

# How Do We Know That Decoding Instruction is Effective?

## Looking at the research



**Two influential consensus documents, the first commissioned by the National Research Council (Snow et al., 1998) and the second commissioned by Congress (National Reading Panel Report [NRP], 2000a, 2000b), reaffirmed the critical role that accurate and fluent decoding plays in becoming a skilled reader.**

Snow et al. concluded that “it is hard to comprehend connected text if word recognition is inaccurate or laborious” (p. 4). Without the ability to decode words accurately and fluently, comprehension will always be compromised. On the other hand, the ability to read words accurately and fluently frees up conscious attention that would otherwise have to be devoted to decoding (sounding out) words — allowing children to focus on the meaning of what they are reading.

A major stumbling block for children who are learning to read “is difficulty understanding and using the alphabetic principle — the idea that written spellings systematically represent spoken words” (Snow et al., 1998, p. 4). Phonics instruction addresses this stumbling block by systematically teaching children how spellings represent spoken words and by giving children the practice they need to decode these words in isolation and in text.

## What does research say about phonics instruction?

The most extensive analysis of the effectiveness of systematic phonics instruction to teach decoding can be found in the meta-analysis of 38 empirical studies in the National Reading Panel Report (NRP, 2000b) (also see Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2001). These studies met stringent methodological criteria set by the NRP and concluded, as have others over the last 40 years (see, for example, Adams, 1990; Brady, 2011) that systematic instruction in phonics teaches children to decode words more accurately than if they do not have this instruction.

Below are some of the major findings from the National Reading Panel (2000b, pp. 2-131-2-134) regarding explicit, systematic phonics instruction:

1. It is more effective than unsystematic or no phonics instruction.
2. It is effective regardless of the method of delivery (small groups, whole class, or one-on-one).
3. It has the most significant influence on growth in reading when introduced early—kindergarten or first grade—before children have started to read.
4. It has been shown to be effective in helping to prevent reading difficulties for young at-risk children and in helping to remediate reading difficulties of reading struggling students.
5. It is effective in improving the ability to decode both real words and pseudowords.
6. It significantly increases growth in reading comprehension in younger children and struggling readers above first grade.
7. It produces more growth than non-phonics instruction in spelling among kindergarten and first grade students.
8. It is helpful to children at all SES levels.



For more information about the National Reading Panel (2000b)—or to get a copy of the full report and other summary documents — go to <http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org/>

**Table 1: Selected Research on the Effectiveness of Phonics Instruction for At-Risk and Struggling Readers - Children**

Study	Subjects	Settings	Findings
Blachman et al. (2004)	69 struggling readers in 2nd & 3rd grade	One-on-one tutoring	Students tutored with explicit systematic phonics program outperformed controls on real word and nonword reading, reading rate, passage reading, comprehension, and spelling. Most gains were maintained in a 1 - year follow - up.
Foorman et al. (1998)	285 at-risk readers in 1st & 2nd grade	Regular classroom	Students in classrooms where they received direct phonics instruction improved in word reading at a faster rate and had higher word recognition skills than those in classrooms with less direct phonics instruction or implicit code instruction .
Lovett et al. (2000)	85 children with severe RD, ages 6-13	Groups of 3 in lab	Phonological analysis and direct instruction in blending along with word identification strategy training provided generalized effects on word identification, comprehension, and nonword reading.
Mathes et al. (2005)	298 at-risk readers in 1st grade	Groups of 3	Two treatment groups differing in theoretical orientations received supplemental instruction in phonemic awareness, alphabetic knowledge, and decoding skills. Both groups outperformed a non-intervention group (n=101) in measures of phonological awareness, word reading, reading fluency, and spelling.
Rashotte et al. (2001)	115 impaired readers in grades 1-6	Groups of 3-5	Treatment group received phonics instruction and outperformed the control group on measures of phonological awareness, decoding, reading accuracy, comprehension, and spelling.
Torgesen et al. (2001)	60 children with severe RD, ages 8-10	One-on-one tutoring	Improvement in reading accuracy and comprehension over pretreatment progress after systematic and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and decoding skills. Gains remained stable over 2 - year follow - up period.

For more examples of research illustrating the benefits of early, systematic, explicit phonics instruction, see additional research references at the end of this booklet and the **TeachingLD** companion piece to this booklet, the **HotSheet** on phonological awareness (Pullen, 2005).

**Reference:**

**Teaching Tutorial: Decoding Instruction**  
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