



On the Hazards of Teaching Reading

Recently, some friends of mine with a 4-year-old daughter decided to homeschool and asked for my advice on finding a good preschool program. They had attended the local homeschool convention and were overwhelmed by the plethora of different programs and were unable to decide which program was right for their daughter. So they asked for my opinion on the various programs, especially one they liked. They considered me to be the expert, particularly when it came to teaching children to read.



How did I become an expert in reading? It's an interesting story. I first became aware that America had a reading problem back in the 1960s when an attorney friend came to my office at Grosset & Dunlap and asked me to become a member of the National Advisory Council of his newly formed Reading Reform Foundation. I asked him what the purpose of the Foundation was, and he explained that it was to get phonics back in the schools. I was quite surprised. When had phonics been taken out of the schools, I asked, and how could anyone possibly teach children to read without it? He recommended that I read Rudolf Flesch's book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, which had been published in 1955. I read the book and became an active member of the Foundation. Flesch had written: "The teaching of reading — all over the United States, in all the schools, and in all the textbooks — is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense."

And then he explained how the alphabetic phonics method — the proper way to teach children to read an alphabetic writing system — had been replaced by a look-say, whole-word method that required children to look at our alphabetic words as little pictures, and it was causing widespread reading disability.

By the 1970s, there was little improvement in the teaching of reading in the schools. So I decided to bring Dr. Flesch's findings up to date and wrote my own book on the subject, *The New Illiterates*. In it I did a line-by-line analysis of the Dick and Jane reading program, the one used in most schools in America, and came to the conclusion that anyone taught to read exclusively by that method would become dyslexic. I was particularly incensed by their having children memorize a sight vocabulary, which trained children to look at our alphabetic words as pictures, like Chinese characters. I called the sight vocabulary the "Thalidomide of primary education."

My research convinced me that parents should have a way to teach their children to read at home since there was no guarantee that their children would be taught to read properly in the schools. The result was my reading program, Alpha-Phonics, which became a best seller among homeschoolers.

My aim was to create a reading program that was so simple and easy to use that any parent could teach their child to read at home without having to take a course in the subject. I had worked out a way of teaching our complex alphabetic system by breaking it up into 118 simple lessons. I began with the simple short vowels and consonants, and then proceeded into the consonant blends, and finally into the



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on August 8, 2012

long vowels.

I saved the long vowels for last because there were many ways of spelling the same long-vowel sound. For example, long “a” is spelled simply “a” as in “apron,” “a-consonant-e” as in “ate,” “ai” as in “main,” “ei” as in “vein,” or “eigh” as in “eight.” That’s five ways of writing the same sound! The same problem was true of the other long vowels. By teaching the long vowels in this way, the student also learned to spell them correctly.

Another important feature of the program is the absence of pictures. Pictures do not teach anyone to read an alphabetic system. They are simply a distraction and encourage guessing. In short, Alpha-Phonics helps the learner develop a phonetic reflex, the automatic ability to associate letters with sounds. Once that reflex is established, the child then goes on to become a fluent reader and can achieve high literacy by expanding his or her reading vocabulary.

If you teach a child to read with lots of big, colorful pictures, that child will only want to read books with pictures. But if you teach a child to read without pictures, he or she will be able to read any book without pictures. Indeed, most adult books have few if any pictures.

Also, I do not teach any irregular words as sight words. There are no sight words in English. Every word stands for the sounds of the language, no matter how it is spelled. For example, there are three words that say “I” in English: first person singular “I,” “aye,” which means yes, and the “eye” we see with. They all stand for the same sound. “Eye” is not a picture of two eyes with a nose in the middle. It is simply an alternative spelling of the long “i” sound with its own meaning. The three different spellings mean that we will know exactly which meaning is conveyed by the spelling alone. Another example is “eight” and “ate,” both of which sound alike but have different meanings and different spellings.

What makes English more difficult to learn than other alphabetic systems is that we use 26 letters to stand for a language with 44 sounds. That is why some of our letters stand for more than one sound. For example, the letter “a” stands for the short sound as in “cat,” the long sound as in “ate,” the “aw” sound as in “tall,” and the “ah” sound as in “park.” That is why I teach all of the different sounds of “a” in their spelling families.

By the way, the reason why English is so rich in its variety of vowel sounds is that it has absorbed many different linguistic influences from its foreign invaders. But it was the Romans who imposed the Latin alphabet on the Anglo-Saxon language.

I also strongly recommend teaching a child to write in cursive script before learning to write in manuscript or print form. Why? Because cursive helps a child learn to read. In cursive the letters are joined together conveying the blending of letter sounds in their correct sequence. In manuscript, some children will write the letters backwards, and they confuse such similar looking letters as b and d, f and t, p and q. However, in cursive these letters are so different from one another that such confusion is impossible. Thus it not only helps a child learn to read, but also to spell, since the hand learns to spell the words it writes. As for printing, the child can always learn to print after he or she has mastered cursive. But if the learner is taught print first, he or she may never master cursive.

Of course, there are those who say that writing in general is no longer needed since we now use word processors. But you can’t take your computer or laptop everywhere you go. And you certainly have to write your own name in cursive on many occasions. So writing will never be totally discarded, especially by young ladies who enjoy keeping diaries.

My methodology is based on the following principles: Do not teach anything that has to be unlearned



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later on, and don't let your student develop a bad habit, such as holding the writing instrument incorrectly. And since everyone has to use a keyboard, it is better to teach a child touch-typing than permit him or her to become a hunt-and-peck writer. As for teaching reading, don't use pictures and do not teach irregular words as sight words. These basic principles permit me to evaluate other reading programs compared to my own. The fact that thousands of children have become successful readers with Alpha-Phonics assures me that my concept of reading is a correct one.

How old must a child be to learn to read with Alpha-Phonics? Some years ago, at a homeschool convention in Portland, Oregon, I was introduced to a three-and-a-half-year-old little girl who was well into the program and doing very nicely. Since then, I've heard not only from parents who have taught their preschoolers to read with the program, but also from teachers who have used it with the reading disabled and produced "miracles."

Not all proponents of phonics agree on all of the issues. For example, some teachers of phonics believe that you should teach the letter sounds before you teach the letter names. That's a very silly idea, since some of the letters have more than one sound. In addition, everything and everyone have names, and the letters of the alphabet are no exception. I have found no learner who had any difficulty telling the difference between the name of the letter and its sound. Indeed, most letter names give the learner a clue to its sound.

There is another compelling reason why I developed Alpha-Phonics. I was brought up by parents who had come from Poland. My mother, orphaned at an early age, was never taught to read in any language. So I had firsthand knowledge and sad experience with illiteracy. Her inability to read greatly constricted her life. She could read no books or newspapers. She could only look at the pictures in magazines. And without the advent of television in her later life, she would have been totally lost.

So, when I was in college I decided to teach my mother to read. I taught her the alphabet, which she learned very nicely. But then I had no idea how to proceed from there. Even though I was an excellent reader I had no idea how to teach someone else to read. So I wrote out simple sentences, in the hope that she could memorize the words. She couldn't. And so my attempt to teach her to read was a complete failure.

In creating Alpha-Phonics, I produced the book which I wished I had had when teaching my mother to read, and I'm sure she would have learned to read very nicely, for she was an intelligent person. In fact, it is easier to teach a completely illiterate adult to read with phonics than someone who was taught whole-language and has acquired a host of bad reading habits which are very difficult to get rid of.

Being a good reader does not mean you know how to teach someone else to read. That is why President Clinton's suggestion that a million college students be recruited as volunteers to teach children to read was so ridiculous. What about the million professional teachers already in the classrooms? How come they can't teach the children to read? And who would teach the volunteers how to teach a child to read? Our education reformers are full of such foolish ideas, which is why today the situation is even worse than it was when Flesch wrote *Why Johnny Can't Read*.

And that is why the homeschool movement has developed and grown as it has. Parents can no longer trust the educational professionals to do a professional job. Today's professional educators are trainers with an agenda to indoctrinate the children with socialist values. It's as simple as that, and that is why my friends came to me for advice and not to one of the establishment professionals.

They had examined several different homeschool programs, and they were particularly interested in one



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that they wanted me to evaluate. It appealed to them because it claimed to be based on classical principles of education. They wanted me to evaluate the preschool and primary program, and they provided me with several brochures they had obtained at the homeschool convention.

(To be continued.)



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