

READINGrockets®

The Alphabetic Principle

By: Texas Education Agency (2002)

Children's knowledge of letter names and shapes is a strong predictor of their success in learning to read. Knowing letter names is strongly related to children's ability to remember the forms of written words and their ability to treat words as sequences of letters.

Not knowing letter names is related to children's difficulty in learning letter sounds and in recognizing words. Children cannot understand and apply the alphabetic principle (understanding that there are systematic and predictable relationships between written letters and spoken sounds) until they can recognize and name a number of letters.

Children whose alphabetic knowledge is not well developed when they start school need sensibly organized instruction that will help them identify, name, and write letters. Once children are able to identify and name letters with ease, they can begin to learn letter sounds and spellings.

Children appear to acquire alphabetic knowledge in a sequence that begins with letter names, then letter shapes, and finally letter sounds. Children learn letter names by singing songs such as the "Alphabet Song," and by reciting rhymes. They learn letter shapes as they play with blocks, plastic letters, and alphabetic books. Informal but planned instruction in which children have many opportunities to see, play with, and compare letters leads to efficient letter learning. This instruction should include activities in which children learn to identify, name, and write both upper case and lower case versions of each letter.

What is the "Alphabetic Principle"?

Children's reading development is dependent on their understanding of the alphabetic principle – the idea that letters and letter patterns represent the sounds of spoken language. Learning that there are predictable relationships between sounds and letters allows children to apply these relationships to both familiar and unfamiliar words, and to begin to read with fluency.

The goal of phonics instruction is to help children to learn and be able to use the Alphabetic Principle. The alphabetic principle is the understanding that there are systematic and predictable relationships between written letters and spoken sounds. Phonics instruction helps children learn the relationships between the letters of written language and the sounds of spoken language.

Two issues of importance in instruction in the alphabetic principle are the plan of instruction and the rate of instruction.

The Alphabetic Principle Plan of Instruction

- Teach letter-sound relationships explicitly and in isolation.
- Provide opportunities for children to practice letter-sound relationships in daily lessons.
- Provide practice opportunities that include new sound-letter relationships, as well as cumulatively reviewing previously taught relationships.

- Give children opportunities early and often to apply their expanding knowledge of sound-letter relationships to the reading of phonetically spelled words that are familiar in meaning.

Rate and Sequence of Instruction

No set rule governs how fast or how slow to introduce letter-sound relationships. One obvious and important factor to consider in determining the rate of introduction is the performance of the group of students with whom the instruction is to be used. Furthermore, there is no agreed upon order in which to introduce the letter-sound relationships. It is generally agreed, however, that the earliest relationships introduced should be those that enable children to begin reading words as soon as possible. That is, the relationships chosen should have high utility. For example, the spellings m, a, t, s, p, and h are high utility, but the spellings x as in *box*, gh, as in *through*, ey as in *they*, and a as in *want* are of lower utility.

It is also a good idea to begin instruction in sound-letter relationships by choosing consonants such as f, m, n, r, and s, whose sounds can be pronounced in isolation with the least distortion. Stop sounds at the beginning or middle of words are harder for children to blend than are continuous sounds.

Instruction should also separate the introduction of sounds for letters that are auditorily confusing, such as /b/ and /v/ or /l/ and /e/, or visually confusing, such as b and d or p and g.

Instruction might start by introducing two or more single consonants and one or two short vowel sounds. It can then add more single consonants and more short vowel sounds, with perhaps one long vowel sound. It might next add consonant blends, followed by digraphs (for example, th, sh, ch), which permits children to read common words such as *this*, *she*, and *chair*. Introducing single consonants and consonant blends or clusters should be introduced in separate lessons to avoid confusion.

The point is that the order of introduction should be logical and consistent with the rate at which children can learn. Furthermore, the sound-letter relationships chosen for early introduction should permit children to work with words as soon as possible.

Many teachers use a combination of instructional methods rather than just one. Research suggests that explicit, teacher-directed instruction is more effective in teaching the alphabetic principle than is less-explicit and less-direct instruction.

Guidelines for Rate and Sequence of Instruction

- Recognize that children learn sound-letter relationships at different rates.
- Introduce sound-letter relationships at a reasonable pace, in a range from two to four letter-sound relationships a week.
- Teach high-utility letter-sound relationships early.
- Introduce consonants and vowels in a sequence that permits the children to read words quickly.
- Avoid the simultaneous introduction of auditorily or visually similar sounds and letters.
- Introduce single consonant sounds and consonant blends/clusters in separate lessons.

- Provide blending instruction with words that contain the letter-sound relationships that children have learned.

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