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The following are nine components of effective reading instruction:

Phonemic Awareness, Letter Knowledge, and Concepts of Print

Phoneme awareness and letter-sound knowledge account for more of the variation in early reading and spelling success than general intelligence, overall maturity level, or listening comprehension. They are the basis for learning an alphabetic writing system. Children who have poorly developed phonemic awareness at the end of kindergarten are likely to become poor readers. Explicit instruction in sound identification, matching, segmentation, and blending, when linked appropriately to sound-symbol association, reduces the risk of reading failure and accelerates early reading and spelling acquisition for all children.

The Alphabetic Code: Phonics and Decoding

In addition to phoneme awareness and letter knowledge, knowledge of sound-symbol associations is vital for success in first grade and beyond. Accurate and fluent word recognition depends on phonics knowledge. The ability to read words accounts for a substantial proportion of overall reading success even in older readers. Good readers do not depend primarily on context to identify new words. When good readers encounter an unknown word, they decode the word, name it, and then attach meaning. The context of the passage helps a reader get the meaning of a word once a word has been deciphered.

Fluent, Automatic Reading of Text

Beginning readers must apply their decoding skills to fluent, automatic reading of text. Children who are reading with adequate fluency are much more likely to comprehend what they are reading. Thus the concept of independent reading level is important: it is that level at which the child recognizes more than 95 percent of the words and can read without laboring over decoding. Poor readers often read too slowly. Some poor readers have a specific problem with fluent, automatic text reading even though they have learned basic phonics.

Vocabulary

Knowledge of word meanings is critical to reading comprehension. Knowledge of words supports comprehension, and wide reading enables the acquisition of word knowledge. At school age, children are expected to learn the meanings of new words at the rate of several thousand per year. Most of these words are acquired by reading them in books or hearing them read aloud from books. Networks of words, tied conceptually, are the foundation of productive vocabulary. Key in developing this foundation is active processing of word meanings, which develops understanding of words and their uses, and connections among word concepts.

Text Comprehension

The undisputed purpose of learning to read is to comprehend. Although children are initially limited in what they can read independently, comprehension instruction can occur as soon as they enter school. Comprehension depends, firstly, on a large, working vocabulary and substantial background knowledge. Even before children can read for themselves, teachers can build this vital background knowledge by reading interactively and frequently to children from a variety of narrative and expository texts, chosen in part for their ability to expand what children know about the world around them. Further, comprehension is enhanced when teachers make sure students understand what they are reading by asking questions and encouraging student questions and discussions. Effective instruction will help the reader actively relate his or her own knowledge or experience to the ideas written in the text, and then remember the ideas that he or she has come to understand.

Written Expression

Reading and writing are two sides of the same coin. Both depend on fluent understanding and use of language at many levels. Each enhances the other. From first grade onward, children benefit from almost daily opportunities to organize, transcribe, and edit their thoughts in writing. A variety of writing assignments appropriate to their abilities is desirable, including production of narratives and exposition. While they are building the skills of letter formation, spelling, and sentence generation, children also should be taught to compose in stages: generating and organizing ideas, initially with a group or partner; producing a draft; sharing ideas with others for the purpose of gaining feedback; and revising, editing, proofreading, and publishing.

Spelling and Handwriting

Recent research supports the premise that written composition is enhanced by mastery of the component skills of spelling and writing just as reading comprehension is supported by mastery of fluent word recognition. Fluent, accurate letter formation and spelling are associated with students' production of longer and better-organized compositions. Word usage, handwriting, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling are the necessary conventions of written expression that must be taught alongside strategies for composing. Students learn spelling and handwriting more readily if those skills are taught explicitly from first grade onward and if they are applied in the context of frequent, purposeful writing assignments.

Screening and Continuous Assessment to Inform Instruction

Frequent assessment of developing readers, and the use of that information for planning instruction, is the most reliable way of preventing children from falling behind and staying behind. A clear message from longitudinal studies of reading development is that most children who become poor readers in third grade and beyond were having difficulty right from the start with phonologically-based reading skills. In addition, instruction that targets the specific weaknesses most likely to cause reading difficulty often prevents later reading failure and facilitates the reading development of most children.

Motivating Children to Read and Developing Their Literacy Horizons

As we have emphasized earlier, a successful teacher of beginning reading generates enthusiasm and appreciation for reading. Research reviews have repeatedly stated that children who are read to often, who are led to enjoy books, and who are encouraged to read widely are more likely to become good readers than children who lack these experiences. Teachers who are juggling the technical challenges of program organization and delivery may lose sight of the fact that purposeful reading and writing is the goal of instruction. Information on the importance of daily reading aloud, the selection of varied reading material, the use of the library, and the integration of topics across the curriculum will bolster literacy instruction, even as teachers focus on teaching specific reading and writing skills. Team and school initiatives to promote a love of books and wide reading should be ever-present.

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