

# Learning the Alphabet

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- Learning the Alphabet is fundamental for learning to read.
  - Although people understand this, there is little research or discussion about the alphabet.
  - Without firm knowledge of letters, children will have difficulty with all other aspects of early literacy.

# What is Alphabetic Knowledge?



- Letter shape recognition
- Letter name knowledge
- Letter sound knowledge
- Ability to print letters
- Rapid letter naming

# Do children know the alphabet?

- National Household Education Survey
  - Slightly over half of 4-yr olds recognize “some or all” letters, based on parent report
  - Ability to name letters affected by
    - Parent education level
    - Minority language status
    - Poverty

# Do children know the alphabet?

- Entering Kindergarten: A Portrait of American Children when They Begin School
  - 50% of all children entering K have one or more risk factors
  - Two-thirds of children with two risk factors have significant reading problems

# Why is the alphabet important?

- Letter-name knowledge before formal reading instruction is one of the strongest predictors of children's reading ability
  - Bond & Dykstra, 1967/1998
  - Share, Jorm, McClean, & Matthew, 1987
  - Riley, 1996

# But is it necessary?

- Early studies which approached this question experimentally did not find that it was necessary to learn letters in order to learn words
  - Jenkins, Bausell, & Jenkins, 1972
  - Johnson, 1969
  - Ohnmacht, 1969
  - Samuels, 1972
  - Silberberg, Silberberg, & Iverson, 1972

- Ehri (1983) found that the studies were flawed:
  - Children did not adequately learn letter names
  - Children were not taught how letter names could be used to decode words
  - Target words did not always include the letter-sound found in the letter name.
- Letter name knowledge may be functionally inseparable from other factors.



# How might letter-name knowledge contribute to reading?

- Letter-name knowledge mediates letter-sound knowledge (Treiman, 1998)
- Letter-name knowledge may be proxy for rich “school-like” literacy experiences (McGee & Richgels, 1989; Smolkin & Yaden, 1992)
- Letter-names may be a precursor or facilitate phonological awareness (Johnston, Anderson & Holligan, 1993; Stahl & Murray, 1994)

# How do we teach children the alphabet?

- Letters-of-the-week
- Use of mnemonic devices
- Alphabet books
- Children's first name

# Letter-of-the-Week

- Introducing letters in isolation may confuse some children about the purpose of letters in relation to words and reading.
- Not all letters are created equal but each letter receives equal instructional time.

- Some letters take longer to visually discriminate
  - t, a, e, o, s, i
  - Massaro, et al. 1980
- Letters have different relationships to sounds
  - Easiest ones are consonant-vowel letter names (e.g., b, d, j, p)
  - Followed by vowel-consonant letter names (e.g., f, m, l, n)
  - Most difficult are c, g, h, w, y (Treiman, 1998)

# Should we teach the most frequent first?

- In a “Letter of the Week” approach, six of the most frequent letters (n, o, r, s, t, and u) would not be taught until after January.

# Use of Mnemonic Devices

Ehri, Deffner & Wilce (1984)

- Pictures do help children learn letter-sound correspondences.
- Incorporating the letter-shape into the picture is also beneficial.

# Alphabet books

- Yaden, Smolkin, & MacGillivray (1993)
  - Children learn meta-linguistic terms, directionality, orientation of letters, letter names and sounds
- Murray, Stahl, & Ivey (1996)
  - Alphabet books that used alliteration increased phoneme awareness

# Alphabet Books

- Van Kleeck (in press) found that parents of young children (3 years old) tended to use alphabet books for vocabulary
- Parents of older children increasingly stressed the letters and letter sound connections.



# Children's Names

- Villiaume & Wilson (1989), Share & Gur (1999), and Bloodgood (1999)
  - Found that names are highly motivating for learning letter names
  - The ability to write letters in one's name and name those letters are originally separate.

# What do we know?

- Very little research on how to teach letter names
- There needs to be more emphasis on exposing children to the alphabet in preschool

# Questions

- Is there one sequence of letters that is preferable?
  - Alphabetic?
  - By frequency?
  - By letter-sound relationship?
  - By ease of discrimination?

# Assessing letter name knowledge

- Accuracy?
- Rate?
- Writing letters?

# When should we worry?

- We worry about children entering second grade without letter knowledge. How much earlier should we worry?