

# What is Decoding?

## Teaching children to decipher new words by sounding them out



**Decoding has been defined as “the act of deciphering a new word by sounding it out” (Moats, 2000, p231).**

An expanded definition of decoding includes figuring out the pronunciation of a word by using one's knowledge of the systematic relationships between sounds and letters (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 52). The ability to decode words accurately and fluently gives children the opportunity to read independently, increasing the likelihood that they will do more reading and improve more quickly than those unable to decode words on their own. The sooner this level of independence can be achieved, the better.

### **What is phonics instruction?**

Phonics refers to the instructional strategies used to teach children to decode words. We use the phrases “decoding instruction” and “phonics instruction” interchangeably throughout this tutorial. According to Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998), “Phonics refers to instructional practises that emphasise how spellings are related to speech sounds in systematic ways” (p. 52). The National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000b) defined phonics instruction as “a way of teaching reading that stresses the acquisition of letter-sound correspondences and their use to read and spell words” (p. 2-89). An especially important point is that phonics instruction goes beyond

simple instruction in letter-sound correspondences. Phonics instruction provides children with strategies that allow them to apply their letter-sound knowledge when they are reading and spelling.

For children to take maximum advantage of phonics instruction, they must first understand that spoken words can be segmented into phonemes (speech sounds). This is known as **phoneme awareness**. They also need beginning knowledge of the alphabetic principle—an understanding of how letters are used to represent those phonemes. For example, understanding that the spoken word *sat* has three phonemes (/s/ /a/ /t/) will help children understand the logic behind writing *sat* with three letters.

## Why is phonics instruction especially important for learning to read an alphabetic writing system like English?

Because the English language is represented by an alphabetic writing system, phonics instruction is necessary to help children understand how written words transcribe spoken language. That is, children need to be taught how the letters of the alphabet combine to represent speech sounds, or phonemes. Good phonics instruction will help children realise that reading is not about memorising words. Letter combinations learned when reading one word (e.g., the *ai* in *rain*) can be used to decode many words with that pattern (e.g., *pain*, *gain*, *train*, and *stain*, as well as more sophisticated words, such as *campaign*, later in reading). Once children are taught the sounds that letters and letter combinations make, they can begin to decode words never seen before. With practise, decoding skills help children read words more accurately and fluently — a critically important skill that is strongly related to good reading comprehension (Snow et al., 1998).



## Is there one phonics program that is best for teaching children to decode?

No one phonics program has been found to be superior to all others, although there is extensive evidence that systematic and explicit phonics instruction facilitates reading acquisition (Brady, 2011; NRP, 2000b). Box 1 explains what we mean by “systematic” and “explicit.” It is important to note that there are many ways to sequence phonics instruction and different researchers have focused on teaching different-sized units (e. g., some begin by teaching letter-sound correspondences, but others focus on larger units called phonograms, such as –at, –ost, and –ack ). For purposes of this tutorial, we are going to present a model that begins by teaching children high utility sound-symbol correspondences and then teaches children to recognise the six syllable patterns in English (described later in this tutorial). This is the model used in our research studies (Blachman, 1987; Blachman, Tangel, Ball, Black, & McGraw, 1999; Blachman et al., 2004) and found to be effective in teaching children to decode.



**Systematic instruction** refers to the use of a planned, logical sequence to introduce the most useful phonic elements (NRP, 2000b, p. 2-81).

**Explicit instruction** is when the teacher directly points out what is being taught (e.g., a says /a/ as in *apple*), leaving little to chance. “First graders who are at risk for failure in learning to read do not discover what teachers leave unsaid about the complexities of word learning” (Gaskins, Ehri, Cress, O’Hara, & Donnelly, 1997, p. 325).

*Box 1: Definitions of “systematic” and “explicit”*

Teaching children to decode words using systematic and explicit phonics instruction should be considered a necessary building block in the process of learning to read. This building block is necessary, but certainly not sufficient by itself. As outlined in the Report of the National Reading Panel (2000), effective reading instruction also includes, at a minimum, instruction in phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies.

### Reference:

**Teaching Tutorial: Decoding Instruction**  
**Benita A. Blachman and Maria S. Murray**

In association with **Teaching LD.org**

Adapted for a global audience by **Get into Neurodiversity**