exercise their brain and build good auditory processing ability. Do the above exercise several times a day for a few minutes; you will gradually improve the brain's ability to process. Each gain of one digit is equal to a developmental year. It is an activity which will take consistency for improvement to happen.

To insist on teaching a child phonics before they are developmentally ready is to set the child and parent up for a lot of frustration and laborious struggle. Focus instead on using your time and energy on expanding the child's auditory short-term memory. And some parents, once they understand the brain's role in learning phonics, decide to utilize flashcards for sight words while they are building the processing ability. This enables the child to view reading as pleasurable, and then later adding phonics to build the reading skill.

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