

Why It Works for Everyone

Learning is as Natural as We Let It Be

We don't really teach the child. We let the child learn. Children learn to talk, not because they received formal lessons in talking. There were no lessons needed because, as I have said, every newborn baby is a little learning machine. All it takes for infants to learn to talk is to be surrounded by people talking to them and encouraging their responses.

Eventually, these little learning machines will combine the sounds they hear into the words they hear, as well. The inborn capacity to turn sounds into words is why every child learns to speak whatever language or languages are spoken to him or to her. Infants raised in multilingual environments learn two or three languages simultaneously as easily as they learn just one. I mentioned in the [My Cousin Jean](#) section of [Chapter 1](#) that while I was in Iceland giving a workshop, I chatted with a child in kindergarten who spoke English with me, Hindi with her grandmother, and Icelandic with her teachers. That child had an Icelandic-speaking father, an English-speaking mother, and a Hindi-speaking grandmother.

To make it possible for every child to learn to read and to write, all we need to do is to make it possible for children to learn to read and to write as naturally as they learned to speak. Every child learns to talk because talking makes sense. Words are collections of sounds the child hears and puts together as words. The 44 sounds of the English language make up every English word a child learns to speak.

The Reading Program allows children to use these same 44 sounds to learn to read and to write in the same way they learned to speak. To speak, children put sounds together to make words. The Reading Program uses this same process for reading words. The child reads the word's sounds and says the word the sounds represent. Writing uses the same process. The child says (or thinks) the word's sounds and stamps them out.

The Reading Program's 44 sound-images allow all children to make the same sense out of reading and writing as they made out of spoken words. Not every child learns to talk at the same rate as every other child. My cousin Jean learned faster than I did. It makes no difference because learning is not a competition. Learning to talk is simply what every child does. Learning to read and to write is not a competition either. It is simply what every child will do at his or her own learning rate.

The Reading Program makes reading and writing as easy for children to learn as it was for them as infants to learn the language they now speak.

It surrounds them with words written in the 44 unique images that represent each sound. Children can see the sounds, say the sounds, and hear the words the sounds make. And, when ready, children can write (or stamp out) these sounds as words. The Reading Program allows every child to become a confident reader and writer of words before any letter spellings of these words need to be introduced.

Using Letters

Letters are just the symbols we use to record words. The words already exist without the letters. However, reading is traditionally taught as if the letters are the words. When the process of learning to read starts with letters, reading is easy for some and difficult for others. The children for whom the process is more difficult end up feeling that they are not as smart as the children for whom the process was easier. These little learning machines are given the mistaken impression that they are not good at learning, even though every one of these children has already mastered the most difficult learning task all of us ever faced – the learning of language when we were know-nothing newborns.

Learning to read with letters presents challenges for children that learning to talk did not. The letters themselves are confusing for far too many children, both perceptually and in remembering the many different sounds that letters make. Using letters is not a problem once the concept of reading has been mastered. Letters only pose a problem when we assume that the letters are the words and not just the symbols we use to record them.

A child who has already learned to read and write words before the letter spellings of these words are introduced already understands the concept of both reading and writing. Children who understand the concept and can read and write with sounds use the knowledge they gleaned from the sight word worksheets, Decoding Charts, and spelling notebooks, to write words with traditional letters. They are using the same concept-connecting-symbolic process that makes our Reading Program as capable of teaching every child as our mathematics curriculum.

A Review from Chapter 3

Name: Joani Richardson

State: Utah

Number of years using the program: 5

Grade: 1

"..... Each year it gets better! I have better readers, spellers, and writers. I love this time of year because you can see the fruits of your labors - they read anything they want (not just the first grade basal, like the other classes), they can spell and understand why words are spelled in that way, and they can write, and write they do - it's so fun to see them enjoy each other's work too. I'm committed, there's no other way....."

The Girl in Kindergarten for the Third Year

The 1973-1974 school year was the first year Mary and I placed Reading Program kits in a school outside our own school district. Mary's student-teacher from her year teaching kindergarten in East Palo Alto was now a teacher in the Franklin-McKinley School District in San Jose. That teacher got her principal's permission to let the three kindergarten classes at their school use the Program.

There was a girl in one of the classes who was now in kindergarten for her third year, which the girl's mother found upsetting. However, the mother was even more upset when she learned that her daughter, who could already read, would now be using a beginning reading program that she definitely did not need.

My first thought was, how could any child be in kindergarten for a third year? To find out, I met with the mother. Her precocious daughter had been reading books since she was just three years old, so her mother enrolled her in a school near where they then lived. The only enrollment she was permitted was kindergarten. Three years of age was deemed to be too young for first-grade enrollment. The next year, the family had moved, and the now four-year-old daughter was again only permitted kindergarten enrollment. This third year, the same thing had happened. Once again, the family had moved, and once again, kindergarten was the only option for her now five-year-old daughter.

The mother was already annoyed that her daughter was still in kindergarten for the third time. However, her daughter's being asked to use a beginning reading program was just too much. I had the daughter read for me, of course. She was definitely a very good reader. I told the mother that I thought it would be better for her daughter to use the reading program along with all the other children at the start of the school year, so she would not be separating herself from her classmates when the kids were just getting to know one another. I suggested that the mother have her daughter use the program for a month, and after a month, if she still did not want her daughter to use the program, I would arrange for her to be excused.

Before the month was over, the mother called me and said her daughter loved the program, and she (meaning the mother) really loved the program, as well. The mother said that now her daughter could really read. Before, she had a great sight vocabulary, but now she could read anything, not just the books that her parents had read to her. She was reading the writing on cereal boxes, the newspaper, and anything else with words on it. She was reading, and now she was even writing. The mother was very much okay with having her daughter use the program.

The reason I have added this story here is because the emphasis of this chapter is on how the program is designed to meet the needs of the children who have difficulty in learning to read. As was noted in [The Concept](#) section of this chapter, the Reading Program was designed specifically to meet the needs of dyslexic children. As was said then, 20% of Americans have some form of dyslexia. Mary and I decided to focus our attention on the needs of that 20%. We believed that if we made it easy for that 20% to learn to read and write, the methods would be even easier to use by the other 80%. That child in kindergarten for the third year is an excellent example of the other 80% benefitting from a program aimed at the 20%.

Dyslexia Footnote

The list we used to guide the Program's design that is listed in [The Concept](#) section is shown again below, along with the Reading Program's method of successfully dealing with each problem on that list.

1 - Problems learning the names and sounds of letters. Letter names are taught in Picture Packets and posted on Alphabet Wall Cards on the classroom wall. The Decoding Chart teaches every child the many different sounds that letters make.

2 - Problems telling apart letters with similar shapes, such as “d” and “b” or “p” and “q”. Learning to write letters correctly is taught before letters need to be either read or written in words. The use of letters is not introduced until children can already read and write the words with sounds.

3 - Trouble associating sounds with letters or parts of words. Associating sounds with letters is not needed when the child first learns to read, since the words to be read are all sounds. The trouble associating is a problem that only exists when children are asked to read letters before they learned to read with sounds.

4 - Trouble sounding out new words. This is not a problem when learning to read starts with two-sound words, when only eight sounds need to be known, and children work in teams to read the words.

5 - Trouble learning how sounds go together. Learning how sounds go together is no problem at all when all the words being read are composed of sounds, not letters.

6 - Trouble breaking words into sounds or relating letters to sounds when reading. A non-existent problem when the words do not have to be broken into sounds. The words are made up of sounds from the very beginning. There is also no difficulty relating letters to sounds when reading, when the first words read are just sounds, and the children connect sounds to letters and not the other way around.

7 - Mixing up the position of sounds in a word. Mixing up the position of sounds in words only happens when the sounds are spelled with

letters. The mix-up is caused by the letters and not the sounds.

8 - Difficulty spelling simple words. The Decoding Chart guides children in the spelling of words, and one hundred sixty-one sight words can be spelled by every child.

9 - Spelling that's unpredictable and inconsistent. Spelling is, by its nature, unpredictable and inconsistent. However, the Decoding Chart helps every child make sense out of spelling words with letters, because each child already knows the sounds for any word.

10 - Confusing or reversing the order of letters in words. Confusing or reversing the order of letters in words is a problem that accompanies learning to read with letters before learning to read with sounds. The child does not get the sounds in a word mixed up. The sounds are not at all confusing. Letters by themselves most definitely are.

11- Reading slowly or making errors when reading aloud. Reading is not a competition. What does reading slowly mean? The question is, "Can the child read?" If the answer is "Yes!" then speed is irrelevant. A child reading letters before learning to read with sounds will make errors that are caused by the child's confusion with the letters being read.

12- Poor phonological awareness and word attack skills. Definitely not a problem for any child who has used the Reading Program.

Phonological awareness is the ability to recognize that words are made up of smaller units of sound (phonemes) and that changing and manipulating phonemes can create new words and meaning.

Without a doubt, every child using the Reading Program has excellent phonological awareness.

A child with poor phonological awareness may not be able to correctly answer these questions: What sounds do you think make up the word "hot" and are these different from the sounds that make "pot"? What word would you have if you changed the "p" sound in "pot" to an "h" sound? How many words can you think of that rhyme with the word "cat"? Not a single child who has learned to read using the Reading Program would have any trouble answering these three questions.

Word attack skills. Young children with dyslexia can also have problems with word attack skills. This is the ability to make sense of unfamiliar words by looking for smaller words or collections of letters that a child has previously learned. For example, a child with good word attack skills may read the word "sunbathing" for the first time and gain a sense of the meaning of the word by breaking it down into "sun", "bath", and "ing". Learning to read with two and three-sound words, then phrases made up of two and three-sound words, allows each child to build his or her word attack skills slowly over time. Making sense of unfamiliar words is easy when every unfamiliar

word is comprised of smaller words that the child has no trouble recognizing.

In summary, every problem is dealt with, and every single child learns. “Every” means 100% and not just 99.99%.

A Dyslexia Footnote – Footnote

The problem many students with dyslexia have in telling apart letters with similar shapes, such as “d” and “b” or “p” and “q” is not confined to letter shapes. In the first version of *Dekodiphukan*, the picture of the E sound was of a little girl with her arms raised while screaming “Eeeee!!” after having seen a mouse. Some dyslexic children confused the “Eeeee!!” and “Ooooo!!” pictures with one another because both pictures showed a girl with her arms raised. Even though the girl in the E picture had her hair in two pigtails and her whole body shown, while the girl in the O picture had straight black hair and was only shown from the waist up. To eliminate this confusion the child seeing the mouse became a boy, and his arms were no longer raised.

Starting with the sounds before a child even needs to know his or her letters lets every child, not just the dyslexic child, understand and master the concept of reading. Starting with the sounds and encouraging the children who catch on more quickly to help the children who need more time, ensures that every child learns, with no child left behind. Starting with the sounds makes it possible to really end illiteracy in America.