

# The BIG GUIDE to teaching LITTLE PEOPLE how to sound out words

Teaching (very) early reading: Part 3



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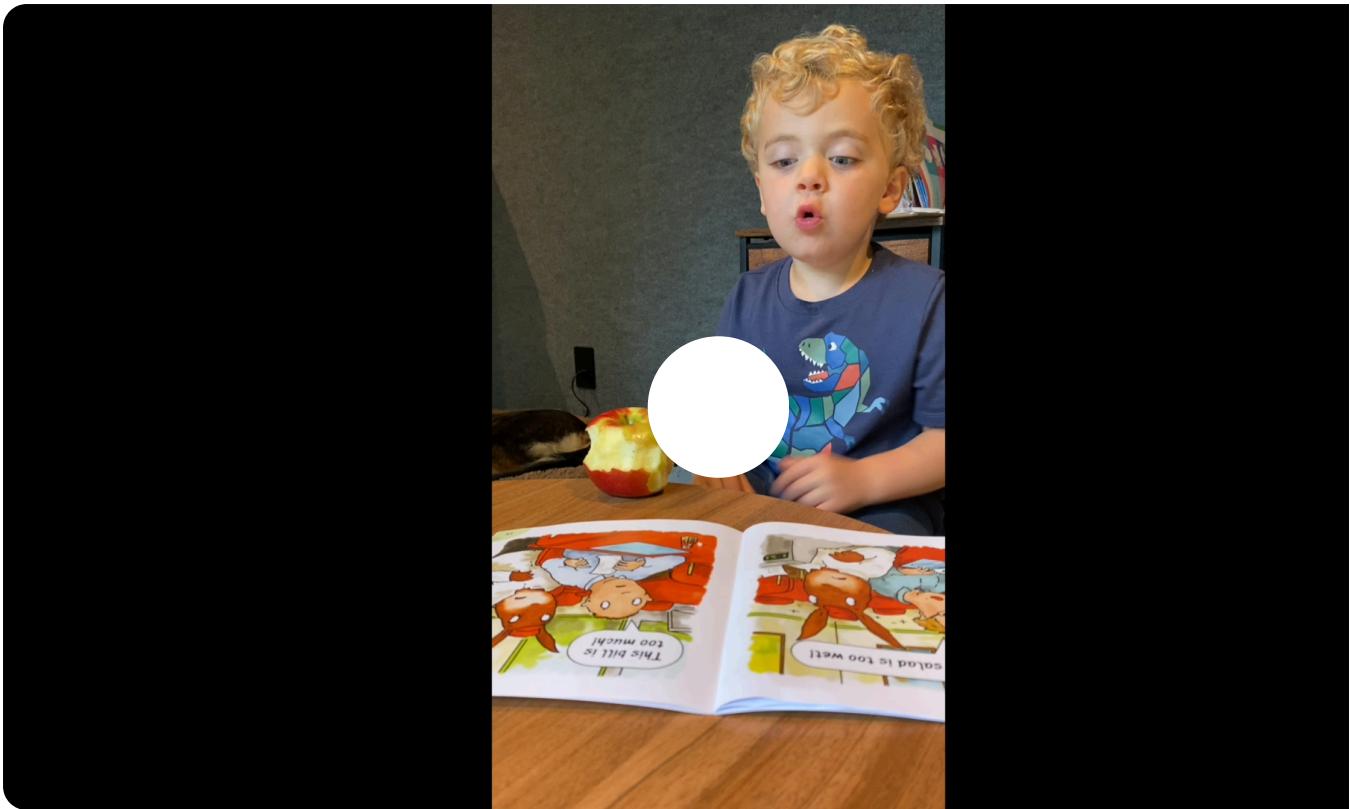
Art for *The Intrinsic Perspective* is by [Alexander Naughton](#)

My “crackpot” opinion is that our society deprives children of independence, intellectual development, and personal joy, all by refusing to teach them to read until quite late.

In the traditional school system learning to read even simple books independently takes somewhere around 1,000 hours of lessons, a lengthy process stretched out across 3-4 years (under good conditions). It usually begins in Pre-K and arrives at the goal somewhere around 1st to 2nd grade for most kids, although standards capabilities vary widely, and failures are common (40% proficiency for grade level reading is a “success” in many schools). In light of this, it makes sense that the traditional education system is riven with debates on how best to teach reading: phonics? Whole-word? And so on.

In comparison, children can learn to read by being tutored by a parent for about 15 to 20 minutes a day within a single year (somewhere between 100-200 hours total, give or take, depending on age). This can be done before kindergarten and opens up their world (not to mention providing a much-needed alternative to screentime). It’s a result pulled off consistently by people like homeschooling moms, an undeniable case where the “crackpots” and “weirdos” do something objectively ten times faster and easier than the “experts.”

I did this with my own son, who was reading simple stories by age 2. Here’s a progression video for Roman, my now three-year-old toddler, demonstrating a portion of the process I walk through below: first starting with a slower form of “double reading” where he repeats what he initially sounds out, as well as playing complete-the-sentence games for individual words, and by the end he’s reading confidently books with advanced words, like a story about a drake (male ducks – early readers build vocabulary too!) getting caught by a snake. Warning: he likes snack while reading.



This is Part 3 of a guide for other parents to do this with their kids. Here is **Pa** (why do this) and **Part 2** (how to establish a formal time for learning). This one contains the meat of actual phonics practice and is much longer.

Why write a guide? After all, isn't getting a child reading essentially an educationally-solved activity, at least in theory? Unfortunately, no.

First, there is far less material about getting toddlers and young children to read rather than older school-age kids with longer attention spans. Second, many of the popular methods that do exist—even those aimed at parents—are not very fun or overly complicated, often incomplete, and take too long to reach practical real world reading mastery. Third, they often fail to take advantage of the **most powerful educational force** we know, 1:1 tutoring, and all the flexibility and personalization that it entails.

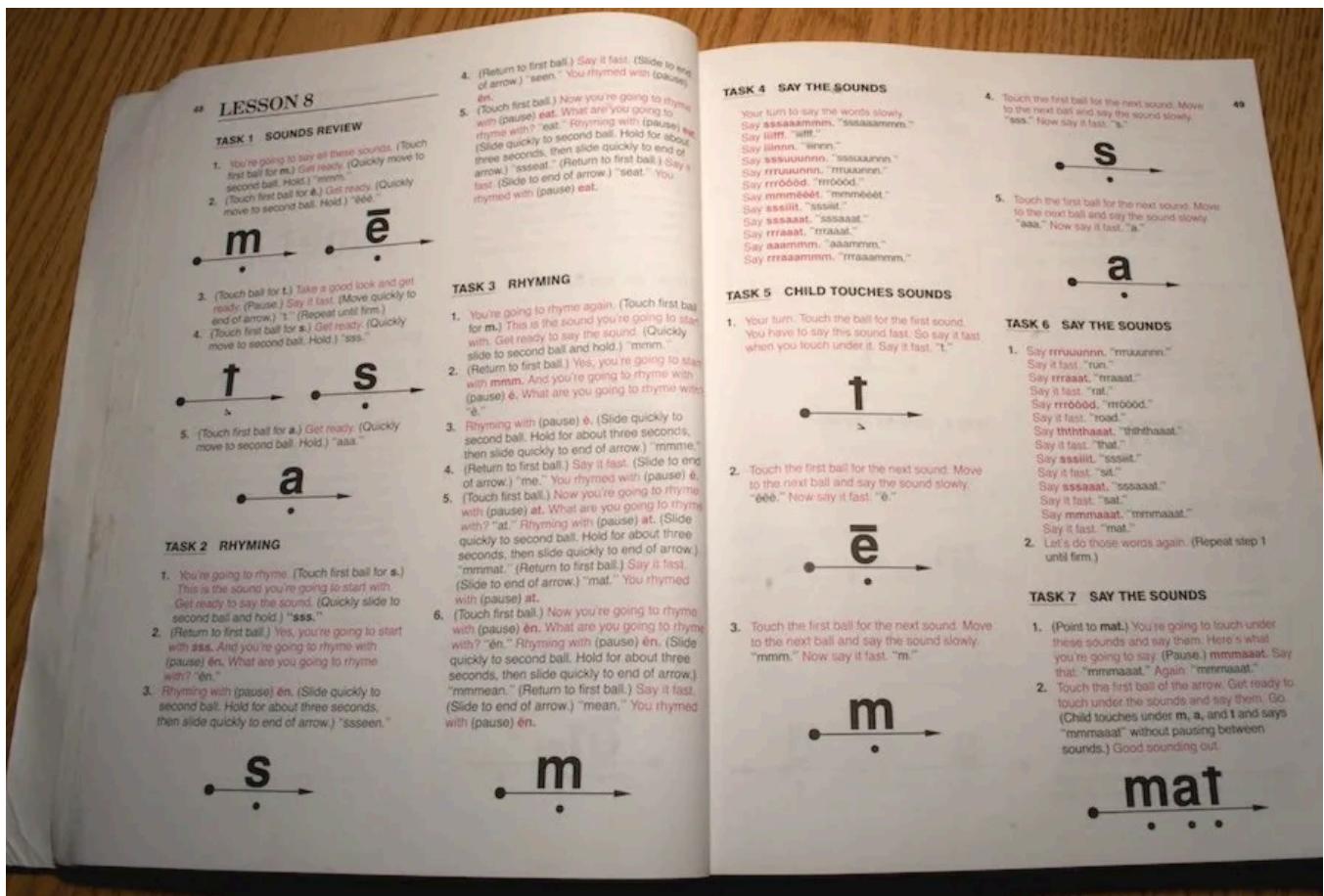
My method begins with a fun personalized *complete-the-sentence game* to play that teaches basic phonics, then speedruns the child to advanced books that actually stimulate them.

# What makes my method different?

It's designed for parents who want to tutor their young kids to get them read for entertainment as fast as possible. That entails four properties:

- (a) being “for parents” means that it cannot rely on detailed knowledge or teaching resources. Parents are busy.
- (b) being “for young kids” means it must be doable for even toddlers, and so must be fun and game-based, taking advantage of the fact that you are your child's first tutor since you know what holds their attention.
- (c) “reading for entertainment” means that it must actually work to achieve the goal of a child *spending time reading by themselves*.
- (d) “as fast as possible” means skipping the over-complications of standard methods. E.g., while phonics is by far the best way to start reading, following phonics slavishly (as many do) will substantially delay and overcomplicate the process.

For instance, usually, if you pick up your average “teach your kid to read” book (*Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons* below is a popular one with over 10 million sales) it will look like this for the earliest lessons.

[source](#)

And listen, you can use these as part of a larger process. But I bought this book and never used it because it violates so many of the above principles. It's overly complicated for parents and kids; in fact, I still don't even know what all of the arrows and dots mean!<sup>1</sup> Just plowing through one-size-fits-all lessons is too boring and difficult for very young children like toddlers to attend to. It's not interactive, game-based, or targeted. A bunch of hard-coded lessons will rarely result in a very young kid being able to read independently. It's like teaching Calculus with one or two examples per concept and expecting someone who can't put on their pants to get an A.

Almost everywhere you look, there's all sorts of overcomplicated advice on the subject of teaching kids how to read. Here's from [childrenlearningreading.com](https://childrenlearningreading.com):

"Onsets" are the beginnings of words, and "rimes" are the ending parts, which follow the "onset". A few examples:

DOG: D-OG (D is the onset and OG is the rime)

CLAP: CL-AP (CL is the onset and AP is the rime)

Such unnecessary rules (ahem, noise) are major steps to many early reading programs. Consider the normally up-front step of learning how to “blend” sounds into words, which is a huge roadblocks for lots of children. In my method you let them pick blending up naturally as they go, since they can actually start reading just fine without it! You just skip it. My baseline belief is that kids are smart—the best learners in the world, in a way—and so we should leverage that as much as possible (while still using a rigorous framework and progression).

The goal of this guide is to reduce a lot of the frustrations that I had. For example, if you walk into the bookstore and you buy early reading materials, you will get things like *Level 1 Reading: Biscuit and the Icy Gale* or other stuff that’s comically advanced in terms of phonics. So the guide provides not only a game-based progression for early phonics, but also all the resources that I used, covering which reading materials are actually high-quality, as well as (later on) how to manage your child’s growing knowledge structure and get them reading independently. It’s based on the obvious-to-me but somehow rarely-followed belief that learning to read should resemble:

## Progressing through sensible tiers of mastery:

**Tier 1.** Memorizing that every letter has its own basic sound.

**Tier 2.** Mapping individual sounds into coherent words via a complete-the-sentence game.

**Tier 3.** Phonically-basic sentences and stories. Initial sight words. Introducing early reading materials that are actually engaging and fun.

**Tier 4.** The necessity of managing the child’s growing knowledge graph and the (simple) tools you need for that. Introducing the rules of phonics wherein the

order of the letters next to one another transform the sounds (like the SH and in “fish” and “chips”). Then more advanced rules, like when an E at the end of word changes the vowel sound (e.g., “sit” vs. “site”), along with more sight words and patterns (“all” as in “tall,” “ball,” etc).

**Tier 5.** Take-Off, when you transition to just sitting with them helping as they read aloud, all in order to speedrun mastery. Essentially, you build their reading foundation with phonics but eventually begin to favor simply pure reading practice. This is because at a certain point the phonics rules get too complex and specialized so as to be useless vs. just practice.

This installment covers Tiers 1-3, as those are the basic steps to getting a child reading sentences and stories. If you want to get kids started on phonics, what follows below is what I think the best method is. Tiers 4 and 5, which continue all the way to advanced independent reading and the world beyond phonics, will come soon.

What I found is that process of teaching reading is about establishing cognitive training wheels and later discarding them for the real thing once they slow you down. It’s the exact same way kids learn how to ride a bike now-a-days, starting with balance bikes, except instead of the mechanics of wheels and pedals complexifying underneath them as they try and try again, they become little parts of language itself.

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## Tier 1: mapping letters to sounds

The initial process described below assumes some formal “school time” the child has already gotten used to. I described this process in [Part 2](#):

Too often, parents become excited about teaching their child something (like numeracy or literacy), but try to randomly bake that into the child’s day. The lessons then fail to stick. What’s necessary is a formal period for learning.

... it is critically important that this formal learning time (call it whatever makes sense) is given a lot of initial hype... Later, once it becomes routine, you won’t have to be so performative and energetic. For example, I started doing flashcards for 10 minutes a day with Roman prior to starting phonics, just covering different fundamental categories, like animals or cars or so on. When he would get the name right, I would celebrate wildly (yes, including making the noise). For a time we would even do “throws” where he would answer, then go to the end of his room and run at me and I would toss him bodily into a pile of pillows to his great delight.

Unfortunately, there is no way to learn to read and not have it be occasionally frustrating. Real learning doesn’t mean always having maximal fun. Instead, rely on the power of *routine*. This is why I recommend daily practice. Children don’t question routine. It’s just part of their day. At this point, my son regularly asks for school, gets impatient if I don’t start it soon enough in the morning, and most days asks to go longer.

Once a formal “school time” is established (the early morning I personally found best, for self-control is a morning-bestowed resource quickly used up in toddlerhood) you can start watching brief videos of basic letter sounds together for a few minutes each day. Here’s the one I used:

Watch it on an iPad or even a large phone. They need to be able to see the text. Just go through it over and over, saying the letter sounds together, a few times each “school time.” I eventually started practicing the above video without the sound, and that's because I actually found it easier if I emphasized some of the differences between the vowels (for example, I found it easier to distinguish E and A by making A sound like a native New Yorker saying “maaaaap”). A little exaggeration of differences in the beginning is easily corrected later. Tip: avoid adding an extra sounds to the ends of letters—B is not really “ba” or has a breath-like “buh,” it’s just short. Favor the succinct.

All learning starts with specific memorization, followed by a period of generalization. Once your child is doing well on the video, especially if they can do it without sound, you should then work on generalization. Vary it up with some flashcards of letters ([I used these](#); but see also some [cool Montessori sandpaper letters](#)) and also plain wooden/magnetized letters ([I used these](#)). Choose resources that allow you to break up lowercase and uppercase letters. You can buy much more [expensive kits](#) that focus in on this stage; while I'm not against making the sounds-to-letters mapping more physically playful, distraction is a huge issue,

honestly more bells and whistles is sometimes not a good thing. The purpose of this is not just to teach them letter sounds, but also to get them used to the abstract format of being prompted and then providing an answer. Essentially, they are being quizzed for a couple minutes a day on basic letter sounds.

Not getting children used to a high-reward, short-duration quiz-like format is probably the most common failure mode. This is because the act of reading is being quizzed over and over again over about what little squiggles mean; it's a quiz we adults have grown so competent at we forget its true nature.

**Note:** Often young kids won't do something that's not immediately rewarding like a simple quiz of showing the letter and saying the sound. This is why I think celebrating and being excited is critical early on. Clap when they finish! Run in circles! Spin them! Throw them into pillows! Don't be afraid to cheat if you feel learning to read is important enough. My kid loves berries, so during school time he would be allowed to eat as many berries as wanted (I could hear my wallet's tiny leathery voice crying in pain). Or we would do it after dinner, when he was relatively bored with just eating anyways. Later, we transitioned to snacks like oranges and apples and goldfish (sue me), or now-a-days I often just share breakfast with him (in case of confusion: I never made this contingent on getting the answers, I think that's probably not a good idea). Unless you're handing out stacks of unhealthy candy while they read, I wouldn't worry about it. A longer attention span, loving learning, being able to read, being able to interact with a teacher in a school setting, etc, are all good returns for the price of berries or some carbs, in the grand scheme of things. And yes, you can still learn phonics with your mouth full.

**Another note:** Sometimes people ask whether or not their kid needs to know the alphabet first. You can do it either way—in theory you could instead teach the basic letter sounds instead of the letter names (I did names first, sounds after).

After enough “school times”—maybe days, maybe weeks—they'll have the basic letter sounds memorized and be comfortable with experiencing a quiz-like format every day. Now you need to put their knowledge to use and try to get them to read simple words.

## Tier 2: The complete-the-sentence game

Welcome to the second most common failure stage, where parents go too fast then get frustrated or abandon the project entirely. Usually, they jump from mapping sounds to letters to immediately introducing early readers books. But that transition is *very* difficult for young kids, for books are overwhelming and complicated, contain distracting pictures, and most are low-quality anyways. Additionally, there is a cognitive leap, one we take for granted, wherein children need to understand that letters together form words and that reading is not “a magic” but instead derived from the letters. You may think that this is obvious but it is not obvious to a child. Even if you tell them explicitly that reading is not adult magic, it still takes time for them to understand the intricacies of it, and become confident that they can do it too.

So instead, before even introducing a book, spend a significant chunk of time making sure they fully grok that a sequence of letters together, when sounded in order, equals a *single word*. Leave sentences for later.

To teach combining individual letter sounds into words, you don’t need early readers; you just need a way to present them with simple words and then use your own creative ingenuity and ability to entertain to prompt them to read that word.

Pretty much all the other methods I’ve seen teach this step in a difficult way. They require that the kids be able to “blend” the individual letter sounds they’ve memorized together so there are no pauses between letter sounds as the child reads them. This is called “blending” and is one of the most difficult steps, as it normally requires both a conceptual leap (that sounds strung together are words) but also *at the same time* a capabilities leap (where individual sounds can lead into one another without the child taking a breath, meaning they both process them fast enough and produce the sound fast enough).

Traditional techniques try to teach blending explicitly. That is, they try to teach the child to not take any breaks in between the letters, so that C-A-T (saying each

sound individually) comes out altogether as “ccccaaaaattttt.” The upside of the traditional way is that if they manage to succeed at blending, the child is automatically reading. But this early step is *very hard!* I suspect many parents up here and conclude that their child is too young to read when they can't get their kid to sound out the words fast enough for it to naturally form into a coherent word. The reaction time and processing speeds of children, especially toddlers, are extraordinarily slow. Everything just takes many beats. So just at mechanical level, kids can't put the sounds together fast enough to make it smooth. They will sound it out with pauses like “[C-sound]... [A-sound]... [T-sound]” and it won't feel like real reading. One way other common approaches deal with this is to try to chunk letters into combinations and practice the combinations, like “am” or “ma,” until it's rote. But the whole thing is tedious frustrating.

So I just skipped blending entirely! I trusted that it would come naturally later (which it did). Instead, I just focused on just the conceptual leap that sounds together are words, ignoring the capabilities leap of putting those sounds together fast enough to resemble how an adult reads.

I'll refer to the method for skipping blending as **double reading**. Specifically, I Roman say the individual sounds of C, then A, then T, all slowly and independently (but in order) and trusted him to put them together the sounds his short-term memory and follow-up by saying the word “cat” afterward (spoiler as he would normally) as recognition of what he'd just sounded out. An example would be (when looking at lowercase wooden lowercase letters c-a-t together on a table):

“[c-sound]... [a-sound]... [t-sound].... cat!”

In order to practice conceptual blending, I developed a **complete-the-sentence game** wherein I would start a sentence myself and then stop at the word that I needed to read, which was displayed in front of him. This is where the power of 1:1 tutoring comes in—the more interesting you can make these sentences, an

the more relevant to your child, the more likely they are to pay attention and enjoy playing the game. For example, I might spell out c-a-t on the table then make a sentence like:

*“Our dog Minnie would bark if she met a...”*

*“[c-sound]... [c-sound]... [t-sound].... cat!”*

Too often, parents or teachers will simply put a random word in front of the kid without giving them any context. But in the early stages, context is confidence. Initially, you want the game to be as easy as possible, while at the same time making sure they're not just guessing what you want them to say without the information from the letters. That's again where your ability as a tutor allows you to come up with new sentences each time in ways that ensure that they actually grok the mapping of letter-sounds to words across contexts.

So improvise! An example session of mine would go like:

[me speaking]: *“I was in the kitchen and I thought I saw a...”*

[he points to each letter in turn]: *“[r-sound]... [a-sound]... [t-sound].... rat!”*

*“Wait, it couldn't have been a rat. Maybe it was Mama's old fuzzy slipper!”*

If your child is struggling to put three-letter words together in their short-term memory (like if they sound it out but then say a different word) try two-letter words instead. As words, they're more abstract, but the sounds-to-words mapping is more obvious. So I also initially made use of sentence completions like:

[Me finger-walking on the edge of the table]: *“Whoa, Mr. Finger Man, watch out. Below you is lava. Be careful not to fall...”*

[Roman points to each letter in turn]: *“[i-sound]... [i-sound].... in!”*

You can present these words to them during the game as either individual physical letters (like the wooden letters I used), or you can use something like an iPad.

mixed both. I found using an iPad had advantages, like I could choose what font (such as dyslexia-friendly ones), as well as make letters as large as I wanted. Then came a point where I could play the game quite rapid-fire, just scrolling through lists of words and quickly coming up with sentences, and he would sound them out, one after another.

**Note:** for those worried about screentime if you do use a screen; it's a couple minutes black text on a white background. It's fine.

If your child is still struggling to make the conceptual leap, simplify the game doing the first step yourself. If you sound the letters out (which you can do more quickly than they can) all they have to do is say the word. Like:

*"I was in the kitchen and I thought I saw a... [r-sound]... [a-sound]... [t-sound]"*

*"rat!"*

Play the game as often as you can! You can play this simpler version in the car saying a full sentence then sounding out a word as if you're looking at letters, then they guess it.

Make sure you always use words appropriate for their phonics level. In the beginning, this means using only the most common letter sounds, confining them to words like "log" (*The frog fell off the...*) but not "go."

Once they're playing the complete-the-sentence game regularly, you need lots different words to practice it on. One good resource is Jady Alvarez's *Elemental Phonics: Level 1*. You can skip the first half of the book (blending practice, which we ignore) and just go to the second half where there's lots of simple three-letter words organized together in lists (it also contains some simple sentences at the end that are good once you start Tier 3). Why are all the best early reading materials self-published by smart go-it-alone homeschooling parents rather than official institutional resources? Why indeed.

Don't expect your child to become good at the complete-the-sentence game in session. It's important to remember that learning unnatural things, like math or reading, is hard. We didn't evolve to read. It's not like spoken language acquisition or general knowledge, which kids pick up via osmosis. It's just as unnatural to learn to swim, or ride a bike. Kids often don't like these things in the beginning because they don't come easy. But within a few weeks or months, your child should be able to do sentence completions of simple words successfully as long as you show them enough examples in enough ways, stay patient, and are persistent.

## Tier 3: Simple sentences & early readers

The next step is to expand the daily complete-the-sentence game beyond individual words into small phrases. At this point, you have a choice when pursuing double-reading. You can either have the child sound out one word, then say it normally, then sound out the next word, then say that word normally, etc. Alternatively, they can sound out the whole phrase first and only then say the whole phrase normally. So either:

*“When in the snow I wear a warm...”*

*“[r-sound]... [e-sound]... [d-sound]... red! ... [h-sound]... [a-sound]... [t-sound].... hat!”*

Or you can encourage them to sound out the whole phrase first:

*“When in the snow I wear a warm...”*

*“[r-sound]... [e-sound]... [d-sound]... [h-sound]... [a-sound]... [t-sound].... red hat!”*

Go with your gut. Since I always felt that a big part of comprehension was at the sentence level, I'd encourage that if you do the first method, you then have them say the full phrase altogether a further third time.

Once you're into phrases, make your life easier by introducing sight words: words that your child doesn't sound out but just knows by heart. Insert a few cases like “a,” “the”, “is,” and “I” into the sentence completion game and just tell them what

the word is over and over again. Completions like: “the hat,” “a cat,” etc. You’re still playing the sentence completion game, it’s just over larger fragments.

Eventually, the phrases can be entire sentences like: “Bob gets up” (Creating this sort of sentence is something you can do yourself and is pretty easy to prepare in advance if you put it on an iPad). Once they’re comfortable with phrases and even short sentences, only then is it time to introduce early readers.

But there’s a problem with early readers: the majority of them are terrible. The books have boring art, the letters are too small, the stories are bland and uninteresting, and they regularly contain mistakes like ungrammatical sentences. As with everything else in the toddler educational space, the majority of it is slop that may as well have been written by an AI. The paucity of early reading material is a dismal indictment of our civilization.

I originally started with the popular **Bob Books**, but the text is far too small. It was literally hard for toddlers to distinguish the letters. Roman disliked them initially although we did manage to read most of Stage 1, rotating between Bob books and the sentences at the end of *Elemental Phonics: Level 1*.



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And indeed, the first book he ever read end-to-end was a Bob book. And oh boy was that celebrated. A massive tickle-fest. War cries, hollering dances, congratulations, etc.

You have to be very sensitive at this stage of introducing books, balancing between letting the child try (and so giving them some time when they encounter a word they don't immediately know) but at the same time, not making it into a stressful encounter where they get frustrated and so knowing when to jump in to help.

Just as I was becoming misanthropic due to bad early reading materials, a commenter here pointed me to the best phonics series that exists: Julia Donaldson's **Songbirds Phonics series**.

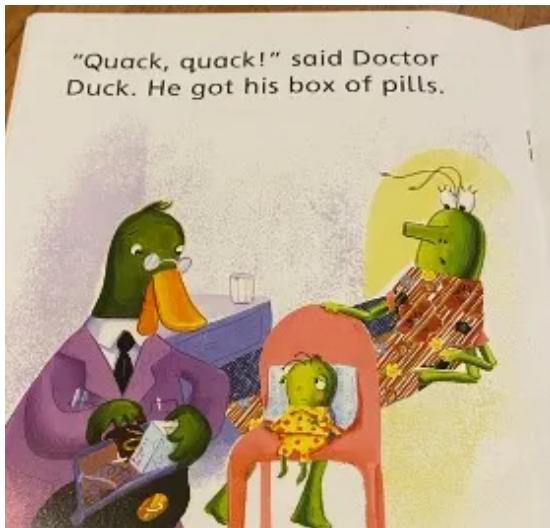


the GOAT of phonics

**Julia Donaldson** is an award-winning children's book author of classics like *The Gruffalo* and *Superworm*. She's also the true all-time GOAT of early reading material. I could sing Donaldson's praises for hours. I could pen her serenades could send her a cake. God, please let Julia Donaldson in through the pearly gates forgive her anything, she writes like an angel (to paraphrase one of Hemingway's wives). For what makes the Songbirds series great is that they are well-written books with beautiful pictures and sensibly-progressing phonics (keep in mind laboring under the constraints of phonics as an author is like boxing with one hand tied behind your back). That combination doesn't exist anywhere else as far as I know. The total set is a little expensive, \$67, but I fully recommend it. I would honestly pay \$1,000 for these books. You can [buy the fully set here](#). If you instead want to try them out, the first two stages of books are available on [Amazon](#) for \$19.

The quality of Julia Donaldson's books is so high she manages to pull off the Disney/Pixar trick of including content that will go over kids' heads but adults

get a kick out of. Donaldson never misses. Every story has something in it that makes me chuckle or laugh or at least admire as a little tip of the hat.



Get it?

Oh, Donaldson is also British, so be prepared for your child to call elevators “lift” and fries “chips.” It’s cute.

Start with a simple book in Stage 1, like *I am Top Cat*, and don't expect too much in the initial run. You're going to read these over and over. And over. And over. The first read of any new book in the series they'll be so overwhelmed by the images and the pictures that their eyes will barely be able to stay on the words patient. Give them time to soak in the images. Go slow. Figure out ways to help them know where to focus. Sometimes I would even let him look at the image and then cover them with my hands to re-focus him on the words (he eventually started doing this himself whenever he got distracted). But don't have it be all business! Make the books interesting. Talk about them. What's going on? What's funny about this? Do you think that Doctor Duck goes to lots of houses? Etc.

At this point I recruited a slender wooden pointer that I could run above the words as he read them so he had visual clues (or even tap on them when he got distracted, briefly channeling a churlish schoolmarm). The pointer felt very 18th century, even somehow transgressive just to possess, but the truth is that it was far better than an adult's fat fingers and craning your wrist. It also seemed to

command a strange sort of respect. Children love symbols, and holding a wooden pointer says to them, in that deep ritualistic way toddlers respond to: I am a teacher, heed me. Also, you can rap their knuckles with it. I'm joking.

Keep playing the sentence completion game during your sessions, but transition to only a few minutes at the end. In the first chunk of a session, try to get through one of the Stage 1 books (this number of books-read-per-lesson increases; we've ended up doing around three daily). Early on it's fine to do the same book multiple days in a row, but once they have a few under their belt, cycle through them and then slowly add new ones. I favored a ratio of probably three to four reads of a book the books they knew before adding a new one.

At this point, it's simply a matter of grinding through Stage 1, supplementing Bob Books occasionally and still playing the sentence-completion game to keep them sharp at the end. Spice things up a bit. A classic book like *Hop on Pop* has a number of pages where all the words are the simplest tier of phonics. And you have them read those and dip in and out across the pages.

You'll notice something as this tier progresses. Remember that there was also a capabilities leap where kids have to get good at physically blending the sound together? Well, you'll hopefully find that your child is getting good at blending automatically! That second confirmatory read where they say the sentence or words again "normally" will begin to feel redundant—not all the time, but more and more often. You can choose when in the process to let them stop the echo once it's a chore, drop it. More and more they will just reel out a full sentence one go, and for a golden time afterward each will feel to you like a little miracle unfolding.



In the next installment (Part 4) I'll cover how to easily keep track of your kid's growing knowledge of phonics as you move beyond Stage 1 of the Donaldson books into 2-4, and also begin to supplement with other resources. Basically, we are building up a knowledge base mostly around one high-quality resource, the Donaldson books, which will then generalize outward into all sorts of other books. So then finally, I'll also show how phonics is destined to be transcended and how to get them reading independently. Like I said, it's all about cognitive training wheels.

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- 1 Regarding explanations like using arrows in teaching: adults do this thing all the time where they use X to explain Y. Then kids fail, because they have no idea what X is! Your well-grooved adult brain arrows like ← are natural and sensible pointers, some sort of atomic unity of explanation. But not to a kid. Parents and educators almost always know how much little kids know, because kids learn early on to fake it till they make it. I once started using arrows to explain the difference between bs vs ds, and after some testing, I realized that *my son didn't consistently know what an arrow represented*. Because he was 2. Turns out you aren't just born, innately, with the knowledge that this ← is some sort of super meaningful thing. Couldn't ← be the other way, and line is the directional part, originating from some sort of demiurgic triangle? And think about how abstract the notion of a direction in coordinate space is, especially one that doesn't change even when you move in relationship to it. Everything in this world is like that and can only be overcome with practice.
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