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## What Works in Teaching Children to Read: Whole Language or or Phonics?

*"Whole language" is embraced by some, cursed by many. For whom is it appropriate and for whom is it inappropriate? (Is it possible to tell in advance for whom it will work or won't work?) - David E. Rubin, MD, Medical director of Laboratory, Saint Anthony Community Hospital*

### Reid Lyon Answers

It is unfortunate that the debates surrounding whole language versus phonics continues to detract from the critical issue - what instructional approaches, strategies, and programs are most beneficial for which kids at which phases or reading development?

We are trying to help people move away from simplistic dichotomies like phonics versus whole language by ensuring that they fully understand:

- (1) what it takes for kids (and adults) TO LEARN TO READ;
- (2) WHY SOME KIDS HAVE DIFFICULTIES; and
- (3) how can we prevent and remediate reading failure.

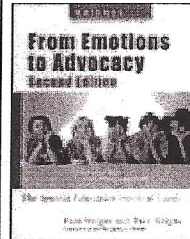
To answer these questions, we have to go to the converging scientific evidence. This is what the conclusions are at this time.

**Learning to read is an extremely complicated process that requires many skills and abilities.**

For example, kids need to understand the sounds of their language, how sounds

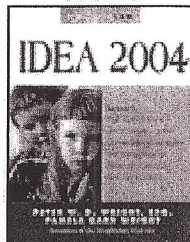
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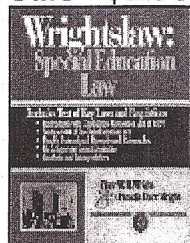
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(phonemes) link to the letters and letter patterns in written language (phonics), how to apply these skills accurately and rapidly and read with expression (fluency), how to develop vocabulary and world knowledge so that what they read can be linked to what they know about content, concepts, and the world, and how to actively deploy reading comprehension strategies to comprehend in an optimal fashion. For reading to develop, any program or approach must be comprehensive and to ensure instructional interactions of all these components.

Instruction must also be tailored so success is achieved and motivation to read continues and is enhanced.

The whole language question gives us an opportunity to examine the **scientific evidence** related to the philosophy undergirding whole language principles.

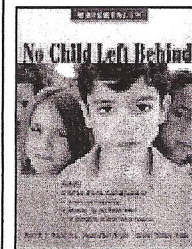
**Whole Language is a Philosophy, Not a Teaching Method**

Whole language is hard to define because different people view it in different ways. It is a philosophy of instruction and learning, not a teaching method or program.

Many tenets of the whole language philosophy do not seem to be scientifically accurate. For example, whole language espouses the notion that learning to read and spell is like learning to speak. Therefore, kids can glean the form and structure of written language through exposure to context meaning-making activities that do not require direct instruction. This idea flows from the notion that learning to read is natural and develops in a similar fashion to listening and speaking. These philosophical notions have not been supported by scientific evidence.

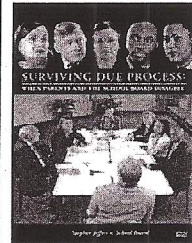
Reading development takes place over a relatively proactive period of time where many of reading skills have to be very systematically and explicitly taught to kids.

One rule of thumb is that **the more difficulties kids are having with learning to read, the more systematic and direct the instruction must be.** Reading instruction



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must also be comprehensive and cover all components.

Even if kids are receiving direct instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension strategies, that does not mean that reading lessons should be dull, drab, or painful.

To reiterate, try to move away from the whole language-phonics debate and ask these questions:

1. What does the evidence tell us about what it takes to learn to read?
2. Does the instructional program or approach include all the critical reading components.
3. Have the teachers received the necessary professional development to be able to assess and target concepts for instruction?
4. Are we continuously assessing progress across all reading domains to ensure that instruction is adjusted for the student?

These adjustments may include teaching in a more sequenced and systematic way, providing additional clear examples, making sure that kids are reading text within their instructional reading level, ensuring that instructional material is personally and culturally meaningful to the student and so on.

***Reading is complex!!! Teaching reading successfully requires a teacher who understands the reading process, assessment, and different forms of instruction to ensure that instruction is comprehensive and successful.***

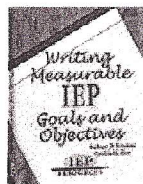
Teachers must know which programs are based upon solid evidence-based principles and are effective, and which programs are based on (Incorrect) beliefs, philosophies, anecdotes, and untested assumptions.

**Note from Wrightslaw:** In October 2004, Education Week sponsored a Live Chat with Dr. Reid Lyon, research psychologist and chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch, National Institute of Child Health and Human

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Development, National Institutes of Health. Dr. Lyon answered questions about reading programs, evidenced-based research, reading myths, and the Reading First program. This question and answer is from the transcript of that chat.

## Meet Reid Lyon

G. Reid Lyon is a research psychologist and Chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch of the National Institute of Child Health & Human Development, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD. He is a strong proponent of the scientific approach to reading instruction.

## Resources

Informed Instruction for Reading Success: Foundations for Teacher Preparation - A Position Paper of the International Dyslexia Association

Teaching Reading IS Rocket Science, What Expert Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do by Louisa Moats, published by the American Federation of Teachers.

Using Research and Reason in Education - How Teachers Can Use Scientifically Based Research to Make Curricular & Instructional Decisions by Paula J. Stanovich and Keith E. Stanovich, published by the Partnership for Reading, May 2003.

Reading Recovery: Distinguishing Myths from Reality by William E. Tummer, Ph.D. and James W. Chapman, Ph.D.

Using Research and Reason in Education. Because teachers find it difficult to stay current with research on effective instruction, this paper helps teachers become consumers of educational programs and materials, provides guidance on how to recognize scientifically based instructional strategies, how to use the concepts of research in the classroom.

Orton-Gillingham or Multisensory Structured Language Approaches from the International Dyslexia Association.

The Science of Reading Research by G. Reid