

Not Hooked on Phonics: There Is Another Way

New Findings Reveal Some Children Learn to Read “in Reverse,” Unlocking Phonics Only After Fluency Develops

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Matthew Glavach, Ph.D.

CA — New classroom observations suggest that some [struggling readers](#)—including many with [dyslexia](#)—may learn to read in a sequence opposite of traditional [phonics](#)—first instruction. Instead of mastering sound-symbol relationships before reading connected text, these children appear to unlock phonics only after developing fluency.

Phonics can support reading development, but for some

students it becomes a slow, discouraging exercise in pulling apart sounds. The hardest part of decoding is isolating individual speech sounds, and many struggling readers find this overwhelming. When reading becomes synonymous with effort rather than meaning, motivation collapses—and even strong instructional programs fall short.

“Children who don’t learn to read in the first couple of grades face a real dilemma,” said Matthew Glavach, Ph.D., founder of StrugglingReaders.com. “By grade four, fluency gaps become extremely difficult to close. We cannot rely on a single approach that may not match the way some children learn.”

Working with hundreds of struggling readers, Glavach noticed that even students who disliked phonics loved listening to stories. Stories provide rhythm, expression, and meaningful language—elements that make reading neurologically engaging. He shifted instruction to repeated oral reading using books children enjoyed, a well-established fluency-building method.

As fluency increased, something unexpected happened: words that once caused frustration were recognized automatically. Students began approaching unfamiliar words with new confidence. “It was as if these children were learning to read in reverse,” Glavach said. “Fluency came first, and phonics followed.”

When phonics activities were introduced after fluency developed, students showed rapid improvement. Parents and educators reported that once children gained smooth, confident

reading, sound awareness emerged naturally.

Voices From Schools and Families

"I have never seen such positive results with so many children who had severe reading problems."

— M.B., School Principal

"His progress was minimal for years. After trying this approach, his reading and confidence soared."

— B.K., Parent

"The Reading Fluency Program works and is highly effective. Three of my Chapter I students, all scoring below the 35th national percentile on a nationally normed test, took part in the program this year.

Results from the CTBS testing tell the story: over 1.5 years of growth in just six months."

— J.R., Chapter I Teacher

About the Author

Matthew Glavach, Ph.D. is an educator and founder of StrugglingReaders.com, dedicated to helping children who struggle with reading. He is the author of Not Hooked on Phonics: There Is Another Way, They Sing into Reading, and Overcome Dyslexia Through Metronome Reading, three programs that offer effective alternatives for struggling readers.

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