

## Chapter 1

# The Wonder and Power of Reading

---

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Taking a look at the reading process and when to do it
  - ▶ Meeting letters, words, and the weird stuff
  - ▶ Reading as a family affair
  - ▶ Getting help
- 

**N**ot long ago, I lived in a house nestled in a quiet wooded hillside. Sometimes, I sat in the garden soaking up the great outdoors, but more often, I'd be gathering the clothes and kitchen implements my children had sneaked outside. My children lived in a fantasy world of wizards and spells inspired by the children's books they read every night. They found all sorts of unlikely capes and wands to help them enact their parts. As I gathered their broomsticks and bowls of potion, I often felt guilty. The man next door, retired with grown children of his own, liked to head outside, too; quietly, with coffee and newspapers. My kids' tremendous hullabaloo must shatter his peace, I thought. One day, my neighbor stood on his verandah and saw me. He beckoned me over. "I've been wanting to talk to you," he said. "I call your girls the princesses. They play such fantastic games! I love listening to them. They're so spirited and imaginative, you should be very proud." Yes, exactly, I thought! What a discerning neighbor! What fine kids! What a mom!

Reading is wonderful and powerful. It can turn little girls into princesses and back gardens into enchanted forests. When your child can read, he gets to experience and work through all sorts of situations, fantastic or real. He can live other lives and go to other places. He gets a broader view of life. And, as if this broad perspective weren't enough to convince you of the importance of teaching your child to read, there's the more mundane, but no less important, truth that good readers get better jobs.

## *Understanding the Process*

Here's where it all starts! I'm about to plunge you into the world of sounding-out, sight words, suffixes, and much more. You get masses of information and advice, but it's going to be fun. This chapter gives you a quick overview of everything that's coming up. Here, I squash this whole book down into a few pages, leaving out whopping chunks so that you have to read the rest of the book!

You're a good reader. You're reading this book, so you must be. You probably don't remember when or how you started to read. It was all so long ago and, as far as you know, it just happened. Well, that's where my vantage point comes in handy for you. I know that reading didn't just happen for you, at all. Even though I wasn't there, I know that you put together a whole collection of skills to reach that final end:

- ✔ You got the hang of sounding words out.
- ✔ You learned some words so well that you knew them by sight.
- ✔ When you looked through books, you used a lot of contextual cues to fill any gaps you had.
- ✔ You stuck with books because you were a successful reader and had fun reading.

So, now I've told you a bit of your life history. And better still, you're more ready to help your child learn to read than you were a couple of minutes ago. How's that? Well, now you know that to be a reader, your child has to acquire some reading skills and have fun doing it.

## *A lightning tour of sounding out*

Sounding out is the backbone of reading. You can sound out most text, so children have to learn how. You may think that sounding out (called *phonics* in schools) starts with "a is for *apple*," but that's not strictly true. In school, children *are* taught that "a is for *apple*," but before that, and largely at home, you've already started your child on phonemic learning. At home, when you sing songs and chant rhymes and poems, you're building *phonemic awareness*. You're showing your child that words and sentences are made of different sounds, and you're helping her hear those sounds. And that awareness is the most important precursor to reading. When your child identifies the small sounds in words and sentences, she's wired up to attach those sounds to letters later on. Great, isn't it? All this time, when you've been talking, singing, and rhyming, you've been your child's first, and perhaps most important, reading teacher.



If you play the sounding-out version of “I Spy with My Little Eye” with your child, give yourself a pat on the back. By saying things like, “I spy with my little eye something beginning with *muh*,” you’re focusing your child’s attention on sounds. I rank this activity as the number one game for helping your child with phonemic awareness. Check out Chapter 3 for more on phonics.

## *A peep at sight words*

In this book, I also give you a quick overview of how your child gets to know some words by sight. A few years ago, learning words by sight meant using a “look and say” method. Parents or teachers showed kids flashcards and, as long as the children saw the flashcards often enough, they were expected to remember those cards. But it turned out that the “look and say” method wasn’t as great as people had thought. In fact, it wasn’t very effective at all. Kids couldn’t remember dozens of words only by the way they looked. None of us can remember large amounts of information unless we have some help. We need little memory joggers, and the information we’re trying to absorb must mean something to us, too. So, the sight words I talk about in this book aren’t “look and say” words, they’re words you get to know by sounding out and using contextual cues until you have instant recognition of them. I go into detail about sight words, and give you some fun activities to play with your child, in Chapter 11.



Sight words occur so often in any text that your child has to get to know them by sight. Otherwise, he’s constantly stopping and starting when he reads and doesn’t understand a thing he’s reading. Sight words are words like *they* and *were*. They’re all over the place, so you should introduce your child to them before you dive into any stories.

## *A word or two about contextual cues*

Readers use contextual cues all the time, at the same time as sounding out and getting to know sight words very well. The term *contextual cues* looks pretty imposing, but, in fact, it describes something so simple that you do it almost unconsciously. Using contextual cues to read means using pictures and the meaning of the text that you’ve read so far to figure out any words or bits of text that you don’t know. Your puzzle-solving brain does this process pretty instinctively. So, don’t be alarmed by the juicy term contextual cues — it just means reading around a thing, and hole-filling, which your brain naturally does.

## Getting the better of jargon

You're probably downright annoyed by most reading jargon. Words like *digraph* and *syntax* don't resemble any words used by average parents, yet teachers sometimes throw them into regular conversations. Well, just so you can keep your cool, unruffled image intact, here are a few nasty terms with the nastiness taken out of them:

- ✓ **Phonemic awareness:** *Phonemic awareness* is knowing the sounds in words. Before kids learn that letters represent sounds, they must first hear those sounds. Rhymes and songs help your child hear the different letter and word sounds. If you read "Humpty Dumpty" to your child, he hears that *Humpty* and *Dumpty* sound alike, as do *wall* and *fall*, and so do *men* and *again*. He hears that words aren't randomly put together but are made of units of sound.
- ✓ **Phonics:** After your child has had a lot of fun with blind mice and contrary Mary, it's time to show her that we represent the sounds we say with squiggles on paper, called letters. When you show her that single letters, and combinations of letters, represent sounds, you're using *phonics*. You may begin by showing your child the first letter (and sound) in his name and how other words start with the same letter, like *Paul*, *pen*, *paper*, and *picture*.
- ✓ **Sight words:** If you were to count the words in a typical piece of text, you'd find that the

same words, words like *they* and *were*, crop up again and again. In fact, those words appear so frequently that a group of 220 of them make up about 70 percent of all typical text. Because these words pop up all over the place, your child should know them by sight. They're *sight words*. In schools, you see lists of these words. They may also be called most frequent or most common words.

- ✓ **Decoding:** *Decoding* is breaking words up and reading one bit at a time. If your child were reading the word *letter*, he'd read it in two parts — *let* and *ter*.
- ✓ **Encoding:** *Encoding* is breaking words up and writing one bit at a time. With the word *letter*, your child would say the two parts (*let* and *ter*) to herself and then write them.
- ✓ **Grammar and Syntax:** These two terms mean much the same thing. *Grammar* and *syntax* are about knowing how sentences go together grammatically — knowing your *is* from your *are*; understanding how to use words in the right order; and getting tenses right. If you talk properly to your child, he gets the hang of most of this grammar and syntax stuff. That's why we parents are forever saying things like, "I *brought*, not I *brung*!"

I talk more about these terms throughout the rest of this book, but don't let that put you off!

## What next?

When a child starts to read, she needs to understand how to sound out, recognize common words by sight, and read around and between the lines. How can your child master these three things? You can help her practice

- ✓ Sounding out
- ✓ Getting to recognize sight words quickly
- ✓ Doing *guided reading* (meaning she reads, you guide)

You have all that you really need to know about the process, for now. If you want to know more about words like *grammar*, *comprehension*, and *decoding*, check out the nearby sidebar, “Getting the better of jargon.” But if you’ve had your fill of terms like phonemic awareness, move on to the next section, “Getting Excited about Reading.”

## Getting Excited about Reading

What’s exciting?

Rhymes, recipes, songs, jokes, stories, the Guinness Book of Records, comics, computer games, board games, puzzles, activity books, letter tiles and blocks, video tapes, cassette tapes, and themes. What do I mean by themes? I’m talking about themes like bugs, space, ghosts, fashion, fairies, dogs, cats, horses, battles, lizards, dinosaurs, engines, trains, cars, sports, pop culture, heroes, and television characters.

### Got your tapes?

This year, my family moved from California to Toronto. My husband and I weighed the pros and cons of taking a plane journey or a car trip. We really didn’t *want* to be locked in a car with our kids for several hot and tedious days, but we thought we should give them the geographical experience. So we plotted a route that took us through Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Canyon.

When we arrived at Yellowstone National Park, we came upon a *Closed* sign at the camping site.

Then, at the Grand Canyon, my kids declared that it was too hot. They took about twelve steps to take a peek over the edge then got back in the car. Our trip had all the makings of a disaster. But it wasn’t a disaster at all. Why? Because my (foresighted) husband had compiled a treasure chest of 25 CDs with raved-about children’s stories on them. We were all completely entranced for the entire two or three thousand miles and enjoyed stories together as a family that we would usually have left our kids to listen to alone.

Kids are interested in so many things that you can easily get them excited about reading. You can immerse your child in things she's interested in, and then you can either share them with her or be close by, enjoying your own great read. Anything and everything you do matters. But make choices to fit your life and be consistent. Set time aside every day for being a reading family. You don't have to read a book each day, if that's too much for your schedule, but maybe you could visit the library every week so that you always have books in your car. Maybe you could play tape stories before bed. And maybe you could make sure that you have a good book on your own bedside table.

## *Picking the Right Time to Start Reading*

Each child is unique. Some start reading earlier than others, some do it with more ease than others, and a few seem to do it early with hardly any help at all. You have to feel your way when it comes to picking the best time to introduce your child to sounding out and identifying words by sight. Even so, you shouldn't wait too long to begin. Most kids start to read around a general time, and here are some hard facts about when that is:

- ✓ Most children start to read between ages 5 and 7.
- ✓ Children make their best progress with reading in kindergarten and first grade.
- ✓ If your child hasn't started to read by age 7, you need to give him extra help.
- ✓ Some children start to read before age 5, but only some.

I often talk at schools. When I've finished giving my riveting presentation, I invite parents to ask me questions. I always get asked this question: "My child doesn't seem to understand the letters, what should I do?" When I ask the child's age, the parent usually tells me her child is 4 years old.

Parents of 4-year-olds get especially worried. If you're a parent of a 4-year-old (or younger), show your child the letters so that she's familiar with the way they look. Have her trace over the letters so that she gets a feel for writing them. Practice talking about the first sound in words and grouping words with the same sound together, like *box*, *bag*, and *butter*. Enjoy a lot of stories, rhymes, and songs. If your child does all the things I've just mentioned with ease, she's probably ready for you to start showing her how to blend letters together to make words. But don't rush her. If she loses interest along the way, take a rest. Instead of hurrying ahead, prepare fertile ground for starting again a few months down the track. Here's a list of easy things you can do:

- ✓ Play sound games like "Simon Says" and "I Spy with My Little Eye."

Simon Says is a listening game. You give your child instructions and she listens for the odd one out. She has to follow all instructions that start

with “Simon says” but *not* instructions that don’t start with “Simon says.” Say things like, “Simon says put your hands on your head; Simon says turn around once; Simon says rub your tummy; Scratch your knee.” If your child scratches her knee, you get to say “Ah ha! *Simon* didn’t say it!” All players stay in the game, even if they get caught out. And you speed up your instructions as players get better. For more fun, have kids who are caught out run once around the garden (or to a tree, door, or suchlike) and then rejoin the group.

- ✓ Sing songs.
- ✓ Chant rhymes.
- ✓ Read books (to her), and more books, and more books.
- ✓ Listen to tapes of songs and stories.
- ✓ Read alphabet books.
- ✓ Play with alphabet puzzles.
- ✓ Let her see you reading your own books, magazines, or newspapers.

## Making Friends with the Alphabet

Singing songs, chanting rhymes, and reading stories to your child probably seem like chicken feed to you. You take all that stuff in your stride. But you may not be so sure of how to introduce your child to the alphabet. Exactly what should you do? How can you make it sound like fun? Should you buy any of the thousands of “foolproof” products you see advertised?



In Chapters 3 and 4, you’re going to read a lot about the alphabet. For now, let me give you the secret of the alphabet, in a nutshell: Your child probably recognizes letters as being letters. He’s watched *Sesame Street*, has seen a lot of letters, and knows that they’re called letters. He can probably name some, too. But he probably hasn’t gotten the hang of the fact that letters represent the sounds we speak. This understanding of the alphabet really helps your child master reading.

Teach your child that letters are the written form of words by explaining it as I just have and by consistently using a letter’s sound, when you can. If you see the word *bread*, say something like, “That word is *bread*, and this letter is *buh* (pointing to the *b*). *Buh* starts *Brian* and *bacon*, too. Where else would you see it?” Chat like this for a while and then make a *b* poster.

A *b* poster is a poster full of things that start with the letter *b*. Start by buying a blank poster and then gather your materials. You can simply use markers, or you can add pictures cut out from magazines, too. Chat to your child about *buh* things (*belt*, *Ben*, *bench*, *black*, *bun*, *beans*, *breath*). Have him draw them. Help him write *b* at the top of the poster or next to every picture he draws. Add *borders* to make the poster look extra good and pin it on your wall.

To teach your child the alphabet, you need to

- ✓ Chat about rhymes. (“I put my *coat* on the *boat*,” “I saw a *pig* wearing a *wig*,” or “I can *dig* because I’m *big*.”)
- ✓ Point out everyday letters, like the first letter in street and shop signs, headlines in newspapers and magazines, and words in books.
- ✓ Play with magnetic letters, letter tiles, letter cards, or letters you’ve written individually on pieces of card. Say, “Find me *duh*, like in *David*, *Donna*, and *dentist*.”
- ✓ Take an interest in your child’s letter books, puzzles, and games.

You don’t need to buy elaborate learning materials because your child can understand letters, and enjoy the experience, with everyday chat and simple play.



If you do buy alphabet books, some are better than others. Funny ones with clear pictures are especially good, but kids like straight forward *apple*, *balloon*, *cat* type books, too. I love the book *Phonics 1: Alphabets* by Mandy Ross and Neal Layton. *Alphabets* uses funny rhyme and alliteration (“Molly has a monster on her mat”) and has cute-as-can-be illustrations. My favorite page reads, “Unwin has an umbrella bird in his underwear.” (The illustration, by the way, doesn’t have the hapless Unwin actually wearing the underwear at the time of the bird incident!)

## Building Words

Oh my golly, you’re going to be hearing a lot about building words! You’re going to get the complete lowdown on word building in this book, starting with single letters and building up to whole chunks of sound in Part I. In Part II, you get the knack of blending and, when you find words that don’t sound out easily, you get how-the-experts-do-it tips.

Word building begins with single letter sounds. You teach your child the sounds of the alphabet and are especially vigilant with the vowels. Every word has a vowel in it, so your child needs to get the hang of vowels. Vowels change their sound, too. They can have a short sound (like *a* in *hat*) or a long sound (like *a* in *hate*). You explain the short sound to your child first and, much later, you get into the long sounds.

*Blending* is when you glide one letter into another to end up sounding out a whole word. *Blends* are different, though. They’re special clusters of letters. Blends are made of two or three consonants that blend together. Blends are letters like *sl*, *st*, *cl*, *dr*, and *pl*. You can find out about both blending and blends in Chapter 5.



## *Suffixes, Silent Letters, and Other Stuff*

This heading may alarm you. You've already been through terms like phonemic awareness, and now here I am with suffixes, and it's only the first chapter! Don't panic! When you come to *suffixes* (or word endings) like *ed* and *ing*, you see that they're pretty consistent and well worth looking at. When does an end *e* get lopped off before adding a word ending? When does a last letter get doubled before adding an ending? What's the story with adding *s* or *es*? I explain all these little puzzles in Part IV, where I also help you sort out silent letters, too. I've crammed Part IV of this book with useful tips.

What do I mean by the other stuff in this section's heading? The other stuff that you find in this book includes stuff like soft sounds, syllables, and vowel+r sounds. I expect that you've never thought of it before, but when the letter *r* follows a vowel, the sound that you make isn't a simple combination of the two.

## *Reading with Your Child*

When you reach Part V of this book, which talks about reading books, it feels like you've walked through the uphill part of your journey and only have to put one foot in front of the other from here on. You don't have to put in any great effort, and you get a clear and lovely view. This book gives you all the tips you need to make reading fun. You see how to choose books wisely and read them to and with your child. I answer questions like, "How should I correct his mistakes?" And you get advice about establishing a fluid style of reading, rather than the stop-start style that puts so many kids off. I also have some recommended reading, too. I don't give you a thousand single titles, though. I have information on a few reliable book series that should keep you stocked for quite some time. And I don't ignore gender differences. I certainly don't tell you to select only girl books for a daughter or boy books for a son, but I let you know the titles that have higher appeal for each gender.

## *Mirror, mirror on the wall*

Before you begin on the chapters about reading, you should take a quick and honest look at your own reading behavior. Are you being a "Do as I Do" type or a "Do as I Say" type? Your child spends a lot of time copying what you do, and you can't get away from the fact that parents who read spawn children who read. To give your child her best chance, make time to read with her *and* show her that you're a reader, too. And, in case you think scanning the odd Web site counts, it doesn't. It's a start, but you should be introducing your child to varied, and frequent, reading experiences.

## *Choosing the right books*

In this book, you hear about two kinds of reading:

- ✓ The reading that you do with your child, where you read to him or you read together
- ✓ The reading that he does all by himself

When you read *with* your child, the world's your oyster. You can get right into award-winning fantasies; almanacs of the unusual, icky, or stupid; and nature books with photographs that leave you wondering how on earth the photographer got them. Enjoy books with your child and go wherever your child's interest takes you. If you're too exhausted at the end of the day to get enthusiastic about dung beetles or dinosaurs, share in the reading by simply hanging out with your child. Read your own newspaper or book while he looks at the Stegosaurus for the umpteenth time.

The reading that your child does by himself is different than the reading you do with him. When he's reading all by himself, his books obviously have to be easy ones. He wants to be able to read them with little or no help from you, and your guidance really counts here. To guide him, you help him select books, you spot new words before he gets frustrated by them, and you praise him. In this book, you read a lot about being supportive and encouraging, and I say a lot about the importance of giving your child choice and ownership of his activities.



You may find yourself taking too much of a lead role when you start introducing your child to reading. You get caught up in the fun of teaching (at least, I hope you do), and then you do a lot of preparing, talking, and instructing. Why wouldn't you? Being active and in control is fun. But, here's the rub — your child wants to be active and in control, too, so you're stealing all his fun! Keep this fact in mind if you want to be a great teacher.

By now, you're probably thinking that there must be more to it than that. My child can't read alone just because I help him select books and weed out the new words. True. The big, industrial-size nuts and bolts of reading are phonics, sight words, and guided reading. You can find out more about guided reading in Chapter 23.

## Where would I be without the library! (Catchy, huh?)

Yesterday, I was sitting in a café with my children. It was eerily quiet, so I grabbed a paper bag and wrote this sidebar. The reason it was quiet was that we'd just been to the library. One of my kids was engrossed in *Goosebumps* (which, I may add, lead to her creeping into my bed in the wee small hours), and the other was huddled over a teen magazine, not wanting me to see the *Problem Page* she was absorbed in. I wrote these words of wisdom on my paper bag.

I make at least one visit per week to our local library. I sign out books, magazines, comics, videos, and stories on tape. I have to. I'm not expecting the discipline fairy to drop in on my

kids any time soon, so I'm taking matters into my own hands. You see, my kids are rarely subdued when I tell them off; they're locked in a never ending competition over who gets more of everything, is best at everything, or should go first at everything; and they often erupt into fist fights. So I have a constant *situation* on my hands. I respond by surrounding my kids with goodies from the library. I get armfuls of stuff, and then we can temporarily appear like a nice, well-behaved family. But should you ever run into me when I'm not buckling under the weight of a few dozen books and have my kids in tow, back off! I'm a library member on the edge!

## When to Get Help

If you ever reach a time when you're worried, or maybe just vaguely uneasy, about how your child reads (or doesn't), Chapter 24 gives you both the comfort and information that may help you feel better. I've crammed the most important things you need to know about reading difficulties into this one straightforward chapter. You get practical advice, a glimpse at when and how most kids start to read, and pointers about where to look for extra help.

And you know that feeling of worrying over a problem and then getting immense relief when you get down to action? Well, this book cuts down your time between the worry and the action. It helps you plan a step by step response of bite-size pieces. And, in case you think you may skip this part of the book because your child's a high flyer, I should tell you that some of the information in Chapter 24 is useful to *all* parents. Every parent gets to experience the parent-teacher interviews. You can bet your life that at one parent-teacher interview in your school-parenting career, you may want to ask for help or register a complaint. Chapter 24 helps you be an effective advocate for your child, steering clear of the bull-at-a-gate or rambling whiner approaches.

