

# ***National Reading Panel Findings on Phonics***

Phonics instruction teaches children the relationships between the letters (*graphemes*) of written language and the individual sounds (*phonemes*) of spoken language. It teaches children to use these relationships to read and write words. Reading teachers and publishers of beginning reading instruction programs sometimes use different labels to describe these relationships, including *graphophonemic relationships*, *letter-sound associations*, and *sound-symbol correspondences*.

Regardless of the label, the goal of phonics instruction is to help children learn and use the alphabetic principle—the understanding that systematic and predictable relationships exist between written letters and spoken sounds. Knowing these relationships will help children recognize familiar words automatically and “decode” new words. In short, knowledge of the alphabetic principle contributes greatly to children’s ability to read words both in isolation and in connected text.

## ***What does scientifically-based research tell us about phonics instruction?***

⇒ **Systematic and explicit phonics instruction makes a more significant contribution to children’s growth in reading than non-systematic or no phonics instruction.**

Systematic phonics instruction involves the direct teaching of a set of letter-sound relationships in a clearly defined sequence. The set includes the major sound/spelling relationships of both consonants and vowels.

Systematic programs also provide materials that give children substantial practice in applying knowledge of these relationships as they read and write. These materials include books or stories that contain a large number of words children can decode by using the letter-sound relationships they have learned and are learning. The programs also might provide children with opportunities to spell words and write their own stories with the letter-sound relationships they are learning.

Phonics instruction programs that are considered to be not systematic do not teach consonant and vowel letter-sound relationships in a prescribed sequence. Rather, they encourage informal phonics instruction based on the teacher’s perceptions of what students need to learn and when they need to learn it.

Research showed that three kinds of phonic instruction produced similar effects.

1. Synthetic phonics programs that emphasized converting letters to sounds, then blending the sounds to form words
2. Larger unit programs that emphasized analysis and blending of larger subparts of words (i.e., onsets, rimes, spelling patterns), as well as phonemes
3. Miscellaneous phonics programs that taught phonics systematically but in other ways

⇒ **Systematic and explicit phonics instruction significantly improves kindergarten and first grade children’s word recognition and spelling.**

⇒ **Systematic and explicit phonics instruction significantly improves children’s reading comprehension.**

The ability to read words in a text accurately and quickly is highly related to successful reading comprehension.

⇒ **Systematic and explicit phonics instruction is effective for children from various social and economic levels.**

⇒ **Systematic and explicit phonics instruction is particularly beneficial for children who are having difficulty learning to read and who are at risk for developing future reading problems.**

⇒ **Systematic and explicit phonics instruction is most effective when introduced early.**

Phonics instruction is most effective when it begins in kindergarten or first grade. Approximately two years of phonics instruction is sufficient for most students. Systematic phonics instruction by itself may not be enough to significantly improve the overall reading and spelling performance of readers beyond first grade. The effects of phonics instruction on students in second through sixth grades are limited to improving their word reading and oral text reading skills. The effects do not extend to spelling and reading comprehension. For these students, it is important to emphasize reading fluency and comprehension. In addition, these students also require explicit spelling instruction to improve their spelling.

⇒ **Phonics instruction is not an entire reading program for beginning readers.**

Programs should acknowledge that systematic phonics instruction is a means to an end. Along with phonics instruction, young children should listen to stories and informational texts read aloud to them. They also should read texts (both out loud and silently) and write letters, words, messages, and stories. Some phonics programs focus primarily on teaching children a large number of letter-sound relationships. These programs often do not allot enough instructional time to help children learn how to put this knowledge to use in reading actual words, sentences, and texts.

**Effective programs offer phonics instruction that:**

- Helps teachers explicitly and systematically instruct students in how to relate letters and sounds, how to break spoken words into sounds, and how to blend sounds to form words;
- Helps students understand why they are learning the relationships between letters and sounds;
- Helps students apply their knowledge of phonics as they read words, sentences, and text;
- Helps students apply what they learn about sounds and letters to their own writing;
- Can be adapted to individual students’ needs, based on assessment; and
- Includes alphabetic knowledge, phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, and the reading of text, as well as systematic phonics instruction.