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Word Recognition Strategies for the Struggling Reader

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What is word recognition?

Word recognition is the ability to read words in isolation or within the context of a sentence or story without hesitation. When learning to read, children must understand the relationships between a letter, or combination of letters, and the sound or sounds they represent. Some letters, however, represent more than one sound. For example, the *c* in *cake* and *city*, the *f* sound in *fat* is the same as *ph* in *phase* and *phone*, and the vowel combination *ea* makes different sounds in *dead*, *bead*, and *steak*. These are just a few of the exceptions that make learning to read more difficult. More often than not, however, English words have regular, consistent spellings with only a small percentage being highly irregular. There are several strategies to help the beginning reader read unfamiliar words. Sounding out words, or decoding, is of utmost importance in developing reading fluency and comprehension. The more children practice decoding, the more fluent readers they become.



Sound Out the Word

Have the child attack an unfamiliar word piece by piece by sounding out the beginning letter, digraph (sh, ch, ea, etc.) or blend (st, bl, dr, etc.). If needed, sound out the letter(s) at the end and in the middle. If he/she has the beginning and ending sounds right, but mispronounces the middle sound, isolate the middle letters and see what sound the letters make. After sounding out the word, have the child blend the sounds together and try to say the word. Ask him/her if the word makes sense. Don't let the child struggle too long. If he/she cannot make sense of or decode the word, review the sounds for decoding, say the word for and with the child, and move on.

Use Picture Clues

Have the child look at the picture to confirm whether the word he/she decoded makes sense. For instance, if the child reads *belt* rather than *bell*, ask him/her to look at the picture and think about whether *belt* makes sense in the context of the sentence.

Look for Word Chunks

Have the child look for familiar word chunks within a word like *and* in *sand* and *eat* in *treat*. Help the child recognize common prefixes (un-, re-, dis-, non-, en-, etc.), suffixes (-ing, -ed, -er, -able, -ness, -tion, etc.), and then read each chunk in the word by itself. For example, *tr-eat-able* is treatable, and *s-and-ing* is sanding. Then have the child read the sentence again to see if the word makes sense.

Apply the Rules of Phonics

Certain rules of phonics help decode words. There are exceptions, but the rules help in decoding.

- A vowel between two consonants usually makes a short vowel sound. Examples: *hat*, *flip*, *check*. Exceptions: *mild*, *cold*.
- Two vowels between two or more consonants usually make the long vowel sound of the first vowel. Examples: *grain*, *treat*, *coat*. Exceptions: *dread*, *said*, *build*.
- One-syllable words ending with -e as in *bake* and *home*, the first vowel makes a long vowel sound. Exception: *have*.
- If *r* follows a vowel, there is no long or short vowel sound. Examples: *tear*, *tar*, *bird*.

Identify Syllables

Recognizing syllables helps identify words. Have the child decode each syllable as if it were a single word and blend the syllables together. Identifying the first syllable often triggers the entire word. Rules for dividing words into syllables are:

- When two consonants appear in the middle of a word, divide the word between the two consonants. This division creates *closed syllables* and the vowel sounds are short. Examples are: *nap-kin*, *bas-ket*.
- When one consonant is between two vowels, divide the word before the consonant. This creates an *open syllable* where the syllable ends in a vowel. *Open syllables* have a *long vowel sound* as in *ti-ger* and *pa-per*. This works more often than not. If it doesn't work, divide the word after the consonant, and the vowel will be short. Examples are *nev-er* and *sec-ond*.
- Prefixes and suffixes form syllables.
- Words ending with a *consonant* and *-le* make one syllable. Examples are *dim-ple* and *han-dle*.



Connect the Words

Have the child compare familiar words to unfamiliar ones and decide if the familiar word is part of the unfamiliar one, for example, *fiction* and *fictitious*. Use the known word to see if the unfamiliar one makes sense, if it does, the two words may be close enough for understanding the context of the word.

Re-read

Have the child read the sentence again to see if the word makes sense. If it doesn't, have him/her think of a word that might make sense and try it.

Keep Reading

Have the child continue beyond the unfamiliar word and look for clues to help recognize the word. The word may appear in another sentence that provides other clues to help understand the context of the word.

Guide him/her through the previous steps for decoding. When he/she reads a word incorrectly, help him/her self-correct. Always give positive responses and praise for trying. Again, don't allow the child to struggle too long with decoding one word. To avoid frustration, help him/her decode the word and move on.

References

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