

# Jump on the Phonics Bandwagon – If it was Only That Simple

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*Matthew Glavach, Ph.D.*

I have read several articles recently about how to fix reading instruction. When two thirds of fourth graders are not proficient in reading, something needs to be fixed. Are we finding solutions without defining the problem sufficiently? While a program may be evidence-based, does that mean that it is child-based, will children respond?

The science of reading is trending in the direction of phonics which is focused on sound-symbol development important to decoding words. It includes practice with isolated word patterns, especially rhyming patterns such as "fun, run, and sun "and sentence structures such "Tad has a tan hat. This phonetic strategy gives beginning readers a tool to use when facing difficult and unfamiliar words. There is no denying that success with sound and symbol relationships can help children to decode words but there is a downside.

For too many children, this is what reading is. There is often a tight skill sequence and little time for reading popular children's books that have joy, interest, and rich meaning, a focus of whole language instruction. Also, phonics lacks prosody, the music of language, the sounds that bring joy, mystery and meaning in the way words are spoken. The lack of prosody affects many children's already short attention spans, and they can lose interest quickly.

The most difficult part of learning to decode is hearing individual speech sounds – something the brain is not designed for. While some children do well on this, many do not. Children who do not respond to phonemics and phonics typically end up struggling with more of the same instruction that did not work for them and to continue often adds to their dislike of reading. Without a child's desire to read, the best instructional programs often fail.

An approach that includes phonics and whole language can have many benefits. Many words are not phonetic. These words are best learned in context, especially the context of books children

love to read.

The author's research with over six hundred children, most of them struggling readers who had not responded to phonics found success with an approach that included phonics and whole language.

The instructional program includes basic phonics instruction with repeated reading in popular children's books. The repeated reading activity does not take away from the joy of reading as children loved reading their books again and again with expression and prosody, the music of language. Something interesting happens when children have success with repeated reading. Children can complete phonics activities more easily. This reading-aloud practice increases phonological awareness in children with literacy difficulties and specific language impairment, and improves comprehension, vocabulary, and general language abilities.

The author's new book *Phonics and Whole Language Together for Reading Instruction* describes how this reading approach can be implemented in classrooms. The book is available at the author's website <https://www.strugglingreaders.com/dm/>

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