



Research-Based Reading

HANDPRINTS **An Early Reading Program**

By Ann Staman

The Reading First initiative, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's guide for educators and parents on how to best teach children to read, is based on the exhaustive review of the current scientific research literature on reading conducted by the National Reading Panel (NRP). *Handprints* embodies the five essential components of effective reading instruction as set forth in the Reading First Request for Proposals:

1. **Phonemic Awareness:** the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the individual sounds—phonemes—in spoken words. Phonemic awareness is the understanding that the sounds of spoken language work together to make words.
2. **Phonics:** the understanding that there is a predictable relationship between phonemes—the sounds of spoken language—and graphemes—the letters and spellings that represent those sounds in written language. Readers use these relationships to recognize familiar words accurately and automatically and to decode unfamiliar words.
3. **Vocabulary Development:** development of stored information about the meanings and pronunciation of words necessary for communication.
4. **Reading Fluency, including oral reading skills:** Fluency is the ability to read text accurately and quickly. It provides a bridge between word recognition and comprehension. Fluent readers recognize words and comprehend at the same time.
5. **Reading Comprehension Strategies:** strategies for understanding, remembering, and communicating with others about what has been read. Comprehension strategies are sets of steps that purposeful, active readers use to make sense of text.

Handprints is a collection of **120 storybooks and 4 workbooks** designed to help young children learn to read. The **120 storybooks in the series are divided into 12 sets, spanning kindergarten and first grade reading levels. The characteristics of the storybooks vary, depending on the level of reading ability. Initially, the books contain a small number of sight words and are somewhat predictable, based on picture cues and a repeated language structure. However, the language structure changes slightly on each page so that the beginning reader learns to look. Later, the stories are less predictable, and the texts contain a larger number of words that the students must decode phonetically, using the phonetic elements and skills they have learned in the workbooks. The four workbooks include activities on letter recognition, phonemic awareness, systematic phonics instruction, and sight words.**



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Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness in preschool or kindergarten has been shown to result in better performance on standardized reading tests in elementary school (NRP, 2000; Bradley and Bryant, 1983). It has also been demonstrated that phonemic awareness instruction is most effective when the sounds are associated with letters (NRP, 2000; Adams, 1990). Ehri (1997) calls this “grapho-phonemic awareness.” In order for a connection between sounds and letters to be made, young children should be carefully taught to identify the 26 letters, and this early instruction has a positive effect on later reading comprehension (Badian, 1995). It is now generally agreed that there is a reciprocal relationship between phonemic awareness and reading ability: that is, phonemic awareness training improves reading ability, but reading also improves phonemic awareness (Ehri, 1997; Goswami, 1990).

Handprints provides beginning readers with both early skills of letter knowledge and phonemic awareness, and practice reading texts. The first two *Handprints* workbooks, Books A and B, are intended for kindergartners, and Books C and D are for first graders. The phonemic awareness activities in these books include hearing whether words begin with the same sound, hearing the consonant sounds at the beginning and end of words, recognizing rhyming pictures, counting syllables, hearing vowel sounds, hearing onsets and rimes, manipulating onsets and rimes, and manipulating beginning and ending sounds of words.

Phonics

Research shows that children learn to read best when given direct instruction in decoding, along with opportunities to apply their newly acquired decoding skills as they read whole texts (Guthrie, et al., 2001; Juel and Minden-Cupp, 2000; NRP, 2000; Hiebert, 1999; Stahl, et al., 1998; Foorman, 1996; Adams, 1990; Juel and Roper/Schneider, 1985). In their comprehensive evaluation of scientific studies of reading, the NRP found that children learn to read best when taught through a systematic phonics program.

The Panel defines systematic phonics instruction as follows:

Systematic phonics instruction typically involves explicitly teaching students a prespecified set of letter-sound relations and having students read text that provides practice using these relations to decode words.

Although the NRP found that systematic phonics is more effective in teaching reading than nonsystematic phonics or no phonics at all, they found that it doesn't matter whether children learn to blend isolated sounds or larger units such as onsets and rimes. Some researchers have determined that it is easier for young children initially to blend onsets and rimes and later progress to blending individual phonemes (Schatschneider, 1999; Ehri, 1991). In another study, it was demonstrated that some children find it easier to blend isolated sounds, while others find it easier to use onset-rime analogies (Gaskins, et al., 1997). Several researchers have concluded that phonics instruction should include both synthetic and analogy instruction (Juel and Minden-Cupp, 2000; Pressley, 1998, 1996; Gaskins, et al., 1997).

As recommended by the NRP, *Handprints* gives students systematic phonics instruction, but, in addition, enables them to practice the word analysis skills they are learning while reading storybooks. Children can enjoy reading a variety of stories, revisit familiar settings and characters, and simultaneously become more skilled in decoding unfamiliar words. *Handprints* first teaches students to use onsets and rimes, and later provides work with vowel sounds so that students can decode words sequentially. Thus, both approaches are presented, to provide for students who find one approach or the other difficult, and to allow for students with different learning preferences (Juel and Minden-Cupp, 2000; Gaskins, et al., 1997; Pressley, 1996).

In the workbooks, the students learn beginning and ending consonant sounds, divide words into onsets and rimes, learn to read new words by analogy with known words (through onset-rime manipulation), learn consonant combinations (blends and consonant digraphs), learn vowel sounds (long and short vowels, vowel digraphs,



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diphthongs), and learn to decode phoneme by phoneme. Phoneme/grapheme and onset/rime cards are provided to assist in the phonics lessons, and teachers are encouraged to use magnetic letters for demonstration purposes.

Vocabulary Development

The NRP found that students benefit from exposure to new vocabulary before they encounter the unfamiliar words in the text. During reading, students are more likely to understand and remember the new words if they are repeated in context (Leung, 1992), and will learn vocabulary from both direct and indirect teaching. For example, Robbins and Ehri (1994) discovered that repeated storybook readings help children's vocabulary development. It has also been shown that children learn sight words more effectively when they read texts that repeat these words again and again (Juel and Roper/Schneider, 1985).

The 120 *Handprints* storybooks provide a rich context in which children can learn new words. Their accompanying Teacher's Guides, available online, have suggestions for introducing unfamiliar vocabulary and concepts before the reading. By reading and rereading a variety of storybooks, students are able to master the new words they encounter. Moreover, teachers are shown how to scaffold the children's understanding of vocabulary as they read. Students are exposed to sight words in context to expand their supply of known words. Their sight word knowledge enables them to both read connected text and decode unfamiliar words through analogy.

Reading Fluency

Fluency is defined by the NRP as the ability to "read text with speed, accuracy, and proper expression" (NRP, 2000). The Panel found that students need to read fluently to comprehend well. With teacher guidance and repeated oral reading, students can improve their fluency. Time for independent silent reading also allows children to do repeated readings and may encourage them to read more.

The Teacher's Guides for the *Handprints* storybooks provide the teacher with numerous techniques for teaching fluency. Repeated readings, both oral and silent, are encouraged. Children are prompted to "read like talking." Teachers are told how to have students use punctuation as

a guide to expression. Students learn how to progress from reading short phrases, to longer phrases, and eventually whole sentences. The text placement in the storybooks is designed to encourage students to read in increasingly longer phrases. At the lower levels, teachers tell the students to rehearse new or unfamiliar phrases during the book introduction. This practice allows for greater fluency during the first and subsequent readings of the books.

Reading Comprehension Strategies

In its research review the Panel determined that readers comprehend better if they relate what they are reading to their own prior knowledge and experiences. They are also assisted by teacher prompts, before, during, and after the reading, to focus on meaning and story structure. Teachers aid students' comprehension by posing questions before and after the reading, or by having students formulate their own questions about the story. Sulzby and associates found that reading lots of "little books" correlates with positive language development, interest in reading, and success in reading in the older grades (Sulzby, 1991). Other researchers have discovered that students learn to read best from texts that include interesting, real-life stories that invite comprehension (rather than nonsensical but decodable texts), repeated high-frequency words, and decodable words (Hiebert, 1999; Stahl, et al., 1998).

Numerous suggestions for promoting comprehension are provided in the Handprints storybooks' Teacher's Guides:

- Preview book by looking at illustrations and making predictions.
- Confirm predictions during reading.
- Predict what will happen next.
- Elicit students' previous experiences and background knowledge.
- Encourage comprehension monitoring.
- Encourage focus on meaning.
- Note story structure by highlighting beginning, middle, and end of story.
- Summarize story orally or in writing.



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Conclusion

Together, the *Handprints* workbooks and storybooks provide beginning readers with skill development and enjoyable, hands-on reading practice in keeping with what is recommended by current researchers, including the research review by the National Reading Panel. According to the Panel, phonics programs in the early grades (kindergarten to grade 1) are the most effective, and these programs should make allowances for the varying phonics skills which students have when they come to school. Instead of imposing a one-size-fits-all curriculum on students, says the Panel, reading programs should show teachers how to adapt instruction and place children in flexible groups.

In addition to guidance on how to use the exercises in the workbooks, the *Handprints* Teacher's Guides for the workbooks provide Before and Beyond activities for students who need extra review or teacher assistance and students whose learning is accelerated. The Teacher's Guides for the storybooks explain how to group students and adapt instruction accordingly. Selections can be made from storybooks on a wide range of reading levels to give appropriate challenges to all students.

Handprints allows teachers to use balanced reading instruction. In the *Subgroup Report on Alphabeticity* (Part II, Phonics Instruction), the NRP advises balanced instruction, explaining that while systematic phonics has been proven to be effective, teachers should not interpret this to mean that they should teach phonics exclusively, or even predominantly. The panel points out that phonics is merely "a means to an end":

Programs that focus too much on the teaching of letter-sounds relations and not enough on putting them to use are unlikely to be very effective. In implementing systematic phonics instruction, educators must keep the end in mind and ensure that children



understand the purpose of learning letter-sounds and are able to apply their skills in their daily reading and writing activities.

In its emphasis on both skill development and reading for meaning, *Handprints* helps students get the most out of their reading instruction.

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