

Tutoring

Ruth Beechick

“My son is a poor reader and speller for his age. He can’t figure out a word like rugged.”

“Well, if he doesn’t know enough basic phonics yet, you can get a book that teaches phonics.”

“But those look so babyish for a kid his age. I can’t ask him to do that.”

“You have two choices. Either you give him a primary book, or you tutor him yourself.”

First a word about the primary book. If a child complains, tell him that if it’s a little kid’s book, then it should be easy for him; he can work through it fast. Instead of worrying so much about the child’s feelings and self-image, worry more about his character and work ethic. He can do what he has to do to learn the phonics, and that helps his self-image in the long run, anyway.

That said, the tutoring choice is more efficient than the book choice. You work on one detail that you see a child needs, and another detail tomorrow. This seems slow at first, and you worry about “gaps,” but a book might take awhile to get to what he needs, if it happens to get there at all.

For the word *rugged*, as a tutor you can frame the *rug* part or write it on paper. If the child can’t read that, tell him the word. Then help him list a few words with the same pattern: bug, dug, hug, and so on. Write them one under the other so the pattern is obvious. Have him read down the list. And back up the list. Read it again the next day, and don’t show frustration if you have to teach the same sounds again later. That’s normal. Children need several contacts with something to learn it well.

If the child needs to learn that *u* sound, or even the consonants, then work at individual letter sounds each day as you find others he does not know.

If *rug* is not a problem, then the *ed* ending is. Just tell how we pronounce that. Then write *end*, *start*, *need*, and other one-syllable words the child knows. Have him read each word and then add *ed* and read again. Read down the list and up the list. Review tomorrow.

While you were thinking up words for that *ed* list, you no doubt came to words where *ed* is pronounced *t* (or *d*). Proceed next to teach this sound. Start by reading the root word, as before, and then add the ending. Here are a few: look, cook, rake, kick, pick. Children know from speech how to pronounce the words. Now in print they need to recognize the ending.

The boy who couldn't read *rugged* also couldn't read *stagger*. So another tutoring topic is the *er* ending. He could probably learn that quickly with words he already knows, like father, mother, sister, brother. By the way, these two words likely were not in the boy's speaking vocabulary, or he may have figured them out without having to sound them letter by letter.

You get the tutoring idea. When you find a detail the child does not know, teach it. That is faster than a book that goes through a lot of items whether or not the child needs each one. You do not need a book to eliminate "gaps." Gaps are exactly what you work on each time the child bumps into a word he cannot read. And the happy secret is that you (or a book) do not have to teach absolutely everything, because as a child learns letter sounds, word endings, and other details, his mind goes to work and he figures out more and more problems for himself.

With some words, like *people*, you will not be able to come up with a family of words in the same pattern. And there is no point in teaching a rule to apply. Just teach the word. That's the way English is.

The tutoring method is more efficient partly because you teach just the items a child needs, whereas a book goes through somebody else's selection of items. Moreover, in tutoring you often teach at just the time a child needs some information. You teach in the context of his reading or other learning, whereas a book of skills teaches in isolation from the child's other learning, and he may or may not make the necessary connections later when he needs to use a rule or some item he learned once from a book.

Apply the same principles to arithmetic. Have the child explain to you each step he takes, beginning with copying the problem on paper. When he gets stuck or does something wrong, show him the right way and, when possible, explain why that way works. Continue problem by problem until the child can proceed on his own.

Story problems are more complex. Ask questions that require the student to state the problem or parts of it in his own words. Sometimes help him draw a line to show how far a car traveled, or draw the number of cookies and cover the ones somebody ate. Or use real coins and act out money problems.

A couple of problems tackled in such a thorough way is an excellent lesson for the day. It teaches clear thinking and the accuracy necessary in arithmetic. And it teaches one or more specific skills that the child lacked.

With content subjects like history, conversation is one of the simplest—and best—methods of tutoring. After reading about Washington's victory at Yorktown, you might say, "Wow! What clever strategy he used!" This can open a conversation where you and the child discuss various strategies you just read about—using three different routes for the troops so Cornwallis would not suspect an attack, raiding the

British in New York to keep them from helping Cornwallis, blocking the bay to prevent escape by sea.

That is, instead of asking test-like questions to see if the child listened or understood, you open up a conversation and you add information as needed during the conversation. The strategy topic can lead to other thinking, such as comparing it with other war stories or wondering how Washington knew the land so well as to put the plan together. Conversation reinforces the learning, making it stronger than just the reading alone.

All kinds of one-on-one tutoring is strong learning and efficient teaching. It doesn't waste time on unnecessary skills or topics as might happen to the child in a classroom. This is a major reason that homeschooled children do so well academically.

Biographical Information

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Dr. Ruth Beechick is a lifelong educator who now writes mostly for homeschoolers, whom she sees as bright lights in these days before Christ returns. Her new book is *A Biblical Home Education*.