

HOW CHILDREN ACQUIRE THE ABILITY TO READ



**All the facts you need to know about
the acquisition of reading skills in an
easy to read, condensed format.**

**Burt /
Books**

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Reading is a complex skill and acquiring the ability to read involves a complex process. There are several processes involved when we read. In order to fully understand the little squiggles on a piece of paper and interpret their meaning and then understand what all those squiggles collectively mean and to be able to respond to them requires a whole series of steps.

Step 1

We need to have the ability to decode the individual words. We need to be able to read the words automatically with very little effort. If we can do this then we can spend more effort thinking about the meaning of the words within the sentence. A child who struggles with decoding the words and lurches slowly from one word to the next, struggling to sound out each phoneme is going to have a problem with the understanding of each word. So much mental effort is spent on decoding that the sense of the words/ sentence is lost with the effort being made simply to decode. So the first step in producing a competent reader is to ensure that he/she can decode words. In order to be able to do this a structured system needs to be put in place to teach the pupil all the phonemes required to be able to decode effectively.

Step 1 can therefore be summarised as follows:

In order to read words we need to have the tools to decode them.

Step 2

Once we can decode the individual words, we will be able to concentrate on the individual meanings of the words. In order to fully understand the meaning of words we need to have an adequate vocabulary. Have you ever tried decoding a word in a foreign language? You may decode quite successfully and even say the word quite correctly but not have the faintest idea what the word means. So a good vocabulary is essential to being able to read and understand what we are reading.

So step 2 can be summarised by saying that in order to have a meaningful understanding of what we are reading we need:

- * an ability to read the individual words
- * An adequate vocabulary

Step 3

We need to have the ability to be able to put all the words together and understand what they mean.

How does this happen?

There are 3 essential steps in the process:

1. We need an understanding of the topic that we are reading about.
ie we need an adequate vocabulary to allow understanding. Have you ever attempted to understand a piece of text from a textbook outside of your own field of expertise? You may read everything fluently, but because of certain jargon you may not have a clue what the text is all about.
2. The ease and speed with which the meanings of the individual words are read and understood.
3. The ease and speed with which the individual words are decoded

A good vocabulary in a child is therefore essential to good reading skills. Within the exercises of the Burt Reading scheme this aspect is acknowledged and built upon in the form of vocabulary building exercises giving pictures that can be talked about.

Many words have 2 meanings. Here is an example:

CAN - a container for carrying water

CAN - the verb

A child with a good vocabulary will understand the meaning of the word CAN within the context of a sentence if they have come across these words before.

eg: The dog can jump over the fence.

The can is full of water.

Step 4

The final step in the process is the comprehension of the “bigger picture” – what the sentences are all about.

If steps 1 – 3 have been acquired the child will now be proficient at reading and will be automatically engaging in either of the following processes:

- a) Forming a picture in their mind of what the text is all about.
- b) Forming “feelings” – emotional responses to the meaning of the text

BUT WHERE IS THE STRUGGLING READER LEFT IN THIS WHOLE PROCESS?

Still back in the first stage? Perhaps slowly moving to the second stage.

What emotional responses are they displaying to reading?

FRUSTRATION? ANGER? DEFEAT? NO CONFIDENCE?

CAN THE STRUGGLING READER BE MOVED BEYOND STAGE 1?

A great deal of research has been put into the acquisition of reading skills. In 1998 Snow et al identified that lack of skills in PHONOLOGICAL PROCESSING was the most common area of difficulty in weak and struggling readers. Many researchers have proved that INSTRUCTION AND PRACTICE can improve phonological processing skills. This research underpins the work done by Coreen Burt in the development of the Burt Reading Scheme. Over a period of 40 years this tenet has proved to be absolutely crucial to moving on from Step 1.

So in order to move towards full understanding of what is being read, a child needs

1. INSTRUCTION

In developing the Burt Reading Scheme, Coreen Burt realised the need for accurate and detailed instruction to the adult or significant person (tutor) who uses it to tutor a weak reader. Precise, careful instructions are given at every stage of the scheme.

2. PRACTICE

A weak reader needs a lot of practice in order to consolidate each phoneme into his/her memory bank and to acquire a good vocabulary that will move his/her reading on to the next stage. The Burt Reading Scheme

offers at least 10 pages of instruction, revision, consolidation for every phoneme. The tutor may choose to move the child as swiftly or slowly through the process as is needed.

3. MOTIVATION

HOW DO WE MOTIVATE A STRUGGLING/FAILING READER TO WANT TO LEARN TO READ?

The work of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) has become the foundation of much research and theory in cognitive development over the past several decades. He theorised that a child typically learns how to use cultural tools through interactions with parents, teachers, or more experienced peers. (An experienced peer can be a **STUDDY BUDDY**) As a result of using these tools - first in cooperation with others and later independently - the child develops higher mental functions: complex mental processes that are intentional, self-regulated, and mediated by language and other sign systems. Examples of these higher mental functions include focused attention, deliberate memory, and verbal thinking.

Vygotsky further theorised that the skills acquired by children reflect the internalisation of the problem solving that they have initially done with the adults in their lives. Vygotsky saw these adults as providing **CAREFUL VERBAL GUIDANCE TO DIRECT AND GUIDE A CHILD'S THINKING**.

Vygotsky argued that if a task is challenging for a child to handle on their own, but is achievable when given assistance by an adult or "expert" other (study buddy), that this represents the most effective form of instruction to develop skills and abilities.

As a result of Vygotsky's work and the further research of others, the idea of **SCAFFOLDING** was formulated. Scaffolding is an analogy for the support given by the adults in the learning process.

SO HOW DO YOU START MOTIVATING THE WEAK/STRUGGLING READER?

STEP 1 READ TO THEM AND WITH THEM.

Reading to a child will develop a love for stories and the written word. Reading on a wide variety of topics and genres will develop their vocabulary. Reading stories to them will pique their interest and make them want to explore books. Coreen Burt has found that this tenet underpins her own reading experience as a child and of that of her own children. Children who are read to will WANT to read. Reading to your child/children is an important interaction from which your child will learn important skills.

STEP 2 : GIVE THE CHILD THE SKILLS NEEDED TO IMPROVE PHONOLOGICAL PROCESSING

A weak reader needs scaffolding to help them to become an proficient reader. In keeping with Snow et al's research, INSTRUCTION (Careful verbal guidance – Vygotsky) and PRACTICE are necessary. The Burt Reading Scheme is underpinned by both these tenets. The instructions are clear to the tutor but printed in a small type face so as not to confuse the pupil. The scheme consists of many worksheets offering many different types of revision on each phoneme. The pupil is given the opportunity of putting into practice their new found skills in the short stories and sentences which only use the words that they have already learnt.

STEP 3 : GIVE CONTINUAL PRAISE AND ENCOURAGEMENT

A weak reader has suffered a great deal. They usually present with poor self-image and very little confidence in their own abilities. They will try every excuse ever heard by a teacher to escape from reading in order to cover up what they perceive to be their own stupidity. Encouragement will begin to sow the seeds of success, self-confidence and progress.

