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The Cambridge approach to early reading

A guide for teachers and school leaders



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About this guide

This guide sets out the Cambridge approach to early reading. It brings together what the research tells us about how young children learn to read, and what this means for teachers, classrooms, and schools. It is designed to support the Cambridge Early Years programme and to ensure a smooth transition into the Cambridge Primary curriculum.

The guide focuses on children aged 3 to 6, though it draws on evidence from across the early and primary years where this is helpful. It covers the main areas of early reading practice: reading for pleasure, shared

reading, reading schemes, guided reading, digital reading, the role of families and early reading assessment. Where relevant, it gives specific attention to bilingual and multilingual learners.





What we believe

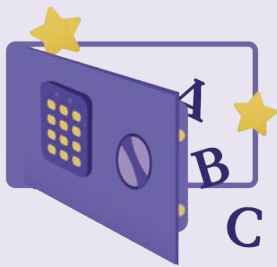
At Cambridge, we believe that reading is one of the most important skills a child will develop, and that all children deserve the support they need to become confident, motivated readers.

Our approach is grounded in international research and shaped by listening to educators around the world. No single method or material is sufficient on its own.^[1, 2, 3, 4] Teaching reading well means attending to a child's developing skills and knowledge, as well as their curiosity, confidence and desire to read.

We recognise that children come to reading from many different languages, cultures and home experiences. Our approach is designed to work for every child, including those learning in a language different from the one used at home.

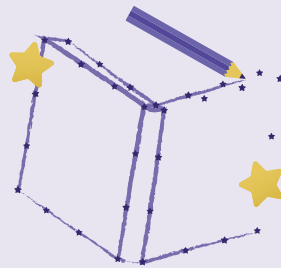
How children learn to read: three areas that matter

Learning to read is not a single skill. It is a set of connected abilities that develop together. Decoding and comprehension are both essential, and reading for pleasure is strongly associated with attainment. Attending to all three gives every child the best possible foundation. [2, 5, 6, 7]



Decoding and word assessment

Decoding is the ability to translate written letters and words into spoken language. Children develop this through phonics and through practice with texts. As decoding becomes more automatic, children can focus more on meaning and enjoyment. Both phonics instruction and supported practice with books are important. [1, 2, 5, 7, 8]



Comprehension and meaning making

Reading is not just saying the words correctly. Comprehension is the ability to understand, interpret and think about what is read. It draws on vocabulary, background knowledge and the ability to make connections. Comprehension develops alongside decoding and is supported by wide reading and rich conversation about books. [2, 5, 7, 9]



Reading for pleasure and reader identity

A child who can decode and comprehend, but who does not enjoy reading, is unlikely to read widely or well over time. Reading for pleasure, the choice to read for enjoyment and interest, is strongly associated with reading attainment and broader educational outcomes. Nurturing children's desire to read is as important as developing their technical skills. [10, 11, 12, 13]

These three areas are not separate. A child who enjoys books is more motivated to practise reading. As decoding becomes more fluent, children can focus more on understanding, connecting with and enjoying what they read. Positive reading experiences can build

confidence, strengthen a child's identity as a reader and encourage them to read more widely. Teaching that supports all three areas gives every child the best chance to develop into a skilled, confident and lifelong reader. [9, 12]



In the classroom

Reading aloud and shared reading

Reading aloud to children is one of the most powerful things a teacher can do. It gives children access to stories, language and ideas they cannot yet encounter independently. Research shows that shared reading can support vocabulary, language comprehension, narrative skills and engagement with books. ^[9, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18]

Dialogic reading, in which children are encouraged to talk about stories rather than just listen, can support language and comprehension. Open-ended questions, repeated readings and book talk can deepen children's engagement and understanding. As children become more familiar with a book, they engage more deeply and creatively. ^[17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22]

Reading areas matter too. A well-stocked, inviting book corner, with books that reflect children's cultures, interests and languages, creates a space for children to explore books freely and begin to build their own reading identities. ^[15]

In practice: ^[15, 17, 18, 19, 21]



Read aloud regularly, in whole-class and small-group settings



Encourage children to respond to stories with their own thoughts and questions



Revisit favourite books; repeated readings deepen understanding over time



Ensure the book corner reflects the diversity of the class and is comfortable and welcoming



Provide unhurried time for children to browse and choose books freely



Encourage story play, including small world figures, props and dressing-up clothes alongside books



Reading schemes

Reading schemes, including decodable texts, levelled texts and predictable texts, have different characteristics and can be selected for different instructional purposes. Research shows that children benefit from different types of text at different stages of their development. ^[4, 23]

Decodable texts help children practise the letter–sound correspondence they have been taught and are most useful in the early stages of learning to decode. They support children to practise blending sounds to read words within connected texts. This helps children understand that written words can be worked out from the letters on the page, rather than memorising or guessing from pictures, context or sentence patterns. ^[1, 4, 8, 24, 25]

Decodability depends on the child's current phonics knowledge. A text is decodable for a child when the words are mostly made up of the letter–sound correspondence that the child has already learned,

alongside a small and carefully controlled number of previously taught common exception words (tricky words). Decodable books should align with the sequence of the phonics programme and increase in complexity as the child's knowledge develops. ^[4, 23, 25]

Using decodable texts should not restrict children's wider experience of books. From the earliest stages, they should also hear and discuss stories, poetry and non-fiction beyond what they can read independently (see section on reading aloud and shared reading). Systematic phonics teaching is central to learning to read, but it is one part of a broader reading curriculum. ^[2, 4, 9]



Levelled texts can support fluency, vocabulary, comprehension and reading stamina once children have sufficient decoding knowledge to read them successfully. However, text difficulty levels do not always match the order in which sounds and letters are taught in a phonics programme. Levelled texts containing untaught spelling patterns should not be used for independent decoding practice with early readers. ^[23]

Predictable texts - At the early stages of reading, books that use repetition and rhyme can help learners understand print, build oral language skills and develop a love of reading. They can be valuable for shared reading and for children who are not yet receiving formal decoding instruction. However, because their patterns often enable children to anticipate words without attending closely to all the letters, they should not replace decodable texts as practice for applying phonics. ^[4, 26, 27]

No single text type can fulfil every purpose. Texts should be selected to match the child's developing reading skills and the purpose of the activity. Decodable texts support phonics practice and early independent reading. Alongside the reading scheme, children should also experience a wide range of books through reading aloud, shared reading and discussion to develop language, knowledge, comprehension and enjoyment. This means that different texts can be used alongside one another, but for different purposes. The use of non-decodable texts with early readers remains debated, and the evidence on combining text types is still developing; our position is that each text type should be used deliberately, for its intended purpose and in ways that support the intended learning. ^[4, 23, 25, 27, 28]

In practice: ^[4, 8, 23, 25, 27]



Match texts to where children are in their reading development



Introduce decodable texts once children have a foundation in letter-sound correspondence



Use levelled texts to build fluency, vocabulary and comprehension



Give children opportunities to re-read familiar texts; this builds confidence and fluency



Choose texts with natural language patterns and storylines children can relate to



Ensure the story makes sense and reflects children's experiences where possible



A B C



Guided reading

Once children have begun learning phonics and are able to apply some of their developing reading knowledge to texts, guided reading can provide a useful form of small-group teaching. In guided reading, small groups of children with shared literacy goals read and discuss a text with a teacher. This approach can help teachers respond to assessed needs and focus on particular reading strategies. [29, 30, 31, 32]

Effective guided reading requires careful assessment of where children are, thoughtful selection of texts and clear goals for each session. [29, 30, 31, 33]

Small-group teaching, like in guided reading, can provide opportunities to respond to children's assessed

needs and support particular reading goals. Its effectiveness depends on careful assessment, appropriate text selection and clear teaching objectives. [31, 32, 33, 34]

In practice:



Use careful, sensitive assessment to form groups and select appropriate texts



Plan sessions with clear aims, including activities before, during and after reading



Teach active reading strategies alongside decoding



Be aware that ability grouping can affect children's confidence; handle grouping with care



Include guided reading as part of a wider, balanced reading curriculum







Digital reading

Digital tools, including eBooks and apps, are a growing part of many children's lives. Research suggests that children's experiences of digital and print books are shaped not only by the medium, but also by the quality of the content, the design of the resource and how it is used. When digital and print books differ only in format, children may understand print books better. However, carefully designed digital features that support the story can strengthen vocabulary and comprehension. ^[35, 36]

High-quality eBooks and reading apps can support vocabulary development and story comprehension, particularly when features such as narration, audio and animation are closely connected to the text and are designed to support rather than distract from it. In contrast, interactive features that are not relevant to the narrative distract children and reduce comprehension. ^[35]

Print books are still important. Reading print books together provides opportunities for sustained conversation and reflection which support children's language and literacy development. Digital resources can complement these experiences, particularly when their features support the text rather than distract from it, but they are most effective when used alongside, rather than in place of, print books. ^[35, 37]

Digital tools are not a substitute for adult support. Research shows that children's learning is strengthened when teachers or parents actively guide and discuss what they are reading. Sensitive and responsive adult support is more effective than digital enhancements alone, whether children are reading print or digital texts. ^[35]

Choosing quality digital resources

When choosing digital picture books, consider whether the story is relevant and appropriate for children, whether the words and visuals work together, and whether features such as narration, sound and animation can be controlled. Interactive features should support the story and conversation around it, rather than interrupting either. ^[38]

In practice:



Use digital tools alongside print, not as a replacement for it



Support children's use of apps and eBooks wherever possible; adult facilitation makes a significant difference



Be aware that game-like features embedded in digital books can sometimes distract children from the story



Reading at home

The home plays a significant role in children's reading development. ^[39, 40] The books available and the increased value placed on reading and activities, improves children's language and reading outcomes. ^[39, 40, 41] This is true from very early in a child's life; evidence suggests that book reading at nine months is associated with stronger later vocabulary development. ^[39, 40, 42]

Parent-child shared reading is one of the most important things families can do to support their child's reading development. Research suggests that parents do not need to be highly confident readers themselves to create positive reading experiences; children's participation, enjoyment and the quality of interaction during shared reading are what appear to be particularly important. ^[42, 43, 44]



Making reading an enjoyable and interactive experience, for both parent and child, helps children engage with books and supports language development. ^[17, 43, 45]

Families engage with books and literacy in many different ways, and children's home experiences vary widely. Bilingual and multilingual children may hear books in one language at home and another at school. Both experiences are valuable. Shared reading and storytelling in a home language can support children's reading development in the language of instruction. ^[46, 47]

Supporting families:



Let families know which books are being read in class so they can explore them at home



Encourage reading and storytelling in home languages



Offer family reading initiatives in a supportive, non-prescriptive way; avoid approaches that feel like correction



Share jargon-free, practical guidance on how to make shared reading enjoyable



Recognise that the quality of interaction during shared reading matters as much as frequency



Ask families about their reading practices at home; this helps teachers support children more effectively



Supporting all learners

Our approach is designed to work for every child, including those learning in a language other than their home language.

Bilingual and multilingual children bring rich linguistic resources to reading. Their developing knowledge in one language supports their learning in another. Vocabulary, phonological awareness and comprehension skills developed in a home language can all transfer to help children in their additional language. ^[47, 48, 49]

At the same time, the journey to reading is different for every multilingual child, shaped by unique linguistic, social and cultural factors. Teachers who understand this are better placed to make informed choices about instruction and support. ^[46, 47]

Strategies that help multilingual learners: ^[46, 47, 50, 51, 52]

- Using children's first language to introduce vocabulary and to preview or review texts.
- Explicit teaching of phonological awareness and decoding in the language of instruction.
- Learners work in pairs and take turns reading in both languages.
- Visual supports, physical gestures and audio resources in the home language to support comprehension.
- Translanguaging: allowing children to move freely between their languages as they make meaning from a text.

Reading materials and classroom environments that reflect children's languages, cultures and experiences are important for all children, not only multilingual learners. A diverse book collection, with characters and stories from many backgrounds, helps every child find themselves in what they read. ^[15, 47]

Assessment



Understanding where children are in their reading development is essential for effective teaching. However, no single assessment tool gives a complete picture. Assessment is most useful when it looks across all components of reading and when it informs what happens next in the classroom. ^[53, 54]

A comprehensive approach to early reading assessment might look across; concepts about print, such as how books and written text work, including where to start reading and the direction in which print is read; oral language and vocabulary development; phonological awareness, including awareness of syllables, rhyme and phonemic awareness (hearing, identifying and manipulating individual sounds in spoken words); alphabet knowledge; and letter-sound matching. ^[8, 53, 54, 55]

Assessments taken at school entry can sometimes underestimate children's capabilities, particularly when assessment practices do not take account of cultural or linguistic diversity. Continuous assessment focuses on how children respond to teaching and feedback, rather than relying on performance at one point in time. Evidence suggests that this kind of dynamic assessment adds useful predictive information beyond static measures, although further research is needed with culturally and linguistically diverse groups. ^[56, 57]

Key principles for assessment: ^[53, 54, 56, 57]



Assess across all components of reading, not just phonics or decoding



Use assessment to inform teaching, not just to group or label children



Be aware of the impact that labels and ability grouping can have on children's confidence and reader identity



Consider dynamic approaches that focus on children's progress and their response to support



Use a range of methods over time, rather than relying on a single test



Be sensitive to cultural and linguistic diversity when interpreting assessment data

What this means for your school

Reading should not be taught in isolation. It is woven into every aspect of learning and play in an early years setting. It develops skills and a love of reading in equal measure, values every child's linguistic and cultural background, and is brought to life by teachers who know their children, know their books and understand why reading matters. ^[2, 7, 28, 47]

Teachers' own attitudes to reading play a vital role. Teachers who read widely, who talk about books with enthusiasm and who act as reading role models inspire children. ^[15, 58, 59] Professional knowledge matters too: understanding the complexity of the reading process enables teachers to make better decisions about which

approaches, texts and strategies to use for which children and at which moments. ^[15, 28]

At Cambridge, we are committed to supporting schools with the research, resources and guidance needed to make this a reality for every learner.



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