

Probing Question: What do children need to be successful readers?

March 26 2009, By Joy Drohan

In the great green room, there was a telephone, and a red balloon, and a picture of..."

Can you recite the words that come next? Chances are you were [read](#) the children's classic Good Night Moon or have read it to your own kids. You may remember a magical moment when the child on your lap suddenly pointed to the letters M...O...O...N...and proudly sounded out "moon" -and just like that, a reader was born.

It's not quite that simple, says Gail Boldt, associate professor of education at Penn State. "Sounding out an unknown word is just one thing that readers do," she says. "This technique must be used in combination with the question 'Well, did that make sense?' 'Sounding it out' is of less use in English than in some other languages because English is not a phonetically regular language," meaning that the same letter makes different sounds in different situations.

The mechanics of [early reading](#) involve phonics (the mastery of sounds made by letters and [syllables](#)), fluency (speed and ease), vocabulary and comprehension, explains Boldt. These elements are often presented as the essentials of [teaching children](#) to read.

Boldt encourages a much broader view of [reading instruction](#), because she feels that focusing solely on these fundamentals — in particular, phonics — leads to "word calling," in which kids do not understand the text.

Despite hundreds of studies, controversy and uncertainty still surround the teaching of reading to young children, she adds. One source of controversy was the the National Reading Panel's (NRP) 2001 report, "Teaching Children to Read," which informed the literacy policy of the Bush administration's "No Child Left Behind" legislation.

According to Boldt, this report has been discounted by some reading researchers for a number of reasons. "A summary version was published by a division of McGraw-Hill, and there have been accusations that the company tweaked the report's findings to promote the use of its reading instruction materials," she says. "In addition, the panel conducting the literature review included only one on-the-ground teacher, and reviewed only certain kinds of studies."

Some key concepts — such as self-monitoring — were lacking from the NRP report, Boldt argues. "This concept simply means that strategic readers know what to do when reading is hard for them," she explains. "Kids must know that they need to stop and use one or more techniques to improve clarity if the words are not making sense. They might repeat the text, skip an unknown word or use context to approximate the meaning, check a dictionary or ask for help."

Also important, and not acknowledged in the NRP report, she says, is that kids "understand reading as social, a way of engaging with other people in exciting ways about topics they care about." After reading a book about driving a backhoe, for example, they might engage with friends in more realistic play with toy backhoes and trucks, and they can more effectively discuss with an adult the work of a backhoe the next time they see one.

"Children need a sense of the kinds of reading that exist," Boldt adds. "They need to know that reading meets our needs and that we read for different purposes." Parents can help their children realize that reading is

a skill people need almost all day long, not just when they sit down with a book, she suggests.

"Many people think of reading as a solitary pursuit, but so much of what we read allows us to intelligently interact with and comprehend all the world," concludes Boldt. "You don't get that sense from workbook rhyming exercises." Turns out that the rituals of that bedtime story — snuggling close on a parent's lap and marveling together at the moon outside the window — are as important to children's reading as the letters spelled out on the page.

Source: By Joy Drohan, Research/PennState

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