

# Using the Science of Reading (SoR) to Support Beginning Readers

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Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) was designed to help libraries and caregivers become partners in early literacy development. The initiative was informed by scientific research on the critical skills underlying early reading and writing along with best practices for supporting their development. ECRR was introduced in 2004, revised in 2011, and subsequently evaluated and revised in 2017.<sup>1</sup>

Research regarding reading continues to advance, especially as it pertains to beginning and fluent readers and the role context and culture play in learning.<sup>2</sup> Since children's librarians are continually encouraged to focus their efforts on getting children ready to read, learning about the science of reading helps us see the bigger picture.

The science of reading (SoR) is a robust body of research, comprising many sciences, that explains the various processes involved in learning to read and understand written language.<sup>3</sup> It's not a settled science because researchers continue to test the veracity and validity of their work.<sup>4</sup> The SoR is not a new strategy, program, or silver bullet for developing readers, although it is currently portrayed this way in social media and popular press. The SoR involves a complex orchestration of skills and interactions,<sup>5</sup> but policymakers in many state departments of education are not taking into account the entire science when making decisions. Instead, their focus is on the simple view of reading (SVR), even though many theoretical models and processes of reading exist<sup>6</sup> and continue to emerge.<sup>7</sup> The narrative around SoR has become extremely polarizing.<sup>8</sup> This can be attributed, in part, to a lack of understanding, which is why this column is addressing it.

The SVR defines reading comprehension as the combination of two equally important components<sup>9</sup>: decoding (word recognition) and listening comprehension (language comprehension). Although the researchers who coined the term acknowledge the complexity of the reading process, their simple formula does not unpack these components, address how they overlap, or offer instructional guidance.<sup>10</sup> This is concerning since how we define reading prioritizes and shapes what gets taught and the products that get endorsed.

When decoding is discussed, in the SVR, phonological awareness, the alphabetic principle, and sight word recognition are brought to the forefront. When listening comprehension is mentioned, vocabulary is often the only construct acknowledged in this domain, which is problematic since there is research evidence highlighting the significance of background knowledge, culture/content knowledge, verbal reasoning, language structure, and perspective-taking in the reading process.<sup>11</sup>

Most teachers and researchers agree that the reading process is more complex; it is broader than phonological awareness, alphabetic, and word reading. They also agree that more rigorous research needs to examine instructional practices in classrooms and that one size does not fit all when it comes to students, schools, or districts. And while libraries are not focused on the teaching of reading, they can certainly stay abreast of the latest research and continue offering access to a diverse body of texts and engaging experiences.

## Some Newer Beginning Reader Series

Spot by Amicus Publishing  
 Word Families by Amicus Publishing  
 The Jack books by Mac Barnett and Greg Pizzoli  
 Read and Rhyme by Bearport Publishing  
 Stairway Decodables by Capstone  
 Little Blossom Stories by Cherry Blossom Press  
 I Can Read! / Fiona the Hippo books by Richard Cowdrey  
 I Spy with My Little Eye by Crabtree Publishing  
 What Can I Bee? by Crabtree Publishing  
 Super Readers by DK  
 I Like to Read® Comics by Holiday House  
 Pull Ahead Readers by Lerner  
 Camila by Alicia Salazar  
 Ready-to-Read Graphics by Simon & Schuster

\*Thank you to Boone County (KY) Public Library staff for their input.

## Readers' Advisory for Beginning Readers

Motivated readers are engaged readers<sup>12</sup> and although there are many titles to choose from, our children and families need quality readers' advisory. While decodable texts composed of controlled vocabulary and phonetic patterns allow students to practice skills and build confidence and motivation, they have not been shown to have a significant impact on reading achievement alone; children who experience both decodable and non-decodable texts fare better on reading outcomes.<sup>13</sup> The key is exposing children to books of interest to them, so they want to learn to read, and giving them practice reading no matter how easy it will or not be to decode the text.

The volume of texts that engage and inspire children continues to grow. While the ALA Youth Media Awards are consulted for the best and most notable, librarians spend countless hours curating book lists to meet library customers' needs and wants. This work must continue. It is quite possible for early readers to develop literacy skills when they are exposed to picture books and

nonfiction, even if they cannot read all of the words. Training in ECRR made it easier for us to select books to support specific skills and practices in storytimes and encouraged us to generate lists of engaging texts to help meet certain learning objectives. Lists can be broad like Books with Rhythm or Rhyme, or more narrow and matched to specific skills like, Books with Alliteration or Books Supporting Syllable Segmentation. Assemble your lists by listening to caregiver and educator requests and matching those needs to quality texts.

The need for “early,” “easy,” or “just-right” books has been long established. Choosing a beginning reader book can be overwhelming and it is possible to have vastly different experiences across branches and library systems. Leveling systems (e.g., Lexile, Accelerated Reader, Fountas & Pinnell, etc.) and categories assigned by publishers vary greatly and can have unintended consequences such as labeling children, restricting children's access to information and enjoyable books, and causing children to become frustrated when there aren't enough decodable words. They can be useful tools when they are clear and consistent and staff can explain their nuances.

Many libraries use color coding schemes describing book characteristics in simple terms. The earliest level readers might be described as having large print, few words, and large pictures, but the format can vary within a level; some texts may be composed of only high frequency words, others may feature word families, some are meant to be read with an adult, etc. The decodability of these readers varies tremendously and can present a challenge to a child with a limited understanding of *orthography*, or how words work. Chicago Public Library has begun addressing this issue by classifying a subset of their beginning readers as decodable, and categorizing them according to word features (e.g., CVC words, blends and digraphs, r-controlled vowels, etc.). As long as library users are educated about the classification systems at their disposal along with their distinctions, they can better support their learners' needs.

Helping children become readers begins with nurturing relationships—parents, siblings, extended family, teachers, and friends. They need to experience a wide variety of texts, have multiple opportunities to read and write, and be surrounded by people supporting their efforts. Moreover, they need to be shown how enjoyable these opportunities can be. &

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## Children and Libraries Is Evolving! Benefits of a Digital-Only Journal

ALSC is excited to announce a dynamic shift for *Children and Libraries*. Beginning with volume 23, no. 1, Spring 2025, the journal will transition to a fully digital format, offering a wealth of benefits for readers. **The final issue to be mailed out as print will be Winter 2024, volume 22, no. 4.**

The digital platform, Open Journal Systems (OJS), which has hosted *Children and Libraries* since 2014, will continue to offer current and past issues in PDF and HTML formats that offer significant advantages:

- **Enhanced Accessibility:** Content can be accessed anytime, anywhere, on any device. And, articles can be downloaded for offline reading and sharing with colleagues. No more postal delivery delays.
- **Search Functionality:** Online search tools will help readers quickly locate specific topics, authors, or keywords across the journal archive.
- **Interactive Reading:** Digital formatting takes readers beyond the static page, allowing readers to follow article links out to further reading and resources, enriching the experience.
- **Sustainability:** Digital delivery reduces ALSC's environmental footprint, which aligns with the association's commitment to responsible practices and reflects the evolving preferences of many readers.

This evolution will allow the association to do more. The cost savings realized from digital-only delivery will support other vital and beneficial ALSC resources, events, and benefits. (Think toolkits, online learning, etc.)

### More Details to Come

Later this year, ALSC will provide a comprehensive, user-friendly guide to accessing the digital platform, including FAQs and demos of the OJS platform, to help ensure a smooth transition. The guide will be available on the website.

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