



## Triple R Teaching

Hello, Anna Geiger here from The Measured Mom. Today, we're going to talk briefly about phonics and comprehension. What does phonics have to do with comprehension?

I wanted to include this episode early in our series about teaching phonics, because one of the common criticisms of structured literacy or science of reading advocates is that there's way too much focus on phonics, that it's not just phonics first, it's phonics ONLY. Today we want to talk about why phonics is so important.

One thing I won't be addressing in today's episode is phonemic awareness, but I've talked many times about how this is really important as the foundation for phonics instruction and it's also something that we want to keep building as we're teaching phonics.

I have a friend who is a school psychologist who often meets with children who have reading disabilities or reading problems. What she has found is that many times these older children, they could be in fifth grade and are struggling to read, have teachers who jump to the conclusion that it must be a comprehension issue, which is understandable because the kids don't understand what they read.

However, she said it often starts with a phonics issue. They're just not able to decode the words. She finds this out when she starts working with them and sees that they don't even know what a vowel is.

Phonics is important because it helps us get at the words, and to be able to read the words fluently, we have to be able to sound them out.

First, we have decoding the words, then as we get better at reading the words, we orthographically map them and we become fluent. Remember that fluency is the bridge from phonics to comprehension. If you can decode words, but you're doing it very, very slowly, your brain does not have enough energy left to really focus on comprehension. But when you have fluency with word recognition and you also have language

comprehension, and you have vocabulary and background knowledge, then comprehension can occur.

I really like an article from Scholastic.com, which I will link to in the show notes. It really takes what I just said and explains it very clearly. So I'd like to read that to you. It says,

"Phonics instruction helps the reader to map sounds onto spellings. This ability enables readers to decode words. Decoding words aids in the development of and improvement in word recognition. The more words one recognizes, the easier the reading task. Therefore, phonics instruction aids in the development of word recognition by providing children with an important and useful way to figure out unfamiliar words while reading.

"When children begin to be able to recognize a large amount of words quickly and accurately, reading fluency improves. Reading fluency refers to the ease with which children can read a text. As more and more words become firmly stored in a child's memory (that is, the child recognizes more and more words on sight), he or she gains fluency and automaticity in word recognition. Having many opportunities to decode words in text is critical to learning words by sight. The more times a child encounters a word in text, the more likely he or she is to recognize it by sight and to avoid making a reading error."

I hope that shows why decoding is such an important skill and why it really needs to be a focus of early reading instruction.

I'd also like to read to you something I read on Reading Horizons. The author of this post said,

"The other day a little girl I know was reading aloud to me and every time she came to a word she didn't know she would try to sound it out. Often she gave up trying to sound out words and would turn to me to ask how to say the word. Once I told her what the word was she almost always recognized the word and knew what it meant. However, because she didn't break out the syllables and phonetic sounds correctly, she was unable to pronounce it correctly and thus was unable to recognize words that were in her spoken vocabulary, but not in her written vocabulary."

So in other words, she might know the word by having heard it and knowing what it means, but if she doesn't have the phonics skills to code it, she's not going to get to it.

We should also note that this operates in reverse, right? So if a child can decode a word, but has never heard it before, phonics is not enough. An example would be the word "lemur," L-E-M-U-R. That word can be read lemur (long e sound) or lemur (short e sound) depending on how you divide into syllables. There's no rule that tells you exactly what to do. A child could read it both ways using phonics, but if they have never heard the word before and don't know what a lemur is, they may not end up with the correct pronunciation.

So phonics and comprehension work together. We get to comprehension by starting with phonics, but we can improve children's use of phonics by building their vocabulary, so they land on the correct word. There's actually a name for this. It's called "set for variability," and it's the process by which kids have to match a word they've sounded out to a word that exists in their spoken vocabulary.

For example, when a child is reading a word and can't quite get what the word is supposed to be, maybe they read conduct (emphasis on second syllable) and it should be conduct (emphasis on first syllable) as in behavior. They might figure out that the word is conduct and not conduct because they think about what would make sense in the sentence. So in that case, phonics alone wasn't enough, they also had to use context to figure out what that word should be.

So we always start with phonics when we're attacking words, but other things come into play as we land on the correct word. That was a little heavy, but I kept it short for you. I hope that gave you some things to think about. You can find the show notes for this episode at [themeasuredmom.com/episode68](http://themeasuredmom.com/episode68). I'll be here next week for a longer episode, and we're going to talk about what you need to know about Orton-Gillingham. So we'll see you then!