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1

Why?

If you are reading this book, I assume you are trying to teach your child to read (or someone you know is trying to teach theirs). Why?

That seems, on the face of it, a fairly simple and straightforward question, but when you start to think about it you soon realize that it's not.

It's his fault

Your first response to the question 'Why' is likely to be 'Well, he can't read.' That's obvious, or you wouldn't be giving the matter a second thought. You might go on to explain that he can't read as well as he, or you, or his teachers, or some standard attainment test (SAT) – and most probably all four – think he should be able to.

This, however, raises another 'Why?' question. Why *can't* your child read with the ease and fluency that is expected of him?

Isn't he intelligent enough? You're pretty sure *that* can't be it. He's bright, he's quick to catch on, and apart from this little problem with his reading you've no reason to think he's a bit short in the brain power department.

Is he, God forbid, *dyslexic*? You've heard about children who have been described in this way. You may even know of someone whose child carries that label. 'Henry can't read well at all. He's been assessed by the educational psychologist and we've been told he's dyslexic.'

But what *is* dyslexia? The word itself, dys-lexia, means simply 'disturbed reading,' so *that's* not a lot of help. Then you find out that the term also carries the implication that the child has a defect in the way he perceives and interprets printed letters and words. *Defective? Your child? Never!*

Is he simply being *lazy* and can't be bothered to put in the effort needed to learn to read? Would he much rather sprawl in front of the TV, or amuse himself with computer games? That certainly wouldn't make him unusual. Well, no, that can't be the cause of the reading problem, because you can tell he really *wants* to read – he's always looking at books, and he loves it when you read to him.

Perhaps he's got an emotional block about the whole business. But what's an 'emotional block'? And how would know one when you saw one?

No, it's *not* his fault

Then you realize that so far you've been assuming that the problem lies with your child. Maybe it doesn't. Maybe it's someone *else's* fault that he's not achieving in this aspect of his education. Now *there's* a thought.

Why?

Could it be *your* fault? You're horrified by the very idea – but what if it's true? Are you putting too much pressure on your child? Are you making him feel a failure when he tries to read and can't, and by so doing are you destroying his self-confidence so that he freezes up mentally when faced with a reading task? No, *surely* not?

Is it the fault of your child's school? Does he feel isolated and lonely there? Is he being bullied? Are the teachers authoritarian and frightening? No, not that, either. When you take him to school each morning he's perfectly happy. He loves being at school. He gets on well with all his friends, and his teachers are pleasant and friendly. So it can't be that.

OK, so what's left? Is it, you wonder, the *way* he's being taught at school? Let's think about that for a moment. What do we mean? We've already dismissed the notion that the teacher is personally to blame – she's altogether delightful, and she's as worried as you are by your child's lack of progress in reading. Perhaps it has something to do with the *materials* the teacher is using. Could it be that the *system* of teaching reading that's being used in your child's school is somehow at the root of the problem? There's always someone on the radio or TV complaining that one in five (or is it two in five?) children leave school barely able to spell their own name, and you've heard suggestions that modern teaching methods may not actually be all they're cracked up to be (and certainly not what the politicians claim they are).

So whose fault is it?

In the mid-1970s, I and my wife were faced with what our six-year-old son's schoolteachers described as the 'difficulties' he seemed to be experiencing in learning to read.

I recall only too well our reaction to his teacher's comments at a parent-teacher evening. 'Well,' she started, 'he's *still* not learning to read.' And then she put a very serious look on her face and said, almost apologetically, 'I don't *think* he's backward.'

Backward? To parents, that kind of comment is like sticking them with an electric cow-prod. When we returned home (in something of a lather), we went through all the thoughts I've listed in the previous few pages.

We agreed that we might have to accept that our son was just not up to it intellectually – but *that* was going to be our conclusion of last resort after we had rejected every other possibility! That doesn't mean that there aren't some people lacking the wherewithal to learn to read. Obviously there are, but they represent only a relatively small proportion of the total population, and the chance that a particular child is one of that group is also small, particularly if he doesn't seem to be encountering learning problems in other areas.

As far as dyslexia was concerned, I had long suspected, as a professional psychologist, that the term might be being used rather too freely. Now don't get me

wrong – I’m not saying that the condition dyslexia doesn’t exist. Things can go wrong, for one reason or another, with all physical and mental functions, and the perception and mental processing of written letters and words is no exception. However, I was aware that making a definite diagnosis of what we might call ‘true’ dyslexia (that is to say, a reading disability stemming from one or more underlying brain dysfunctions) is not a simple matter, and there is, indeed, no generally agreed method for doing so. Nevertheless, this doesn’t prevent the label from being attached to hundreds of children each year, and one has to wonder why.

One reason may be that it effectively turns the spotlight off the widespread use of inappropriate reading schemes introduced into primary schools by those espousing what has been called a ‘liberal’ approach to the educational process. The rejection, by these educational modernizers, of traditional methods of teaching reading, is consistent with their dismissal of rote learning of the multiplication tables and the abandonment of the use of lined paper in the acquisition of handwriting skills. If a child fails to learn to read, it can’t be admitted that the teaching method could possibly be at fault. So, if it’s not the *teaching* that’s going wrong, it has to be the *learning* – the child, not the reading scheme, must be dysfunctional. A diagnosis of dyslexia solves the problem.

To our minds, therefore, regarding our son as dyslexic was no more welcome than concluding that he was just plain dim, and although we recognized that we might

eventually be forced to accept one explanation or the other, we were certainly not inclined to do so before we'd examined every other possible reason for his reading problem.

We then did what we probably should have done very much earlier in our son's first year at school – we talked to him about the reading lessons he was receiving, and about how he felt about the whole business of reading. It didn't take very long for us to suspect that the difficulties he was experiencing were rooted in the way he was being taught to read. What our son was experiencing might not be a *learning* but a *teaching* problem.

Our suspicion was confirmed when he described in more detail what was happening at school when reading was being taught. At first, we were rather surprised, because, from our son's descriptions, it all seemed very interesting and stimulating. There were puzzles and games, pictures to be coloured in, cards to be sorted, and a variety of other activities. Where was the problem? It looked a lot of fun.

Well, the lessons may have *looked* fun, but it was obvious that all that these different activities were achieving was to confuse our son. The message he was receiving, loud and clear, was that reading *had* to be approached in these 'oblique' ways (sneaked up on, so to speak) because it was really tricky and complicated. As each day passed without any increase in his ability to read, our son was becoming more and more convinced

that he was just not capable of ever learning to do such a dreadfully difficult thing.

Of course, in one sense he was perfectly correct. The way in which the English language is spelt *doesn't* make it an easy language to read. In some languages, such as Italian and Spanish, and in those with fairly recently invented written forms (Maori and Swahili, for example), the spelling rules are very simple, each sound almost always being represented by the same letter or combination of letters. In English, however, we are faced with multiple spellings of the same sound (*bought*, *caught*, *short*, *thwart*, for example). French, we might add, is just as bad and maybe even worse (*aller*, *allé*, *allée*, *allés*, *allées*, *allez*, *allaient*) – in fact, a French person can't spell a huge proportion of words without knowing their precise grammatical status.

The way in which our son was being taught seemed to have been deliberately designed to make him only too aware of these difficulties in English spelling. One of the first reading books that he brought home contained words such as *ought*, *who* and *night*, and even some words made up of two run together by dropping a letter and replacing it with an apostrophe (*can't*, *shouldn't*). Holy smoke – no wonder he was frightened out of his wits!

What can be done about it?

Clearly, drastic action was called for. Obviously, the first thing to do in situations where progress is being impeded

by excessive anxiety is to get rid of the source of anxiety as quickly and as thoroughly as possible. We therefore asked our son's teachers to stop trying to teach him to read, at least for a few weeks, whilst we did what we could to restore his self-confidence, and maybe get him on the right road to learning.

After talking to him at length, I decided to put together a reading scheme specially designed to overcome his anxiety. The result was what I have called the *Spell and Read* system that is outlined in this book.

Before I started, though, I had a good look at what had been written about the reading schemes that were already available, and what their relative advantages and disadvantages might be. As you might expect, I quickly found myself bogged down in talk of graphemes, phonemes and morphemes, phonological deficits, something called the visual lexicon, and the transition from 'declarative' to 'procedural' memory. As you might also expect, I soon gave up, and you'll find none of that kind of thing in *this* book!

As for the reading schemes themselves, none of them seemed to get right down to the central issue of reading – what *pronunciation* was associated with a particular *combination of letters*. There seemed to be a tacit understanding behind all the schemes that English spelling is so intractable that any attempt to approach it directly is necessarily foredoomed to disaster. This isn't, however, the way in which I see English spelling. Yes, it's obviously not without a certain degree of irregularity, but this is a far cry from being *completely* haphazard and

random. I came to the conclusion that if the regularity that exists in English were formalized this could provide the basic framework of an easy-to-use reading scheme.

The *Spell and Read* course was the outcome of these deliberations. I have used it, and I know that it works. During the years that I spent as a university lecturer, I lent the draft manuscript to several of my students who were married and had children. They all reported that it met with remarkable success in removing the reading difficulties that were having such a detrimental effect on their children's school careers. I have subsequently used the system with my own grandchildren, to similarly good effect.

The course is simple, logical, systematic and, I hope, free from any irrelevancies which might obscure its real purpose. It does not set out with the primary intention of interesting, stimulating or amusing the child (though, for all I know, it may do all of these things) – it is merely a straightforward, unpretentious, no-nonsense device for teaching reading skills.

You may be tempted to skip the next few chapters and get right down to using the *Spell and Read* course with your child. Please don't. It will make you feel more at home with the system if you spend a little time understanding how and why it has been constructed.

2

Learning to Read

Look-and-say *versus* phonics

Two major systems are used in the teaching of reading to children: *look-and-say* and *phonics*. OK, that's an oversimplification, but it's a perfectly adequate distinction for the purposes of this book.

The *look-and-say* method consists of presenting to the child one word at a time – the words are sometimes printed on 'flash cards' – and asking the child to repeat what the word says. The idea is that the child should eventually come to associate the overall shape of the word (or particular elements of that shape) with its meaning.

Actually, the processes that occur in establishing the child's learned response to a presentation of a particular word are probably quite complex, particularly since there are almost certainly aspects of reward and punishment involved (the parent or teacher may smile and nod at a correct reply, or frown at an incorrect one).

The second, or *phonic*, system directs attention away from the complete word, and involves instead the breaking down of each word into its phonic (sound) components. Thus the word *cat* is seen not as a unit, as it would be by the look-and-say system, but as an assemblage of three

sound elements, namely *c* (*cuh*), *a* (*ă*) and *t* (*tuh*), which, when sounded rapidly in sequence – *cuh-ă-tuh* – make up the total word, *cat* (*ă* is used for the short *a* sound).

It is common for each system to have its ardent supporters, and for arguments to rage as to which system is the best, the quickest, the simplest to teach, and associated with fewest difficulties for the pupil. In fact, such arguments are to some extent misplaced. Elements of both systems are inevitably involved when a child learns to read, no matter which system is adopted as the primary teaching device. Thus, if a child is taught by look-and-say to respond correctly when presented with the words *cat*, *can*, *cut*, *put* and *pan*, it is likely that he will soon discern that the distinction between *cat* from *can* lies in the difference between *t* and *n*, and that the distinction between *cut* and *put* lies between *c* and *p*. In this way an *implicit rule system* will be built up associating the letter *c* with the sound *cuh*, *t* with *tuh*, and *p* with *puh*. The rule system can then be used to work out the pronunciation of new words which the child has not previously met. This must be so: if it were not, the child would have to be taught to read by learning each and every word of the language separately and individually.

The phonic system of reading makes such *implicit* rules *explicit*. It does not leave it to the child to work out for himself, in a haphazard and unpredictable manner, which sounds are associated with which letters or letter combinations; instead, the rules are laid before the child as clearly enunciated guides. Nevertheless, once the

pronunciation of a new word has been firmly established by applying these rules (e.g., *empty* would be worked out as *ě-muh-puh-tuh-eeh*, the symbol *ě* being used to represent the short-*e* sound) future presentations of the word are likely to elicit the correct response immediately, without the intermediary phonic steps – in other words, once the pronunciation has been worked out phonically the response becomes associated with the *complete* word rather than with the string of *separate* phonic elements.

The message, then, is clear – the look-and-say and phonic reading systems are not distinct in any hard-and-fast way. Any distinction that does exist between them is rather one of emphasis.

In many schools it is usual to commence the teaching of reading by look-and-say, starting with the letters of the alphabet and a few simple, usually monosyllabic, words. This establishes the fundamental feature of reading, namely that printed letters and letter combinations are *symbols* for sounds, and that collections of printed letters can, if properly sequenced, act as symbols for both sounds and units of meaning. Once a child has grasped the idea that marks on paper, or on a blackboard, signpost, etc. *stand for*, or *symbolize*, sounds and meanings, and that changes in the shape of the marks bear regular relationships to changes in their meaning, then in one sense the battle to teach reading has been won – the child knows what reading *is*, even though, as yet, he does not know how to *do* it. I remember this point being put over very well on a television comedy programme: ‘I’m going to

teach you to play the clarinet,' said the comedian, and then went on 'You put the clarinet in your mouth like this, and do this with your fingers.' Well, that *is* what playing a clarinet involves, and no matter how much you happened to know about the theory of music, if you did not know *that* much about the mechanics of playing the clarinet you would not be able to translate written music into a single audible clarinet note.

So the child learns what reading *is* by look-and-say. He may then go on to learn *how* to read by an extension of the look-and-say procedure which allows the development of a few generalizable, but implicit, rules. After a period of look-and-say, the teacher may try to make *explicit* some of the rules that have been generated *implicitly*, and more phonic-based teaching is thus gradually introduced. The timing of this change of emphasis in favour of phonics depends on the views the teacher holds concerning the nature of the reading process.

Emergence of reading difficulties

In many cases, children adapt fairly well to this phased introduction of phonics, and indeed to many of them the experience may be novel and exciting. Sometimes, however, it can lead to the emergence of reading difficulties. Much depends upon the way in which the phonic system is introduced.

If it is done in an indirect, roundabout manner, using, for example, puzzles and games, some children feel that the whole business is much more complicated than it actually is. As a result, reading becomes associated with anxiety and the fear of failure. When that happens, urgent steps need to be taken to restore the child's confidence in his own ability to cope with reading. Failure to take such action can lead to irreparable damage being done to the child's future scholastic career.

Resolving the problem

When the indirect introduction of phonic reading does result in reading difficulties there are two courses of action which may be taken to help resolve the situation. The first and, on the face of it, most obvious approach is to abandon temporarily all teaching of phonics and to revert to look-and-say in the hope that the child will mature sufficiently to cope with the phonics teaching. Any gain in so doing may, however, be offset by a sense of failure produced in the child by the reversion to the earlier teaching style.

An alternative approach to the problem, and that which is adopted in this little book, is to drop the fancy teaching methods, and meet the issue of phonics head-on. This involves giving the child simple, straightforward instruction in the techniques of phonic reading and to keep at it until he has fully mastered them. If this can be done in a way that avoids raising the child's anxiety, it

may be possible not only to restore his confidence in his own ability, but to give him a firm basis for the future development of his reading skills.

The *Spell and Read* course has been specially designed to allow a parent to teach his or her own child the principles of phonic reading, and to do so in a systematic, direct, rigorous manner, whilst at the same time taking steps to avoid the emotional difficulties that can beset the indirect teaching of phonic reading.

Although the course has been written primarily for use by the child's parent, or at least by someone who has a one-to-one relationship with a child, it is also suitable for use with a group, with a little modification of the manner in which the Exercises are presented.

Whilst in general it is recommended that the *Spell and Read* course should be used with a child who has had about one year's experience with look-and-say teaching, and who therefore understands the basic principles of translating written marks into sounds and meaning, it would, in principle, be possible to use the course to teach a child to read without his having undergone an initial look-and-say experience.

The *Spell and Read* course can be used remedially in the case of children who are showing learning difficulties where reading is concerned, even where these difficulties are not obviously related to an awkward transition between look-and-say and phonic systems. The intention is to give parents a clear, fully explained, logical system for

teaching reading, which they can apply easily without putting stress upon the child's emotional resources.

Full recognition is given to the fact that individual teaching is expensive in terms of time, and any system relying upon a pupil-to-teacher ratio of one-to-one has necessarily to be one which takes very little time to administer. Accordingly, the lessons in this course should not take up more than 10 minutes a day *at the very most*, and most parents would agree that this is little enough to invest in their child's happiness at school and in later life.

Exercise 1

b	bat
c	cat
d	did
f	fat
g	get
h	hot
j	jam
k	kit
l	log
m	man
n	not
p	pet
r	rat
s	sit
v	van
w	wet
y	yet
z	zoo

Exercise 1A

b

bag

big

bit

bell

d

dog

dig

did

doll

Step 2

Short-a: two-letter words

Theory

There are two single-letter words (*I* and *a*) and 31 two-letter words in English. Of the two-letter words, four contain *a* in its short form, which I shall indicate as *ă*. This is the letter *a* as it occurs in *cat* rather than the *aah* form as in *hard*, or the *aye* form as in *name*, whilst two (the rather odd words *ah* and *ha* – usually written *ah!* and *ha!*) contain the *a* in one of these two long forms. This lesson concentrates on the four short-*a* words, *am*, *an*, *as* and *at*.

Note that there are two further words of two letters, *by* and *my*; in these *y* acts as a vowel. These two words are dealt with separately in Step 5 of the course (pages 56–59).

The purpose of the two Exercises

Exercises 2 and 2A, which should both be presented on the same day, each list the two-letter words containing a short-*a*. The order of presentation in each Exercise separates *am* and *an*, which might otherwise be confused.

Instructions for the Exercises

1. **Note:** Your child does not have to do anything in Exercise 2, *except simply listen*. The Exercise adopts a very simple technique to help the child grasp the concept of putting together two phonic elements to

make a single sound. Point first to the letter *a* and say *ă* (remember that I use *ă* to indicate the short *a* as in *cat*) then point to *t* and say *tuh* (leave a pause of about one second between saying *ă* and saying *tuh*). Repeat the procedure, but shorten the interval somewhat between the two sounds. Keep doing this, making the interval shorter and shorter until the *ă* and *tuh* run together into a single sound *ătuh*. The sequence will sound something like this:

ă-----*tuh*
ă-----*tuh*
ă-----*tuh*
ă----*tuh*
ă--*tuh*
ă-*tuh*
ătuh
at

2. Then point to the word *at* and say it.
3. Do the same for *am*, *as* and *an* in Exercise 2. The child should fairly quickly grasp the idea of combining phonic elements but, if he does not, the same device can be used in subsequent lessons as necessary.
4. Then move to Exercise 2A. Pointing to the letter *a* which heads the list of words in this Exercise, say:

'What is this letter?' Reward a correct response (ă) by saying 'Very good!'

5. Follow an incorrect response or a hesitation by *immediately* supplying the correct answer.
4. Then say: 'The rest of these words have this letter in them. See, here is the word *at*.' Point to, and say, the first word in the list. Ask your child to repeat this word: he is bound to get it right, but reward him nonetheless.
7. Now go on to the second word (*am*), point to it and say: 'Now, what do you think *this* word is?' Reward a correct reply and supply the correct answer in the event of a non-response or an incorrect reply.
8. Repeat this for the remaining two words (*as* and *an*).
9. Return to the beginning of the list and work through it a second and a third time (*even if your child gets every word right on the first or second run through*).
10. Repeat the whole procedure on subsequent days, if necessary, until your child makes three errorless runs on one day.

YOU CAN NOW PRESENT EXERCISE 2

AND, IMMEDIATELY AFTERWARDS, EXERCISE 2A

Exercises 2 and 2A

2

1. a + t → at
2. a + m → am
3. a + s → as
4. a + n → an

2A

a

5. at
6. am
7. as
8. an

Step 3

Short-i: two-letter words

Theory

There are no useful two-letter words (as far as this course is concerned) beginning with short-*e*, and so in this lesson we proceed to the next short vowel sound, namely short-*i*. There are four two-letter words using short-*i* (the sound in *bit*, not the longer sound that occurs in *bite*). These four words all use *i* before a consonant; there are no two-letter words in which *i* follows a consonant.

The purpose of the Exercise

The two-letter short-*i* words occur frequently: they are *if*, *in*, *is* and *it*, and they are listed in this order in Exercise 3.

Instructions for the Exercise

1. Point to the letter *i* which heads the list of words and establish that the child can identify it.
2. As soon as you are satisfied that your child knows the letter, proceed to the four words of the Exercise. Say 'What word is this,' and reward a correct response. Supply the answer to an incorrect response, and move on to the next word.
3. Repeat the procedure three times and then on subsequent days if necessary, until your child makes three errorless runs on a single day.

YOU CAN NOW PRESENT EXERCISE 3

Exercise 3

i

1. if
2. in
3. is
4. it