

# When Should Decoding Instruction be Introduced?

## The prerequisites for decoding



### What will my students need to learn in order to learn to decode?

There are two important insights that help children learn to decode. The first is understanding that spoken words can be segmented into phonemes (individual sounds, such as the /u/ and /p/ in the spoken word up), referred to as phoneme awareness. Research has shown consistently that children who have some initial awareness that spoken words can be segmented (as shown, for example, by holding 'up' a finger or moving a disk for each sound they hear as the teacher stretches out a word like 'up') are more likely to be successful readers in the early grades (Blachman, 2000; NRP, 2000b). Joanna Williams (1987) offered an explanation for the connection between phoneme awareness and reading more than 20 years ago when she wrote,

"Sometimes children have trouble learning to decode because they are completely unaware of the fact that spoken language is segmented—into sentences, into syllables, and into phonemes" (pp . 25 - 26).

The second important insight for learning to decode is understanding that phonemes are represented in print by the letters of the alphabet. Since decoding requires knowledge of the relationships between sounds and letters in order to figure out how to pronounce a new word, it is necessary to teach sound - symbol correspondences explicitly.

## How many sound - symbol correspondences do the students need to know before learning to decode?

It is not necessary to wait until all sound - symbol correspondences are learned before beginning instruction in decoding. With just a small pool of known letter sounds (e .g., /a/, /m/, /t/, /s/), students can begin to decode two- and three-letter words such as at, am, sat, mat, and Sam. By adding just one more letter sound, such as /p/, the words that can be decoded expand to include sap, tap, map, pat, and Pam.

Starting decoding instruction early — as opposed to waiting until children know the sounds of all of the letters in the alphabet — allows more time for the additional practise that at - risk and struggling readers need, provides a strong foundation in this critical skill, and gives young children a sense of pride and accomplishment.

There is no agreed upon evidence - based sequence for introducing sound - symbol correspondences. It makes the most sense to begin with high utility letters such as a, m, t, i, s, f, p, r (as opposed to teaching the alphabet in order), because these high utility letters can be combined to make a large number of simple words. It is also helpful to separate similar sounds, such as /e/ and /i/, and similar letters, such as b and d, when you are teaching sound symbol correspondences (Carnine, 1976, 1980).

Over time, the sound - symbol associations that children are taught during decoding instruction increase in difficulty. Instruction in phonemes represented by single letters, such as the /t/ in top and the /a/ in hat, will be followed by the introduction of phonemes represented by letter combinations, such as the /sh/ in ship and eventually letter combinations that represent vowel teams, such as the /oa/ in boat. These more complex letter combinations will be introduced gradually as instruction focuses on more complex words.

## When to start?

Helping children acquire the important insights they need about the relationship between oral and written language — phoneme awareness and letter - sound knowledge — can begin before children reach kindergarten and facilitates learning to decode in the early grades (National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008).



*Remember, children with knowledge of only a few letter-sound correspondences can start to learn to decode simple words! See how many words you can make using only the letters a, m, t, i, s, f, p, and r.*

Researchers in Australia, for example, demonstrated that 4-year-old children could successfully learn to identify specific sounds in the initial and final position, using large coloured posters that depicted objects that began or ended with the target phoneme. Children were taught explicitly to identify which picture ended or began with the target sounds (an early phoneme awareness activity) and were also taught the letter that represented the target phoneme. The children who participated in these phoneme awareness and letter - sound activities (compared to children who did not) showed transfer to early reading skills at the end of the study and an advantage in both decoding and comprehension when they were tested three years later (Byrne & Fielding – Barnsley, 1991; 1995).

It is important to note, however, that many at – risk children enter kindergarten and first grade with limited knowledge about the relationships between print and speech. Some children may continue to struggle to acquire phoneme awareness and letter - sound knowledge. These children, especially, need the benefit of a well - trained teacher who recognises when a child is lacking these important skills and who is ready to provide evidence - based instruction that will provide the foundation for learning to decode.



A classic article written by Stanovich (1986) described the downward spiral that can result if children fail to learn to decode early in the reading process. These children are exposed to less print, practice less, fail to develop the fluency that comes with practice, and are more likely to dislike reading. Without fluency, much of their attention remains focused on slow and effortful decoding, with less attention available to devote to the meaning of what they are reading. As a consequence of this, children gain less information from reading, losing valuable opportunities to increase vocabulary and knowledge about the world.

These observations were confirmed when Juel followed a group of 54 children from first to fourth grade (Juel, 1994). At the end of the fourth grade, the decoding of the poor readers was still not equivalent to average and good readers at the beginning of second grade. More recent evidence indicates that the older children get, the harder it is and the longer it takes to remediate difficulties (Torgesen, 2005), with many never catching up. Our goal should be to get all children off to a good start by providing explicit and systematic decoding instruction early, identifying those who are at risk of falling behind, and providing intervention before their deficits can become severe (Lyon et al., 2001).

**Reference:**

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

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