

Reading: How we learn sight words

In the early stages of learning, we are often asked about sight words.

Is there a good way to learn sight words?

How can we help at home?

How are sight words taught in class?

The carefully designed and comprehensive method of language teaching developed by Maria Montessori following her observations give children in the Montessori environment a distinct advantage when it comes to learning sight words.

Formal teaching begins

Reading begins to be formally taught in the Cycle 1 (3-6) classroom. Typically, the sequence of learning would be:

- Learning the phonetic sounds of letters by using the sandpaper letters;
- Playing games such as 'I Spy' and 'Alphabet Rap' to ensure sounds are both pronounced and heard correctly;
- Introduction of the large movable alphabet with activities to create words, i.e. identifying the sounds they hear in phonetic words. (Note the writing before reading.)

As the children's skill with phonetic sounds develops, they gain the ability to decode simple phonetic words and the 'explosion' into reading commences.

The next step

It is at this stage that we introduce:

- Blends, e.g. tr as in truck, pl as in plum;
- Phonograms, e.g. sh as in ship, ai as in tail. Phonograms are two or more letters that, when combined, create a new sound, e.g. ph, th, igh etc. These are introduced with sandpaper letters and reading activities that allow the children to practise one phonogram at a time, with special attention focused on how the child pronounces the phonogram (some phonograms can be particularly tricky — 'th' is challenging for young children, who often say 'f').

As the children begin writing their own sentences and reading books, they come across words that they cannot write or read phonetically. These words are referred to as 'puzzle words', but you may know them as 'sight words' or 'heart words'.

Introducing sight words

Initially, sight words are explicitly taught in groups of three, e.g. who, I, she. Children come across these words when reading short sentences and books and may try to sound them out. In the case of the word 'who', we might respond: "That doesn't sound right/make sense does it? That's a puzzle word. It says 'who'." The puzzle word, 'who', may be written into a child's dictionary, posted on the wall or displayed in other ways to provide visual prompts, fostering independence and success as the child learns to incorporate the puzzle word into their creative stories and reading.

Practice is key here. One size does not fit all when it comes to children's language acquisition — we work on the individual child's level and provide as many opportunities as possible to practise these words in different contexts, e.g. speaking, reading and writing.

As your child learns a new phonogram and writes it into their word booklet, these might be sent home for them to read to you, alerting

you to any new phonograms or puzzle words they may be learning and providing an opportunity to practise. Identifying new phonograms or puzzle words in books you and your child read together is another good opportunity to practise and reinforce what your child is learning.

At this point, I would like to point out that we do not give homework — time at home should be spent engaging in family activities. However, evidence shows that when parents are supportive of the work children are doing at school, improved outcomes follow. Remember our key phrase linked to student wellbeing in Week 5's eBulletin — 'practice makes progress'.

In summary...

The child's learning sequence involves:

- The phonetic sounds of the letters in the alphabet, leading to:
- Writing and reading phonetic words, followed by:
- The explicit teaching of phonograms and puzzle words.

These three key word groups can be seen in the example below. Remember that some children will demonstrate skills and knowledge as they gain each piece of the reading puzzle, while others will wait until they have many pieces.

Examples of the three key word groups

Phonetic words	Phonogram words	Puzzle words
pan ant tin big cot jug nut wet milk blanket insect	chap rich ship dish eat seat sail train spoon that	was your said their one two write have are what