

Teach a Child to Read with Children's Books
By Mark B. Thogmartin

Book review by Ruth Beechick

I often hear parents say, "My child can read but he can't comprehend." Since reading *is* comprehending the printed words, something is very wrong with this statement. I decided that the error is in these parents' definition of reading. They seem to think that reading consists of sounding out words. Their child can sound out words, so they say he can read.

Homeschoolers are more prone to this view than the rest of the world because many advertisements and writings directed to them promote phonics heavily. That sounds reasonable to an adult mind. If we are going to teach reading, the view says, let's start with the smallest particles—the letters and their sounds and rules and linguistic vocabulary of phonemes, consonants, and so forth. Then we can move up to syllables and to words. And when the child knows enough words he can begin to read. This could be called the bottom-up system.

This wonderful book by Mark Thogmartinⁱ explains a top-down system in which the child begins by reading real books. These are more interesting than workbooks and certainly more interesting than phonics drill. But they have within them all the same phonics sounds and sight words that the bottom-up lessons would teach. Thogmartin does not neglect phonics; he integrates it with real reading rather than teaching it in a vacuum. Through books, then, children get the best of both worlds—enjoyment of stories and reading skills, too.

Thogmartin suggests "predictable books." Some of these are repetitious like *Brown Bear, What Do You See*.ⁱⁱ

Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see?
I see a redbird looking at me.

Redbird, redbird, what do you see?
I see a yellow duck looking at me.

Others are cumulative like *Old MacDonald Had a Farm*. Some have elements of rhyme and rhythm or use familiar sequences such as numbers or days of the week.

On Monday he ate through one apple.
But he was still hungry.

On Tuesday he ate through two pears,
but he was still hungry.ⁱⁱⁱ

This predictability is key, according to Thogmartin. In *Brown Bear*, a child could read the next two lines all except for the new creature. A major reading strategy is to predict what may come next. This is what keeps you reading page after page of a novel. By predicting meaning, the child can tell that the next page will name a new

creature looking at the yellow duck. The first letter or other phonics element he knows may help him figure out what creature. The picture on the page will help too. It is legal to use pictures. A good reading strategy is to keep an ongoing “movie” in our heads of what we are reading, and picture books introduce children to that strategy. Phonics, meaning, and pictures—all are legal cues. Meaning is the main one. If phonics causes a child to say *house* instead of *horse* but house does not fit the meaning, the child needs to stop and try to figure out what is wrong. Or if he says *read* with long *e* sound when it should be short *e*, only meaning will help him correct it.

Try reading something that is difficult for you and see what cues you use to figure out unknown words. In a geology report I see the word *aeromagnetic* and I don’t bother to sound it out syllable by syllable. Sounds do not give the meaning anyway. I see two parts, the second a familiar word and the first looks like the British spelling in aeroplane. The British connection is confirmed later in the sentence where it uses kilometers instead of miles. So I suspect that this is a way to use magnetic instruments from the air to study a geologic formation. That meaning fits what I am reading so I can continue without running to the dictionary. Children, likewise, should learn to use known parts or any cues that help to get the proper meaning.

Thogmartin explains that parents should begin with “whole reading” of predictable books by reading to children and then gradually move into more formal lessons where children do most of the reading. In lessons, the general procedure is to begin by reading familiar books in the child’s basket of books. Review yesterday’s book. Then use a new book for the day. First, introduce the new book by looking through it with the child. Look at the pictures. Talk about the story using its own words as much as possible. If it says they *went* to the park and *went* to the zoo, then don’t ask “Where did they *go*?” Then help the child read the book using any of the skills he has learned so far.

There are numerous teaching tips in this book, more than you can use in one lesson and maybe more than you will ever use. One idea is for the child to point to each word as he reads, not so as to sound out What...do...you...see, but more rapidly so as to show he understands the one-to-one correspondence of each printed word to each spoken word. You can sometimes read with a child. If he reads word by word, you can model a smooth expressive reading and then have him reread the sentence. Another tip is to wait long enough for the child to try the strategies he knows and not jump in too quickly to tell him a word. When you do help, try reminding him to look at the first letter or a known part of the word or other cue. Good phonics information is included in this book, pointing out what generalizations (not rules) are the most useful to teach. This top-down system does not have an engineered sequence for learning sounds or other bits of reading. You teach them as a child meets them. All the sounds and words are in interesting stories. Far better to learn them there than in boring workbooks and drills.

Among things *not* to do, is not to panic when a child reverses *p*, *q*, *b*, or *d*. Instead, show how lower case *b* is part of capital *B*. Or teach the word *bed* as a mnemonic. Do not use the words *big* and *little*, but use *upper case* and *lower case*. Some lower case letters are as big as the capitals. Do not interrupt a story with teachings so long that the story gets lost. Keep your teachings short. If a child misses more than one word in ten, the book is too hard for him.

Thogmartin points out that tests like the California Achievement Test are geared to children who are learning the bits and pieces of reading and have practiced filling out workbook blanks. So he found a test of whole reading and the children scored higher. Someone in your homeschool group who has access to a graded series of readers (not A Beka or ACE) can make a test. Choose selections from each level of reader, shorter on the lower levels, possibly up to one hundred words at higher levels. For easy arithmetic try to arrange round numbers of words—forty, fifty, and so on. To test a child, start where you know it is easy for him, and have him read aloud each selection in order. Stop when he misses more than ten percent of words in two selections—for instance, if he misses more than four words in a forty-word selection. The highest level where he achieved ninety percent is his reading level.

Thogmartin's lessons add writing. He has the child write a sentence about the story or perhaps a sentence that he wants to write. This gives further opportunity to teach about letters and sounds, and it integrates reading and writing.

After several chapters of good teaching ideas, the book moves on to record keeping, and this is where I part company with the system. I could never keep records of each sound and each skill that a child has learned, or even a list of the books read and the days they were read. If a child does not learn or remember a particular item, I assume it will come up again and I will get more chances to teach and review it. That is easier than searching my records to see what to teach.

When my first child was learning to talk I thought that if this toddler was going to learn English language in two years I surely could learn Russian in that time. All I had to do was write down each new word he spoke each day, then add those to my Russian list and learn them, but this very soon became overwhelming. By the natural home method toddlers learn to speak thousands of words per year. The natural reading method also reaches a point where we cannot keep up with what words a child has learned, let alone what strategies he uses in each case. I might at times use a checklist of letters or sounds to decide on something specific to teach or to see how a child has progressed during a semester or to impress a year-end evaluator. But as part of my day-by-day teaching, I could never keep it up. If you can, your year-end evaluator will be impressed.

In the appendix is a long list of children's books to use, but Thogmartin does not insist you stick with his list. Use whatever you have available at home or in libraries. He points out that you can buy more than thirty books for the price of an expensive phonics kit. Children who do phonics games and drills for reading class think that's

what reading is. Those who do workbooks think that's what reading is. And both get boring after a time. But children who read interesting stories think that's what reading is—right from the beginning. If your child is one of these, you will never end up saying, "My child can read but he can't comprehend."

Biographical Information

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Dr. Ruth Beechick has taught hundreds of people to read, all ages, and many methods, and she is happy to see a commonsense book like Thogmartin's directed to homeschoolers. Her own newest book is World History Made Simple: Matching History with the Bible (www.HomeschoolingBooks.com or 1-800-421-6645).

ⁱ *Teach a Child to Read with Children's Books*, by Mark B. Thogmartin, 1996 (EDINFO Press).

ⁱⁱ *Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by Bill Martin, Jr., 1967 (Henry Holt & Co.).

ⁱⁱⁱ From *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle, 1969 (Philomel Books).