

learning links



Helping Kids Learn

www.learninglinks.org.au

Information Sheet 43

The Reading Wars and Collateral Damage: Children with Speech and Language Difficulties

In May 2006 we were privileged to welcome Dr Roslyn Neilson* to our Annual General Meeting. Dr Neilson presented an address on The Reading Wars and Collateral Damage: Children with Speech and Language Difficulties to our staff, members, parents, teachers and health professionals. With Dr Neilson's kind permission, we have reprinted her address.

It is an honour to be given the chance to speak to the Learning Links' Annual General Meeting and I thank you very much for the invitation.

I have worked alongside Learning Links for many years, and I have the greatest respect for the organisation in general, and in particular for the way their team cares for children with learning difficulties. I hope that what I say tonight will do justice to the excellent work carried out by the Learning Links' teachers and therapists.

I would like to talk to you about reading and reading difficulties.

My perspective is that of a Speech-Language Pathologist (we refer to ourselves as SLPs for short). Why is an SLP involved with reading?

Many children who come through Speech Therapy clinics as preschoolers have later difficulties with literacy (Bernhardt & Major, 2005; Bishop & Adams, 1990; Catts, Fey, Tomblin & Zhang, 2002; Larrivee & Catts, 1999; Stackhouse & Wells, 1997).

As SLPs we have seen the early warning signs of literacy problems all too often. At risk are those preschoolers who develop language late and show persistent grammatical immaturities and those who find it difficult to tell stories coherently (Bird, Bishop & Freeman, 1995).

Also at risk are those children who have pronunciation difficulties that persist beyond the age at which they start school (Nathan, Stackhouse, Goulandris & Snowling, 2004).

Recent research includes another at-risk group: children who may have only a few errors on individual sounds, but who have generally imprecise speech, including particular difficulty with polysyllabic words and who seem to find it difficult to retrieve the precise words they want to use in running speech (Elbro, 1999; Leita, Hogben & Fletcher, 1997).

These children are often referred back to the SLP clinic after they have started school with the question: Is Johnny having trouble with reading because he is not saying his sounds clearly? And the answer is: well, the problem is more complicated than that.

SLPs very often find that these children also have a problem with phonemic awareness – that is, the ability to rehearse a word in their mind and locate and identify all the separate sounds in it (Gillon, 2003).

This is a listening skill, but it is, as I'll try to show, intimately associated with reading and spelling.

There is another perspective that I bring to this address tonight: the hindsight afforded to me in the current NSW educational context, where Reading Recovery is the official remedial program available to children in the school system.

It is only available in Year 1 – other Support Teachers do work with older children – but the main funding in the system is often directed towards Reading Recovery. The program is, indeed, sometimes very helpful – but only sometimes (Centre, 2005).

Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.

We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

Early Childhood Services for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without special needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood teaching and therapy.

School Age Services for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group tuition and therapy.
- Occupational and speech therapy programs combining specialist education services and therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and the Reading for Life Program for children falling behind in their reading.

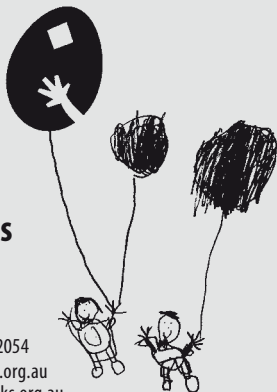
Family Services helping and supporting families and health professionals.

- Centre and home-based family counselling.
- Parenting Programs and groups for families.
- Case Management Services.

Professional Development for teachers and health professionals.

Presentations, workshops and advice on identifying and helping children with learning difficulties, learning disabilities and developmental delays.

Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Dee Why and Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, Victoria and New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.



Learning Links

Head Office

12-14 Pindari Road
Peakhurst NSW 2210
Tel: 9534 1710 Fax: 9584 2054
Email: mail@learninglinks.org.au
Website: www.learninglinks.org.au

Enquiries regarding this Information Sheet should be directed to Robyn Collins
Tel: (02) 9534 1710 Fax: (02) 9584 2054 Email: rcollins@learninglinks.org.au

© Learning Links 2006. The material in this publication cannot be reproduced without the written permission of Learning Links.

The majority of school-age children who come to my Speech Therapy clinic have failed Reading Recovery – that is, they have been ‘referred off’ unsuccessfully. If they have completed Reading Recovery successfully, they have not continued to make progress.

My presentation is probably going to generate disagreement from some of you in the audience. I would like to take a strong stand, however, because I feel that it is on behalf of children with speech and language difficulties that I’m speaking.

And, although estimates vary, these children form at least seven or eight percent of the school age population. (Tomblin, Records, Buckwalter, Zhang, Smith & O’Brien, 1997).

As the title of my presentation indicates, I’m going to be talking about the effects of the so-called Reading Wars.

I’m on safe grounds, I’m sure, if I assert at the outset that war is a bad thing.

War is bad because it makes us move towards extreme positions, dehumanising the enemy and believing that our side is entirely in the right. War is bad, too, because when we are fighting we are often too preoccupied to notice those innocent people caught up in the cross-fire – the ‘collateral damage’.

The Reading Wars involve the issue of how to teach reading in the early years of schooling. There has been a recent flare-up of hostilities, as I’m sure you’re all aware, stirred up by Brendan Nelson’s Review into the Teaching of Literacy at the end of 2005 (Dr Nelson was the Federal Minister for Education at the time).

This was billed in the media as a showdown between ‘Whole Language’ and ‘Phonics’. Last year’s flare-up, with all the polarisation it engendered, seemed to many of us like *deja vu* all over again and it is important to understand why we keep having these reading wars.

The English language

I’ve done some asking around in multicultural circles and I think it is generally true that English is the language most prone to reading wars – teachers in other languages don’t get as fierce. It is probably not the case that English teachers are by nature the most belligerent; I think it is much more likely that English tends to stir up war fever because the written code of English is inherently difficult to teach.

The English script uses an alphabetic principle: letters are mapped onto the sounds of words. The rules involving this letter-sound mapping are known as phonics – and in English, it is phonics that has been at the heart of all the Reading Wars.

The written code of English is difficult for many reasons. The writing system is multi-layered, with foreign spelling influences coming along with the words we have borrowed from so many other languages (compare the spelling of the /k/ sound in words like ‘khaki’, ‘boutique’ and ‘chorus’, with Indian, French and Greek features respectively).

In English, spelling is determined by meaning as well as by sound, so we get irregular words like ‘health’ coming from the word ‘heal’. We also use consistent spelling for features like the –ed past tense ending, regardless of how the words are pronounced, so that ‘walked’ is not spelled ‘walkt’.

English pronunciation has changed since our early Anglo-Saxon roots, and many of our most basic words are spelled oddly because they were originally pronounced differently (eg. ‘said’ and ‘night’).

We have a relatively large number of different vowel sounds in English (about twenty) and this makes for a very complicated system of mappings with only five classic ‘vowel’ letters plus the odd extra ring-in like Y, W, L and R.

English stress patterns, with large numbers of unstressed syllables, cause problems as well – we don’t pronounce the vowels in unstressed syllables clearly (eg. the middle vowel sounds in ‘crocodile’, ‘satellite’ and ‘definite’). Pronunciation is often determined by meaning, with no corresponding variations in spelling (eg. ‘wind’ gusts versus ‘wind’ the clock). The reasons go on and on.

So English phonics predisposes us to English Reading Wars and there is a long history of warriors who march under the banner of abandoning the attempt to teach phonics entirely.

There is also, however, a huge body of research evidence to show that, despite the inherent problems of phonics, children who are taught phonics systematically do better than children who are not (Adams, 1990; McCardle & Chhabra, 2004).

These findings have not, however, satisfied the very passionate anti-phonics camps, who simply claim that the research is invalid.

There have been at least two very different and very popular alternatives to phonics proposed in living memory. The older system is the 'Look and Say' or 'Whole Word' method, where children are taught to recognise words by sight, attending to their overall shape rather than sounding them out.

We still have this method alive and well in our classrooms, in the form of flash cards and wall charts for sight words.

Whole Language

But the newer and much more far-reaching alternative is the one that has taken over as the current combatant in the anti-phonics war: Whole Language.

Whole Language is a child of the Baby Boomers: the left-wing liberals who were, at least in the '70s and '80s, enthusiastic about freedom and self-expression in education.

Its basic assumption is that we recognise words by attending to the meaning of the text, working from the top down (Goodman, 1986). We don't read, they claim, by using phonics to sound out, working from the bottom up.

From this assumption it follows that reading must always involve meaningful texts and children must therefore start with whole 'authentic' books rather than with sounding-out lessons. This proposition has been very attractive to teachers (and to writers of children's books) because it does away with Dick, Jane and Spot and allows more interesting, language-rich books into the classroom (Hello Possum!).

Whole Language proponents also claim to prove that we really don't need to sound out words because we can read texts in which the internal letters in words are scrambled – we just need a little information about the first and last letters (I'll come back to this later).

The Whole Language Camp claims that phonics consists of boring, meaningless drills – eg. Mem Fox, who wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 2006: "Why give medicine to every child in a class when most of them aren't ill?" Phonics is acknowledged as a very imperfect back-up cueing system that may be used to verify our guesses about words, but it is not seen to be primarily involved in the reading process.

My characterisation of Whole Language may sound extreme, but it is important to realise what a profound difference the Whole Language movement has made to our day-to-day classroom teaching and to our system of remedial reading.

Walk into any Kindergarten classroom and you'll see the Big Book in pride of place – a book that children are taught to follow along with as the teacher reads. The actual words in children's early reading books are made guessable by means of using very repetitive, predictable texts and by providing illustrations.

Children are taught that the primary cue for reading is context: look at the picture and think of a word that makes sense. You are allowed to get your mouth in the right shape for the first letter if you can do this, but you are explicitly told not to sound words out beyond the first letter.

The poor beleaguered teachers at the chalk-face rightly claim that phonics does still exist in the post-Whole Language classroom. I'd like to argue, however, that it is a very poor cousin.

In schools where systematic phonics programs have not been adopted, children are taught one letter a week in Kindergarten, with one sound associated with it. It is assumed that children understand how to segment the sounds in words, so they know what you mean when you say 'P is for pig', and can also understand why there is a P in the words 'top' and 'spot'; phonemic awareness is quite taken for granted.

Children may choose to sound out words as they attempt spellings, but they are equally encouraged to copy words from wall charts, with no need to demonstrate that they understand why the words are spelled the way they are. And parents are told never to let children sound words out at home.

Reading without phonics

I'd like to give you a chance to try out the technique of reading 'without phonics'.

Here is the first paragraph from a children's book, *The Hobbit*, by J.R.R. Tolkien – you've seen *The Lord of the Rings*, so you know the context pretty well. I've given you the first sentence as it was written, and then I've mixed up the internal letters in all words longer than three letters. You always have the

first and last letters. Cover over the solution until you've had a good try.

In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a ntasy, drity, wet hloe, field wth edns of wmos and an ozoy selml, not yet a dry, brae, sdnay hloe with nnohtg in it to sit dwon on or to eat; it was a hbiobt-hloe, and taht manes cfmorot.

(Solution: In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat; it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.)

Now try it with not even the information coming from the scrambled internal letters you probably used when you tried to read the above sentences. In this next sentence in *The Hobbit* I've replaced all internal letters with x.

It hxd a pxxxxxxx rxxxx dxr lxxe
a pxxxxxe, pxxxxd gxxxn, wxxh a
sxxx yxxxxw bxxx kxxb in the exxt
mxxxxe.

(Solution: It had a perfectly round door like a porthole, painted green, with a shiny yellow brass knob in the exact middle.)

Notice what happened to your comprehension as you struggled to work out what the words in those sentences were, even when you had some information from the internal letters. Identifying the words is not, of course, the whole story in reading, but it is a necessary component that underlies reading comprehension.

I would like to argue that the Whole Language theorists are simply wrong when they claim we don't look at the whole word while reading. Firstly, eye movement studies show clearly that we do (Adams, 1990).

But more importantly, the Whole Language theorists have missed the point very seriously when they conceptualise how we learn to read words.

Sound-letter mapping

Learning to read words is, I suggest, an amazing process of extracting details about patterns (Adams, 1990).



As we identify words, competent readers map the sequence of letters onto the sequence of sounds we hear in the word. In doing so we quickly develop a massive database of knowledge of how groups of letters sound.

In order to do this sound-letter mapping, of course, we need phonemic awareness – that is, the ability to think about the sequence of sounds in the word. We also need to have the instinct to disobey the Whole Language instructions, and to look at words beyond their first letter.

And indeed, there are some children – the brighter ones who have no language or phonemic awareness difficulties – who do this instinctively, thereby confirming the assertion made by Whole Language proponents that children can learn to read by being immersed in books, with no explicit teaching of the underlying code.

The knowledge of phonics that good readers develop may not be conscious, but that doesn't make it any less real. You just 'know' how to pronounce a non-word 'crabble', as opposed to 'crable', and you just 'know' how to pronounce 'cest', as opposed to 'cust', without necessarily being able to verbalise the rules you followed.

What you know is the pattern and you developed your knowledge of that pattern by understanding how the written code is related to the sounds in words. And this skill enables you to read not only the new words you encounter, but also a whole text of non-words, as in Lewis Carroll's wonderful poem Jabberwocky.

*Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

It is very important to realise that Reading Recovery, the remedial system I referred to earlier, is a child of Whole Language.

This is true to the extent that reading in Reading Recovery begins with whole books and word recognition is essentially divorced from phonics. Children practise reading books at their 'level' and as they do this they are taught a few specific strategies.

Making sense is the primary strategy and sounding out is discouraged while children are engaged with books. It is true that the book is put aside for a short portion of each session and

time is spent on 'making and breaking' words, but this is incidental rather than systematic phonics teaching and it does not provide enough of a boost to phonemic awareness to give the weaker children the underlying skills needed for learning to read independently (Centre, 2005).

The top-down Reading Recovery strategies are very stressful for children with language difficulties. The main cue is: 'Think of a word that makes sense' – and this is hard if you have weak vocabulary, or if you have word-retrieval difficulties. Another favoured cue, 'Think of a word that fits in the sentence', is difficult if you have a poor sense of sentence structure and verb endings.

Even the so-called 'graphophonic' cues, 'Does it look right?' and 'Does it sound right?' are problematic if you have poor phonemic awareness and aren't sure what the sounds in the word are.

Most importantly, the Reading Recovery emphasis on making meaning rather than decoding explicitly steers children away from doing what more competent learners do implicitly – that is, looking carefully at the words and absorbing the patterns. It is much easier to stare at the picture and hope that something will come to mind.

The children with language difficulties are the ones who are least likely to be good at absorbing patterns in the first place and they are the ones who are most in need of systemic instruction about how to do it. They need phonemic awareness and they need explicit phonics so that they can make sense of the spelling patterns of English.

My recommendations

I'm hardly being controversial in this.

Many schools I know have chosen not to abandon their Big Books but to use a systematic phonics program as well and to give it at least an equal place in the curriculum. Programs like Jolly Phonics and Letterland are proving very popular and effective and there are many other good smaller programs being used around the country.

Many schools are choosing to offer their teachers in-services on phonemic awareness and the teachers are adding phonemic awareness components to their day-to-day classroom activities.

Some universities are actually including components in their teacher training courses that go beyond Whole Language – but I suspect that this is the area where the mopping up after the latest Reading War skirmishes is happening most slowly.

As for the 'collateral damage' – those children who have been dropped into limbo by a Whole Language approach that did not help them – rehabilitation can be provided.

There is no quick fix: they are children with learning difficulties and they are likely to need ongoing support as they progress through school. Furthermore, their potential higher-level comprehension and vocabulary learning problems are not to be underestimated as they learn to crack the phonics code.

But, as a first step in rehabilitation, they will benefit hugely from phonemic awareness training and from explicit training in how to track the whole way through a word as they read it, mapping letters onto sounds.

Furthermore, if teachers are already using a 'Pause, Prompt and Praise' strategy as children are reading, they can easily adjust the 'prompt' component by encouraging children to look back over at least some of the words to do a quick sound-letter tracking exercise as they go.

I'll finish with just one quick example of the many games I use in my clinic to help children with reading difficulties. The game works at the word level rather than with whole texts, but it still involves comprehension and includes a language component.

I call it Piggy in the Middle. We start with the five short vowels, written in a column down the page. I know that four of these vowels are difficult, so we have cue pictures handy, along with the instruction: 'Get your mouth ready to say (eg. apple, egg, itchy, octopus, ugly) to check on the vowel sound.'

The child chooses one beginning consonant letter or digraph from a set I give them, and one ending letter or digraph. The child then systematically moves these beginning and end consonants down the column of five vowels, reading the consonant-vowel-consonant word or non-word made with the three components.



You can easily scaffold and model the process for the child as you go. If you get a real word you go forward two spaces on your Snakes and Ladders board, and if you get a nonsense word you go forward only one space. The word/non-word decision allows for a lot of vocabulary development in the course of the game.

Children leave this game, and others like it, with the satisfying sense that they have really been 'reading', even though they have not been grappling with whole books. And for a foot soldier like myself in the Reading Wars, this is a very satisfying experience.

**Dr Neilson is a clinical Speech Pathologist with a BA (Hons) in Psychology & English & a PhD in Reading. She has developed widely used tests of phonological awareness and was a member of the panel that provided the Speech Pathology Australia contribution to the 2005 Federal Government literacy teaching review. She lectures in Special Education at the University of Wollongong, provides teacher in-services, supervises students, works in schools with small groups of children with language-learning difficulties and sees clients in her private clinic.*

Sites referring to research on the importance of phonics teaching.

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/rosereview/finalreport/>
(search Rose Review)

<http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/publication/publication.cfm?id=45>
(search Louisa Moates) How spelling supports Reading

References

- Adams, M. J. (1990). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bernhardt, B. & Major, E. (2005). Speech, language and literacy skills 3 years later: a follow-up study of early phonological and metaphonological intervention. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 40, 1-28.
- Bird, J., Bishop, D.V.M. & Freeman, N.H. (1995). Phonological awareness and literacy development in children with expressive phonological impairments. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Research*, 38, 446-462.
- Bishop, D.V.M & Adams, C. (1990). A prospective study of the relationship between specific language impairment, phonological disorders, and reading retardation. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 21, 1027-1050.
- Catts, H.W., Fey, M.E., Tomblin, J.B. & Zhang, X. (2002). A longitudinal investigation of reading outcomes in children with language impairments. *Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research*, 45, 1142-1157. Centre, Y. (2005). *Beginning Reading*. NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Elbro, C. (1999). Dyslexia: core difficulties, variability and causes. In J.Oakhill, J. & R. Beard (Eds.). *Reading Development and the teaching of reading*. Oxford: Blackwell (pp. 131-156).
- Gillon, G. (2003). *Phonological Awareness*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Goodman, K. (1986). *What's whole in whole-language – a parent-teacher guide*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Larrivee, L.S. & Catts, H.W. (1999). Early reading achievement in children with expressive phonological disorders. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 8, 118-128.
- Leitao, S., Hogben, J. & Fletcher, J. (1997). Phonological processing skills in speech and language impaired children. *European Journal of Disorders of Communication*, 32, 91-113.
- McCardle, P. & Chhabra, V., (Eds.) (2004). *The voice of evidence in reading research*. Maryland: Paul H., Brookes Publishing.
- Nathan, L. Stackhouse, J., Goulandris, N. & Snowling, M.J. (2004). The development of early literacy skills among children with speech difficulties: A test of the "Critical Age Hypothesis." *Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research*, 47, 377-391.
- Stackhouse, J. & Wells, W. (1997). *Children's speech and literacy difficulties*. London: Whurr.
- Tomblin, J.B., Records, N.L., Buckwalter, P., Zhang, Xuyang, Smith, E. & O'Brien, M. (1997). Prevalence of Specific Language Impairment in Kindergarten Children. *Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research*, 40, 1245-1260.

learning links

www.learninglinks.org.au

Early Childhood Services
– all enquiries to Head Office

School Age Services
– contact your local branch

Family Services
– contact your local branch

All other enquiries
– Head Office

Head Office

12-14 Pindari Road
Peakhurst NSW 2210
Telephone: (02) 9534 1710
Preschool: (02) 9533 3283
Facsimile: (02) 9584 2054
Email: mail@learninglinks.org.au

Northern Suburbs Branch

2 Alfred Road
PO Box 634
Brookvale NSW 2100
Telephone: (02) 9907 4222
Facsimile: (02) 9907 4244
Email: nsb@learninglinks.org.au

Western Suburbs Branch

Unit 7/9 William Street
PO Box 1026
Fairfield NSW 1860 (2165)
Telephone: (02) 9754 2377
Facsimile: (02) 9755 9422
Email: wsb@learninglinks.org.au

Southern Suburbs Branch

10 Railway Parade
Penshurst NSW 2222
Telephone: (02) 9580 4888
Facsimile: (02) 9580 4788
Email: ssb@learninglinks.org.au

South West Sydney Branch

88 Shropshire Street
PO Box 42
Miller NSW 2168
Telephone: (02) 8783 7111
Facsimile: (02) 8783 7222
Email: sws@learninglinks.org.au

Eastern Suburbs Branch

1/20 Silver Street
Randwick NSW 2032
Telephone: (02) 9398 5188
Facsimile: (02) 9326 5364
Email: esb@learninglinks.org.au