



Speech-Language and Reading - Connections Demystified

By Linda Balsiger, M.S., CCC-SLP

What do speech, language, and reading have in common? A lot! Spoken language is a symbol based system, where words are symbols used to represent meaning. Reading, writing, and spelling are simply more advanced forms of language that use the same symbolic systems in written form. Children with language or learning disorders, and children with visual symbol processing weaknesses, often struggle to acquire the basic skills needed to achieve success with these more advanced language forms.

Basic reading readiness begins in pre-school and kindergarten. The first important skill is an awareness of the speech sounds in words, otherwise known as **phonological awareness**. Early phonological awareness skills include the ability to match rhyming words, identify initial or final sounds of words, blend sounds to form real or nonsense words, and segment words into their distinct sounds.

The next step after phonological awareness is **phonemic awareness** – or the learning of sound-letter associations. Children must learn to associate speech-sounds with written letters – or abstract symbols on paper that hold no meaning by themselves! Children with weaknesses in speech-language or symbolic visual processing often have difficulty with the acquisition of these critical foundational reading skills.

Once basic pre-reading skills are acquired, children can start to “sound out” words and learn to “decode” or read simple words. After that, they begin learning common word patterns, such as letter combinations that change sounds. For example, a final ‘e’ changes the vowel sound in a one syllable word: *cut/cute, bit/bite, can/cane, fin/fine*. However, for many children, their brains are not “wired” to easily recognize these linguistic patterns, even when they are taught in school.

Over time, high frequency words do not have to be “sounded out” each time they are read, but instead are recognized as “whole” words. However, the English language is vast. No child can become a proficient reader by relying on “whole word” or sight word vocabulary alone. They need to extend their basic skills to be able to decode novel words they have never seen. This requires that they learn to recognize more advanced word parts and patterns, and break multi-syllabic words down into their parts.

By third or fourth grade, children are no longer learning to read, but are “reading to learn”. Many children with language or learning weaknesses



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begin to fall behind in all subjects, even when they appear to have acquired basic reading skills. They may experience problems with **reading fluency** (speed and accuracy) or **reading comprehension**. Language plays a significant role in each of these areas. For example, children with word-retrieval breakdowns, who often speak with frequent revisions and reformulations, may have poor reading fluency. This is because reading requires constant rapid linguistic retrieval - of sound-letter associations, word frames, and word meanings. Likewise, children with spoken language processing weaknesses often experience difficulties with reading comprehension, because they face the same challenges in processing the grammar and syntax of written language.

For many children, reading comes naturally and effortlessly. For others, the road to reading is filled with frustration. Oftentimes, children who struggle with reading are brilliant in more "right-brained" activities (e.g. art, engineering, visual-spatial relationships), but their self-esteem may suffer when they see their peers easily acquiring new skills that they find difficult. Timely intervention that builds self-confidence is crucial to prevent them from becoming discouraged learners. With individualized treatment tailored to build upon the unique strengths in their learning profile, these children can also acquire the skills they need for academic success.

Linda Balsiger, M.S., CCC-SLP is a literacy and learning specialist and certified state-licensed speech-language pathologist. She is the owner of Bend Language & Learning, a private practice dedicated to the treatment of dyslexia and other language-based learning disabilities (www.bendlanguageandlearning.com).

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