



Australian Government

Department of Education, Science and Training



# Teaching Reading

A Guide to the Report  
and Recommendations  
for Parents and Carers

National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy  
December 2005



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## The Research Evidence

Teaching children how to link sounds with letters enables them to break the ‘code’ of reading. This is called ‘explicit phonics instruction’ and is the foundation of reading, writing, spelling and comprehension. The Inquiry investigated Australian and international research about the most effective way of teaching all children to read. It found that early, systematic and explicit teaching of phonics is a necessary part of an integrated approach to the teaching of reading.

In the first three years of school (and beyond if necessary) all children learn best with an integrated approach to reading which teaches:

- phonemic awareness: the ability to hear and manipulate the sounds in oral language;
- phonics: the relationships between letters and sounds;
- fluency: the ability to read quickly and naturally, recognise words automatically, and group words quickly;
- vocabulary knowledge: new words and what they mean; and
- text comprehension: understanding what is being read and developing higher-order thinking skills.

The research indicates that children starting school need these effective approaches if they are to learn to read successfully. Children who are identified as being at risk of experiencing difficulties in learning to read can become successful readers if they develop knowledge of letter-sound relationships, understand the alphabetic system, and are taught within an integrated reading approach (Recommendation 2).

In visits to schools around the country, members of the Inquiry observed the remarkable success of these evidence-based methods of teaching children to read, regardless of socio-economic circumstances or family disadvantage.

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## Helping your child to read

Schools have the main responsibility to teach children to read and write. Even so, as parents and carers, there are many things you can do to help your children become readers.

You can help your children learn to read by reading aloud together well before they begin school, and continuing to share books and enjoy reading throughout their school lives.

In the years before school, read with them, teach them rhymes, play word games, point out letter-sound relationships and practice the alphabet at home.

Once they start school you can continue to help by listening to them as they learn to read for themselves.

To help give your children the best start in reading, the Committee recommends that programs, guides, and workshops be provided for parents (Recommendation 4).

You can also help by understanding how the teacher is teaching reading and by asking questions about your child's progress. This is why the Committee recommends that:

- every child be assessed by their teacher when starting school and at regular intervals over the first three years of school; that parents receive reports twice a year on their children's progress; and that teachers use these assessments to guide children's development so that no one falls behind (Recommendations 9, 10);
  - each school develop a consistent whole-school approach to the teaching of reading that is clearly explained in a 'literacy plan' provided to parents. The literacy plan will help you understand how your children are being taught to read (Recommendations 5, 6); and
  - each school identify a teacher with specialised skills in the teaching of reading. The specialist literacy teacher will provide expert help to classroom teachers, help them understand and use appropriate strategies and help with children experiencing difficulties learning to read (Recommendations 1, 6, 7).
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## Successful Teachers

Children begin school with a wide variation in their abilities, their attitudes, their behaviour and their backgrounds. Often, too much emphasis is given to these factors. Once at school, the evidence shows that it is quality teaching that is vital to teaching children to read.

For beginning teachers to be well prepared to teach your child to read, the Committee recommends that:

- as a condition of registration, all primary and secondary teaching graduates must demonstrate that they possess the personal literacy skills and knowledge necessary for teaching literacy, especially reading (Recommendations 1, 2, 8, 14);
  - teachers update their skills by engaging in regular evidence-based professional learning (Recommendations 1, 2, 7, 14, 15, 16); and
  - teacher education institutions make preparing student teachers to teach reading their key priority. Coursework should be based on research and include instruction on how to teach phonics in a systematic and explicit way, along with instruction on how to teach oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies. (Recommendations 1, 2, 11, 12, 13).
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## Successful Schools

The Inquiry found that successful schools:

- share a belief that all children can learn to read and write well regardless of family background;
  - place an early and systematic emphasis on the explicit teaching of phonics along with teaching oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies (Recommendations 1, 2);
  - provide a stimulating literacy environment with a wide variety of printed and computer based resources available for children and their teachers;
  - have strong leadership and management practices, involving a whole-school approach to the teaching of reading and literacy (Recommendations 5, 6, 7, 16); and
  - expect their teachers to engage in professional learning and also to learn from each other (Recommendations 7, 14, 15, 16).
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## Background

A key Australian Government priority is a focus on achieving sustained improvements in the literacy and numeracy skills of Australian children to prepare them for their futures.

While international data indicate that Australia's level of achievement in literacy is high relative to other countries, a significant minority of children in Australian schools continue to face difficulties in acquiring acceptable levels of literacy and numeracy.

In order for all Australian children to achieve high standards of literacy, the Hon Dr Brendan Nelson MP, Minister for Education, Science and Training, established a National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy on 30 November 2004. The Inquiry was conducted by an independent Committee with experience in literacy research and policy, teacher preparation, professional learning and leadership, and included a primary school principal, a primary school teacher, a parent and a journalist. The Committee was chaired by Dr Ken Rowe, Research Director of the Learning Processes and Contexts research program at the Australian Council for Educational Research.

The Inquiry examined the way reading is taught in schools, as well as the effectiveness of teacher education courses in preparing our teachers for reading instruction.

The Inquiry's full report and recommendations, literature review, submissions, site visits and this Guide are available on the Department of Education, Science and Training website at [www.dest.gov.au/schools/literacyinquiry](http://www.dest.gov.au/schools/literacyinquiry).

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# Recommendations

The first two recommendations make clear the Committee's conviction about the need to base the teaching of reading on evidence and the importance of teaching systematic, explicit phonics within an integrated approach.

Other recommendations on the role of parents in supporting their child's reading, the importance of leadership and management practices in schools, standards for teaching, the essential place of assessment, teacher education and ongoing teacher professional learning are underpinned by these two fundamental recommendations.

## An integrated approach to teaching reading

1. Teachers be equipped with teaching strategies based on findings from rigorous, evidence-based research that are shown to be effective in enhancing the literacy development of all children.
2. Teachers provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency. Equally, that teachers provide an integrated approach to reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies.

Such instruction arising from these two recommendations must be part of an intellectually challenging literacy environment that is inclusive of all children.

3. Literacy teaching continue throughout schooling (K-12) in all areas of the curriculum. Literacy must be the responsibility of all teachers across the curriculum, to provide an educationally sound program meeting the specific skill and knowledge needs of individual children from diverse backgrounds and locations.

## The role of parents

4. Programs, guides and workshops be provided for parents and carers to support their children's literacy development. These should acknowledge and build on the language and literacy that children learn in their homes and communities.

## School leadership and management

5. All education authorities and school leaders examine their approaches to the teaching of literacy and put in place an explicit, whole-school literacy planning, monitoring and reviewing process in collaboration with school communities and parents.

This process should be comprehensive and recognise the learning needs of children experiencing difficulty in learning to read and write, as well as extending successful readers and writers, so that all children can proceed with every likelihood of success to the next stage of their lives.

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### Specialist literacy teachers

6. All schools identify a highly trained specialist literacy teacher with specialised skills in teaching reading, to be responsible for linking the whole-school literacy planning process with classroom teaching and learning, and supporting school staff in developing, implementing and monitoring progress against individual literacy plans, particularly for those children experiencing reading and literacy difficulties.
7. Specialist postgraduate studies in literacy (especially in teaching reading) be provided by higher education providers to support the skill base and knowledge of teachers, including the specialist literacy teachers.

### Teaching standards

8. The Committee recommends that Teaching Australia – Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, in consultation with relevant professional associations, employers from the government and Catholic school sectors and representatives of the independent school sector, together with relevant teacher institutes and registration bodies, develop and implement national standards for literacy teaching, initial teacher registration, and for accomplished teaching, consistent with evidence-based guides for practice. It is further recommended that these standards form a basis for the accreditation of teacher preparation courses.

### Assessment

9. The teaching of literacy throughout schooling be informed by comprehensive, diagnostic, and developmentally appropriate assessments of every child, mapped on common scales. Further, it is recommended that:
  - nationally consistent assessments on-entry to school be undertaken for every child, including regular monitoring of decoding skills and word reading accuracy using objective testing of specific skills, and that these link to future assessments;
  - education authorities and schools be responsible for the measurement of individual progress in literacy by regularly monitoring the development of each child and reporting progress twice each year for the first three years of schooling; and
  - the Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 national literacy testing program be refocused to make available diagnostic information on individual student performance, to assist teachers to plan the most effective teaching strategies.
10. A confidential mechanism such as a unique student identifier be established to enable information on an individual child's performance to follow the child regardless of location, and to monitor a child's progress throughout schooling and across assessment occasions.

### Teacher preparation

11. The key objective of primary teacher education courses be to prepare student teachers to teach reading, and the content of coursework in primary literacy education focus on contemporary understandings of:
    - evidence-based findings and an integrated approach to the teaching of reading, including instruction on how to teach phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and text comprehension;
    - child and adolescent development; and
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- inclusive approaches to literacy teaching.
12. Literacy teaching within subject areas be included in the coursework of secondary teachers so that they are well prepared to continue the literacy development of their students throughout secondary schooling in all areas of the curriculum.
  13. Significant national 'lighthouse' projects in teacher preparation and education be established to link theory and practice that effectively prepare pre-service teachers to teach literacy, and especially reading, to diverse groups of children.
  14. The conditions for teacher registration of graduates from all primary and secondary teacher education programs include a demonstrated command of personal literacy skills necessary for effective teaching, and a demonstrated ability to teach literacy within the framework of their employment/teaching program.

### Teacher professional learning

15. Schools and employing authorities, working with appropriate professional organisations and higher education institutions, provide all teachers with appropriate induction and mentoring throughout their careers, and with ongoing opportunities for evidence-based professional learning about effective literacy teaching.
16. A national program of literacy action be established to:
  - *design* a series of evidence-based teacher professional learning programs focused on effective classroom teaching, and later interventions for those children experiencing reading difficulties;
  - *produce* a series of evidence-based guides for effective teaching practice, the first of which should be on reading;
  - *evaluate* the effectiveness of approaches to early literacy teaching (especially early reading) and professional learning programs for practising teachers;
  - *investigate* ways of integrating the literacies of information and communication technologies with traditional literacies in the classroom;
  - *establish* networks of literacy/reading specialist practitioners to facilitate the application of research to practice; and
  - *promote* research into the most effective teaching practices to be used when preparing pre-service teachers to teach reading.
17. Australian and State and Territory governments' approaches to literacy improvement be aligned to achieve improved outcomes for all Australian children.
18. The Australian Government, together with State and Territory government and non-government education authorities, jointly support the proposed national program for literacy action.

### Looking forward

19. The Australian Government Minister for Education, Science and Training raise these recommendations as issues for attention and action by MCEETYA, and other bodies, agencies and authorities, that will have responsibility to take account of, and implement the recommendations.
  20. Progress in implementing these recommendations, and on the state of literacy in Australia, be reviewed and reported every two years.
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