



## Triple R Teaching

How should I introduce sight words to preschoolers? What's a good sight word list for preschoolers? Where can I find preschool sight word worksheets? These are all questions I've heard from parents who are eager to get their children on the right path when it comes to learning to read. They're all good questions, but I think we need to back up and ask this question first: should we teach sight words in preschool? We'll get into it right after the intro.

Okay, first of all, let's clarify what sight words are. Some people will tell you that sight words are words that cannot be sounded out, but the researchers' definition of sight words is different. According to researchers, sight words are words that a reader recognizes instantly without needing to sound out or guess. Therefore, all beginning readers have a different sight word vocabulary, because they all know a different set of words by sight.

It's probably best to speak in terms of high frequency words. These are the most commonly used words in printed text. Obviously, readers need to know high frequency words, but how they learn these high frequency words matters.

We'll get to that in a minute, but first we need to talk about what preschoolers, or really any child, should know before they learn to read.

They need five important pre-reading skills. One of those would be concepts of print. They hold books correctly, turn the pages in the right direction, they know that each word on a page represents a spoken word, and they understand that text is read from left to right.

They need language and listening skills. So they should be able to retell a familiar story in their own words, even if it's very, very basic. They engage with stories as you read to them, and they can answer very simple questions about a story.

They need letter knowledge. They should recognize the letters of the alphabet, or at least a few if you're going to teach just a few at a time and then teach them to sound

out words, that's one option. They don't have to know the whole alphabet, but it does make it easier.

They can name each letter sound or a number of them. So with some reading programs you teach maybe five letters at a time and then you teach children to sound out words using those letters. If that's the approach you're taking, they don't have to know the whole alphabet, but you want to make sure, of course, that they are able to get started with that.

Phonological and phonemic awareness is another important pre-reading skill. So there is debate about whether or not rhyming is necessary for learning to read. Technically, it's not. You can still learn to read without being able to rhyme, but it's certainly helpful because if you think about it, it's actually a form of phonemic awareness - you're substituting that initial phoneme.

You want them to be able to have a concept of word. They can count words in a sentence, they can count syllables. I think it's important that they can rhyme, but if they can't, you can still get started with reading.

What's most important is the phonemic awareness piece, and that is that they can put sounds together to make a word and separate a word into its sounds. So if you say, "Put these sounds together to make a word, /f/ /ĭ/ /sh/," can they tell you the word is "fish?" Can they take the word "fish" and break it up into its sounds, /f/ /ĭ/ /sh/? Can they identify the first and last sound in a word? We're not talking about letters. We're talking about the actual sound.

Finally, do they have an interest in learning to read? Do they enjoy being read to? Do they ask you to read to them? Do they pretend to read? These pre-reading skills are important and when they're in place or at least we're on a good path toward establishing them, then we should teach preschoolers to sound out words.

Notice, I did not say we should teach them sight words. We want to teach them to blend sounds into words.

This is not what I used to teach. I used to think that they should learn sight words first, because it seems easier sometimes to memorize a few words than to sound them out. In fact, because I believed this, I created a huge set of sight word books for preschoolers to learn to read, and these books required them to use the pictures to solve most of the words, but those sight words were repeated over and over. I thought

they could just memorize the repeated sight word and use the pictures to read the rest and that would be fine, that they would be learning to read.

Well, I don't share those books anymore because I've learned that three-cueing, something I learned to use in college and graduate school, is a major problem and is not something we should be teaching beginning readers to use.

What if preschoolers struggle to sound out words? What if we're trying to start with sounding out, but they can't quite do it. Well, you might think you should switch to giving them lists of words to memorize, but that's not the answer.

Instead, you should go back to those pre-reading skills I mentioned earlier, in particular phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is the ability to play with individual sounds in words. Readers should be able to isolate, blend, segment, and manipulate phonemes. I didn't mention that before, but manipulate means switching out sounds.

Now we certainly can and SHOULD continue to teach phonemic awareness as we teach phonics. If children don't have the basics of phonemic awareness, they're not going to be successful with reading. You could practice oral blending if your child struggles to sound out a three letter word like "hat." So instead of having them sound out the word with the letters, you could say, "Put these sounds together to make a word, /h/ /ă/ /t/. What's the word? Hat." If your child cannot come up with that word, that's a really good sign you need to build phonemic awareness first.

Now, AFTER preschoolers are starting to sound out words, we can teach "sight words," and I'm going to use that in quotes. Really, we're talking about high frequency words that are not decodable. But when we do that, we don't need to go overboard. We can teach high frequency words that they need to read because they're in the decodable books that they're reading.

For example, if the story goes, "The cat is big," then "cat" and "big" are very easily decodable. "The" is not, and "is" isn't too hard, as long as they know that S can represent /z/, but they may not know that right away.

You may need to teach those two words explicitly with giving particular attention to the spellings that are not what you would expect. You can still break the words apart into their sounds. So for "the," /th/ /ə/, talk about how we use TH to represent /th/, and in this word, we use an E, which is a surprising letter to represent the /ə/ sound.

As for what sight words you should teach to preschoolers, I don't think you should teach them to memorize very many words, but it's okay to do a little bit of that at the beginning. So Readsters, which is Linda Farrell and Michael Hunter, they recommend teaching these words to pre-readers, "the, a, I, to, and, was, for, you, is, of." But again, you don't just want to teach these as whole words just to memorize, you should call attention to the sounds in the words and how you spell them.

I actually have a collection of free sight word lessons with decodable books on my website. It includes thirty on the website, and I also have the full set of 240 that are available for purchase, but you could just check out the thirty free ones. Each one has a very explicit lesson for it that could certainly work in preschool, kindergarten, or first grade, along with a book - a decodable book - that features that specific high frequency word. You can find a link to that as well as a transcript of this episode in the show notes, [themeasuredmom.com/episode11](http://themeasuredmom.com/episode11).

I'll see you next week!