A Family Guide to the Science of Reading

Helping Our Children Learn to Read and Thrive

Families In Schools+



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Welcome

Dear Parents & Caregivers,

Learning to read is one of the most powerful milestones in a child's life. It opens the door to knowledge, fuels imagination, and lays the foundation for success in school and beyond. Reading is not just a subject—it is the gateway to all learning, confidence, and opportunity. When children become strong readers, they are better equipped to understand the world, advocate for themselves, and pursue their dreams. **Families play a critical role** in this journey, and with the right knowledge and tools, every parent can help their child thrive.

Yet today, far too many children are not learning to read well—especially those in low-income communities. This is not because children cannot learn, nor because families do not care. It is because too many schools have not been equipped with the research-based approaches that we know work. The good news is that we can change this. The **science of reading** gives us clear, proven guidance on how children learn to read—and when schools and families work together, children succeed.

This guide is designed to empower you with that knowledge, strengthen your voice, and support your partnership with educators—because together, we can ensure every child becomes a confident, capable reader.

How to Use This Guide

You can use this guide in a way that fits your life. Read it from start to finish or you can jump to the pages you need most.

Each building block page has:

- A short explanation
- Simple activities by age
- Ideas you can do in daily routines
- A question you can ask your child's school

For more tips, flip to pages 15-20.

Here are a few ways to start:

- **If your child is ages 0–5,** focus on talking, singing, telling stories, and playing with the sounds in words.
- **If your child is in kindergarten to 2nd grade,** focus on helping them hear the individual sounds in words and connect those sounds to letters.
- **If your child is in 3rd grade or older,** and reading is hard, find out whether the difficulty has to do with connecting sounds to letters, or something else entirely.



You can do these activities in any language. Use the language that feels best for your family. Home language supports the growth of strong readers.



We hope this guide helps you feel confident, supported, and part of a bigger literacy movement.



Only about

1

in 3 students read at grade level by 4th grade.

20

minutes of reading each day exposes children to almost 2 million words a year!

This guide is for parents, caregivers, and any caring adult who helps raise a child.

Families lay the foundation for reading.

- Your love builds safety and confidence.
- Your conversations build language.
- Your stories build meaning.

Teachers help children connect these foundations.

- Teachers' systematic and explicit reading instruction builds these connections.
- In-school daily reading practice strengthens them.
- Teachers adjust pace and intensity to meet children's needs.

For multilingual families:

- Home language is a strength.
- Children can learn to read in English and grow their home language too.
- The science of reading works for multilingual learners when they receive support as they learn English. This includes English sounds, their spellings, and how sentences are structured.

What you already do matters



Learning to read starts at birth and grows at home and at school.



It begins at home when you talk with your child.



It grows when you tell stories, sing songs, and say rhymes.

Reading family recipes, street signs, text messages, and grocery lists together is a great way to build reading skills!

Families are one of the most powerful forces in a child's literacy journey



Children do not only learn at school. They learn through relationships, conversations, routines, stories, songs, questions, and the language they hear every day. Long before a child can read, they are already learning from the people around them. They learn words from conversation. They learn curiosity when someone answers their questions.

You are your child's first and most important teacher. You help your child notice language, enjoy books, ask questions, and keep trying.

Remember: Talking counts. Singing counts. Storytelling counts. Asking questions counts. Your presence counts.

Unlike speaking and walking, reading is not natural.



Reading Is a Skill

Most children learn to speak naturally. The brain is wired for it. Reading is different. It works by forging connections among capacities built since birth—language, vision, memory—and that takes instruction, practice, and time, starting with the most essential connection: how sounds map to letters.

Multilingual Learners

Children bring different strengths and needs to learning to read. Multilingual learners are no exception. Their home language is an asset, and many also need dedicated support at school to develop English language skills alongside literacy.

Family Takeaway

Reading grows step by step. It is built over time, and children do best when school and home both support that growth. Children who are multilingual bring important strengths to this process.

What is the Science of Reading?

The science of reading is a body of research that helps us understand how all children learn to read—including multilingual learners.

Many schools are shifting toward approaches to reading instruction that are grounded in the science of reading.

One of the most common approaches is called **structured literacy.** Structured literacy is a way of teaching reading that helps children understand how language works. If your child speaks more than one language, that is a strength.



> **Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.**
>
> -Frederick Douglass

Structured Literacy

What Your Child is Learning

- Sounds in words
- Letters and spelling patterns
- Word parts
- Sentence structure
- Word meanings

How Reading is Taught

- Step by step, or systematically
- Explicity and clearly
- Practiced over time
- Adjusted based on child's needs
- Checked periodically

Why Sentence Structure Matters

- Sometimes children can read all the words in a sentence but still not understand it.
- Learning how words are put together helps children make meaning from what they read.
- This is especially important for multilingual learners, since sentence structure can be different across languages.

Why This Matters

This approach is based on research about how the brain learns to read and helps children build strong, lasting reading skills.

Adapted from: International Dyslexia Association, Structured Literacy Grounded in the Science of Reading.

How the Brain Learns to Read

Letters and Sounds

Reading requires the brain to connect two systems that develop separately. One for processing letters, another for processing the sounds of language. For most children, connecting the two takes effort and is made easier by deliberate instruction and support.

Words Become Automatic

With practice, these connections strengthen. Words that have been fully decoded and connected to their meaning become stored in long-term memory. From that point on, they are recognized instantly and effortlessly.

What This Means for Families

The more a child practices, the larger their bank of instantly recognized words becomes.

This frees up mental energy for what reading is really for: understanding, learning, and enjoying what is on the page.



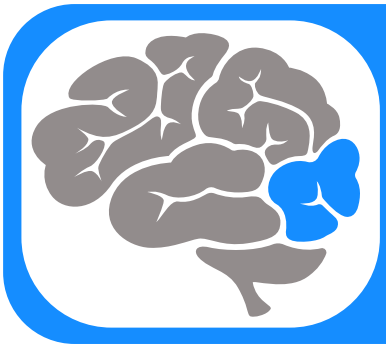
How the Brain Learns to Read



The four areas of the brain that form connections to help us read are **the occipital lobe**, **the temporal parietal area**, **the temporal occipital core**, and **the inferior frontal core**.

None of these parts are designed for reading since they have other functions by nature. We need to form connections between these parts so they can work together and help us learn to read.

How the Brain Learns to Read



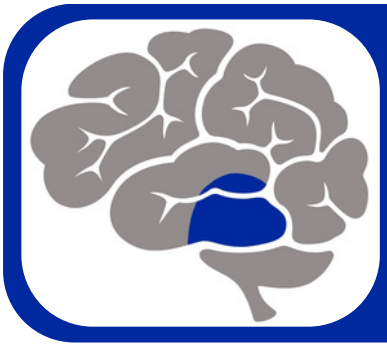
OCCIPITAL LOBE

The part of the brain responsible for visual processing. This part of the brain is important for identifying the letters to read.



TEMPOROPARIETAL JUNCTION

The part of the brain that helps understand speech. It is used more by beginning readers that are learning to combine the visual aspects of letters and sounds to decode words.



OCCIPITOTEMPORAL CORTEX

The part of the brain linked to visual recognition of patterns. This area is important for the automatic recognition of words.



INFERIOR FRONTAL GYRUS

The part of the brain where we form the sounds of language. This area is involved with the pronunciation of written words.

Scan to watch the full video explanation

Adapted from: Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors, and UnboundEd/CORE. “PODER: El Cerebro y La Lectura [Módulo 1, Sesión 2].” YouTube, 15 Aug. 2023, youtu.be/gGM17Kjq7hQ?si=EsvKf8ea4nNR1fT9

Six skills that help children become strong readers



ORAL LANGUAGE

The ability to talk and hear.



PHONEMIC AWARENESS

The ability to hear, identify, and manipulate sounds in spoken words.



PHONICS

A method that helps children connect the sounds in words with the letters and letter combinations that represent them.



FLUENCY

The ability to read with speed, accuracy, and appropriate expression.



VOCABULARY

Understanding words, their definitions, and their context.



COMPREHENSION

Learning to understand and make meaning of a wide variety of texts.

ORAL LANGUAGE

Talking and listening builds readers





Ages 0 to 2

Narrate the day. Point to and name objects. Sing songs, rhymes, and repeats. Respond to your child's sounds and gestures like a real conversation.



Ages 3 to 5

Ask open questions: "What do you think will happen next?" Tell simple stories together. Play describing games with colors, sizes, and feelings. Encourage pretend play and conversation.



Grades K to 2

Do a daily "high and low" from the day. Ask your child to retell a story in order. Encourage them to explain their thinking. Talk during meals, car rides, and routines.

Family reminder: Conversation is not extra. It is part of how children build literacy.

TRY IT TODAY

Show and Tell 3

- Ask your child to share three details about something (their day, a picture, a snack, a game).
- Then ask: “Tell me more.” and “Why?”

PHONEMIC AWARENESS

Hearing the sounds inside words



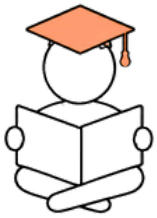
Ages 0 to 2

Clap simple rhythms. Repeat playful sounds like "ba ba ba" or "ma ma ma." Say nursery rhymes often. Pause and let your child join in with familiar sounds.



Ages 3 to 5

Play rhyming games. Clap syllables in names. Ask which words start with the same sound. Stretch out simple words slowly.



Grades K to 2

Play sound swap games: cat to hat. Say a word slowly and ask your child to blend it. Hunt for words that start with the same sound. Break simple words into beginning, middle, and ending sounds.

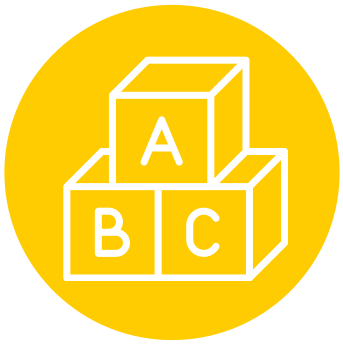


Sound Safari

- Pick one sound (like /m/). Go on a hunt for three words that start with that sound.
- Say the words out loud together.
- You can do this in any language.

PHONICS

Connecting sounds to letters to read words





Ages 3 to 5

Play with letter names and sounds. Notice letters on signs, labels, and packages. Trace letters in sand, shaving cream, or the air. Connect letters to meaningful words like names.



Grades K to 2

Build simple words by changing one sound. Practice sounding out short words slowly, then blending. Notice word families like cat, hat, and mat. Point out patterns in everyday reading.



Grades 3 and up

Look for chunks like re, un, ing, and tion. Break bigger words into parts. Pause guessing and ask, "What letters do you see?" Support reading with patience and repeated practice.



Letter Detective

- Spot one letter or letter team you see today (on a sign, label, or book).
- Ask: “What sound does this make?” Then find one word with that letter pattern.
- If your child is not sure, you model it and have them repeat.

FLUENCY

Smooth reading builds understanding





Ages 0 to 5

Read aloud every day. Repeat favorite books often. Let your child tell the story from the pictures. Use expression when you read.



Grades K to 2

Try echo reading: you read a line, your child repeats. Do choral reading together. Reread short texts two or three times. Celebrate smoother reading, not just speed.



Grades 3 and up

Read poems, songs, and plays aloud. Take turns reading paragraphs. Record and replay reading to notice smoothness. Choose short, interesting passages for practice.

TRY IT TODAY

Read It, Remix It

- Pick a short text (a few lines, a page, a poem, or lyrics).
- Read it once. Then read it again, a little smoother, like talking.
- This works in any language.

VOCABULARY

Words are tools for thinking





Ages 0 to 5

Name feelings like excited, nervous, proud, and calm. Compare things: big and small, heavy and light. Use rich describing words during play and routines. Repeat new words in meaningful ways.



Grades K to 2

Choose a word of the week. Ask what a new word might mean before giving the answer. Use real-world words during cooking, shopping, and errands. Connect words to actions and objects your child knows.



Grades 3 and up

Keep a notebook or phone list of new words. Talk about multiple meanings of words. Ask when your child has experienced a word, like relieved or frustrated. Explore words from books, news, hobbies, and conversation.

TRY IT TODAY

Word Wizard

- Pick one word from today (like “frustrated,” “proud,” or “plan”).
- Ask: “What do you think it means?”
- Then use it in two new sentences.
- If you use more than one language at home, try it in both.

COMPREHENSION

Making meaning from what we hear and read





Ages 0 to 5

Ask who, what, and where questions during read-aloud. Do picture walks before reading. Ask how a character might feel. Connect stories to your child's own life.



Grades K to 2

Stop and ask, "What just happened?" Retell the story using beginning, middle, and end. Ask about the problem and solution. Encourage predictions before turning the page.



Grades 3 and up

Ask for evidence from the text. Compare two texts, or a book and a movie. Ask what the text reminds them of. Talk about the author's message or purpose.

TRY IT TODAY

Pause and Prove It

- After reading or listening, ask: “What happened?” and “Why?”
- Then ask: “What part made you think that?”
- Kids can point to a picture, a page, or a sentence.

Understanding Assessments

What assessments show

Assessments can show what skills a child has already learned and which ones still need practice — letter sounds, reading words, fluency, or understanding what is read. But assessments do not tell the whole story. Every child learns at their own pace, and with the right support, all children can become strong readers.

Family reminder

You do not have to wait for a big problem to ask questions. Early questions can lead to earlier support.

If something feels unclear, ask for examples. Ask to see the kind of reading work your child is doing.

Assessment types and tools

- **Screeners** identify students who may be at risk for reading difficulties.
- **Progress monitoring** shows whether students are making growth in specific reading skill areas.
- **Diagnostic assessments** identify a student's reading strengths and weaknesses and help explain where support is needed.

Examples of Screeners

- **DIBELS**
- **i-Ready Reading**
- **MAP Reading**
- **STAR Reading**



Questions to Ask

Use these questions to learn more about how reading is taught at your child's school and how you can partner in that learning.

Foundational Skills

□ Does my child receive explicit instruction in phonemic awareness?
□ Does the program teach children how to sound out words instead of guessing based on pictures or context?
□ How often are students given opportunities to practice reading decodable texts?

Language and Comprehension

□ How does the program build vocabulary and background knowledge?
□ Do students get to see themselves in the literature through reading culturally relevant texts?
□ How are comprehension skills taught and supported?

Assessment and Support

□ What screeners does the school use to identify students who may need extra reading support?
□ What interventions are available if a child is struggling?
□ Will progress be monitored and shared with families on a regular basis throughout the year?

Home–School Partnership

□ Are family guides or home resources available to support learning at home?
□ What can I do at home to reinforce what my child is learning at school?
□ Who can I talk to if I have questions about my child's reading growth?

Additional Advocacy Questions

□ Is our reading curriculum aligned with the science of reading?
□ What reading programs or materials does our school use?
□ How does instruction support multilingual learners and students with diverse needs?



Did you know?
Guessing based on pictures or context is not aligned with the science of reading and gets in the way of real learning.

The importance of policies in improving reading outcomes

Why policy matters

Across the country, there is a movement to improve literacy outcomes. States are implementing policies to advance evidence-based reading instruction. The movement reflects a growing recognition that the literacy crisis is a solvable problem and that solving it means embracing the science of how children learn to read.

Family reminder

Policy may feel far away, but it affects real classrooms and real children. Families have a voice in that conversation. Share what your child is experiencing and what support they may need.

How to advocate

If your school is not using a structured literacy approach aligned with the science of reading, consider reaching out to your principal or school board representative.



Helpful Resources



Suggested resources

The journey does not end here. Use the resources below to continue learning, growing, and advocating for children's literacy success.

- Sold a Story (Emily Hanford podcast)
- Sold a Story (Spanish)
- PODER (Abriendo Puertas videos)
- National Center on Improving Literacy
- Families In Schools
- Reading Rockets
- Colorin Colorado

Glossary

Assessment
A tool schools use to check how a child is doing. Assessments can show what skills a child has and what support they may need.

Blend (Blending)
Putting sounds together to make a word. Example: /k/ /a/ /t/ becomes “cat.”

Comprehension
Understanding what you read. This includes thinking about the text and making meaning.

Decode (Decoding)
Figuring out a word by connecting letters to sounds and blending the sounds together.

Explicit Instruction
Teaching in a clear, direct way. The teacher shows the skill, practices it with students, then students try it on their own.

Fluency
Reading with accuracy, at a good pace, and with expression. Fluency helps children focus on meaning.

Foundational Skills
The early building blocks of reading, like phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency.

Grapheme
A written letter or group of letters that stands for a sound. Example: “sh” is a grapheme.

Home Language
The language a family uses at home. Home language is a strength and supports literacy.

Letter Sound
The sound a letter makes in a word. Example: the letter “m” can make the /m/ sound.

Multilingual Learner (MLL)
A child who is learning English and also uses one or more other languages.

Oral Language
Speaking and listening. This includes conversation, storytelling, and understanding spoken words.

Phoneme
The smallest sound in a spoken word. Example: the word “cat” has three phonemes: /k/ /a/ /t/.

Glossary

Phonemic Awareness
Being able to hear and work with sounds in spoken words. This is an ear skill that comes before reading.

Phonics
Learning how letters and letter patterns connect to sounds. Phonics helps children read words and spell.

Prefix
A word part added to the beginning of a word that changes its meaning. Example: “un-” in “unhappy.”

Read Aloud
When an adult reads to a child. Read aloud builds vocabulary, background knowledge, and love of reading.

Science of Reading (SoR)
A large set of research that shows how kids learn to read and what helps most. It includes skills like sounds, letters, word reading, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Segment (Segmenting)
Breaking a word into its individual sounds. Example: “cat” becomes /k/ /a/ /t/.

Sight Word
A common word a child can recognize quickly. Some sight words follow regular phonics patterns, and some are harder to sound out at first.

Suffix
A word part added to the end of a word that changes its meaning. Example: “-ing” in “playing.”

Systematic Instruction
Teaching skills in a planned order, moving from easier skills to harder skills.

Vocabulary
The words a child knows and understands. Vocabulary helps children understand what they read.

Word Family
A group of words with the same ending pattern. Example: cat, hat, and mat are in the “-at” family.



About Families In Schools

Families In Schools is a Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization that works alongside families, schools, and communities so that students can thrive. For decades, we have supported family engagement as a strategy for student success.

We believe families are experts in their children's lives, that strong partnerships between home and school matter, and that families should have the information, tools, and voice to help shape better outcomes for their children.

Read LA!

Literacy *and* Justice *for* All

Read LA!, powered by Families In Schools (FIS), is a campaign to ensure all children in Los Angeles can read and thrive.