

## Are decodable books preferable to predictable books in helping children learn to read?

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### Statement of the problem

The use of predictable books has been a dominant feature of early reading instruction. A developing focus on synthetic phonics, however, has led to curriculum changes which now require children to read both predictable and decodable texts.

While decodable texts align with a code-based model of reading, predictable texts align with a whole language approach which uses meaning to drive the word recognition process. The strategies designed to be used with predictable texts take children's attention away from words and the sound structure of language.

### Proposed solution/intervention

A mismatch currently exists between phonics instruction and the books provided for children to practise their developing alphabetic knowledge and skills. Children require access to decodable books that help them move from sounding out each word letter by letter, to recognising an increasing number of words by sight.

### The theoretical rationale

In an alphabetic writing system such as English, the best way to ensure proficiency in decoding skills is first to systematically teach children how to translate the symbols that represent the written code into sound. This should be done explicitly, in isolation and free of context. (Language comprehension skills on the other hand require context and are best developed by exposing children to rich language experiences and shared storybook reading.)

Decodable books support a phonics or code-based approach to reading where letter sound correspondences are initially taught in isolation. The subsequent employment of decodable books allows children to practise and generalise these skills in text reading.

### What does the research say?

Studies show that beginning readers benefit from texts that support the development of word recognition as a primary strategy. The available evidence provides strong support for the role of decodable books in early reading. When children read decodable books they are more likely to read familiar and unknown words more accurately and with less support.

Decodable books have been found to be more effective when the phonics program employed in the classroom is matched closely to the letter-sound correspondences that feature in the book. A high 'lesson to text' match ensures that only the phonic skills known to the student are included in the material being read, thus enabling children to 'self-teach' the phonic code, leading to automatic and fluent word recognition skills. Older low progress readers similarly benefit from reading decodable text.

### Conclusion

Decodable books help children to apply the alphabetic code when reading and to generalise their knowledge of letter sound correspondences. They are recommended for children in the first two years of school, and for older low progress readers.

### Key references

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