



Understanding Literacy

A Toolkit for Families

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Introduction

Welcome to **Understanding Literacy: A Toolkit for Families**. We are thrilled to partner with you to support your child's education. In this toolkit, we have gathered resources to help you better understand what you can do to support your child's literacy growth.

Within this toolkit, you will discover helpful information including:



**Why Reading
on Grade Level
Matters**



**How to Understand
Your Child's
Reading Progress**



**What to Do If You
Notice Your Child
has Trouble Reading**

Please remember that you are not alone. Your child's school, teachers, and our entire educational community are here to support you every step of the way. We encourage you to explore this toolkit, ask questions, and engage with your child's teacher and school.

Thank you for being committed to your child's education. Together we can create a bright future filled with endless possibilities.



Why Reading on Grade Level by Third Grade Matters

Tennessee's goal is for all children to be proficient readers and to be reading on grade level by the end of third grade. Research has shown that when a child is a strong reader, he or she can understand schoolwork better which makes learning and school more enjoyable.

The term proficient reading is another way to say "on grade level" reading. Proficient reading has been connected to higher rates of students graduating from high school, entering a program after high school such as college or technical school, and remaining employed throughout life.

Read through the information below to learn more about why this reading milestone is so important.



Children reading at grade level are...

**MORE
LIKELY
TO:**

- Graduate from high school
- Begin and finish programs after high school
- Remain employed



SIGNIFICANTLY MORE LIKELY TO: Stay on grade level over time

HIGHLY CONNECTED with finishing high school and lifelong income, health, and wellness.



Children not reading at grade level are...

4X MORE LIKELY TO DROP OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL

Negatively impacting short & long-term earning potential

ASSOCIATED with higher rates of poverty, not keeping up with medical treatment, pre-teen alcohol use, depression, and teenage pregnancy.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Low literacy rates negatively impact our students and our state.





What Reading Instruction Looks Like in Tennessee

In Tennessee, reading instruction aligns with the latest brain research, ensuring that every child has a strong foundation in literacy. For early reading instruction, we use a Sounds-First Approach since we begin teaching reading by focusing on the sounds in words. This approach is explicit and systematic, which means children are taught step by step, with clear explanations and with many opportunities for practice.

Tennessee's early reading instruction focuses on foundational reading skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.



Phonemic Awareness helps children identify and work with individual sounds in words, while **phonics** teaches them the relationship between letters and sounds.



Fluency focuses on reading the words correctly, at a good speed, and with expression while **vocabulary** instruction enriches their knowledge of new words.



Comprehension means children can understand the books and stories they read.

In [Understanding a Sounds-First Approach to Reading: A Toolkit for Families](#), we dive deeper into these important reading pieces, sharing how children practice and show their understanding and what families can do at home to support this literacy development.



What Elementary Children Learn in Reading

The information in the table below will give you a general idea of what your child is learning and practicing in reading from kindergarten through fifth grade. However, it is essential to consider your child as an individual who is working to become a strong and proficient reader.

If you have questions about what your child is learning in reading, contact your child's teacher.

K Kindergarten	- Children begin building their early reading skills in kindergarten. - They will spend time learning to hear the sounds in words and will later attach these sounds to a letter. - Children will begin to understand that letters represent sounds, letters form words, and printed words carry meaning.
1 First Grade	- Children build on their foundational skills from kindergarten and will explore more complex words and texts. - They will strengthen their phonics and sounding out skills to read more words that may be unfamiliar. - They will become better at blending sounds to read words and will begin to recognize spelling patterns in common words.
2 Second Grade	- Children in second grade continue to develop their fluency and decoding (or sounding out) skills. - Fluency allows children to read with greater accuracy (fewer mistakes), appropriate speed, and expression (they do not sound like a robot). - Children are becoming more confident readers and can tackle unfamiliar words. - They are learning to make connections with stories and consider the setting, characters, and plot to help with their understanding or comprehension.
3 Third Grade	- Third-grade students continue to work hard at reading and becoming more independent readers. - By third grade, all sounds have been taught and students begin working on decoding and reading words with more than one syllable. - They begin the switch from learning to read towards reading to learn. - The texts or reading passages get longer and more complex in third grade. - Children expand their vocabulary and deepen their ability to comprehend texts with different story types.
4 Fourth Grade	- Children in fourth grade are fluent readers and should be able to understand or comprehend more challenging stories. - They continue to increase their vocabulary and can think critically about the different texts they are reading.
5 Fifth Grade	- Fifth-grade children refine their reading skills by focusing on comprehension, vocabulary, and critical thinking. - Children can understand stories from multiple genres such as drama, poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. - The material they can read is more complex.



The [Tennessee Academic Standards](#) outline in more detail what students are learning in English Language Arts at each grade level from kindergarten through twelfth grade. The ELA standards are designed to prepare students with the most important knowledge and literacy skills necessary to succeed in college or in the workforce.

How to Understand Your Child's Reading Progress

As a parent or caregiver, it is natural to wonder about your child's reading progress and be curious about the reading instruction he or she receives at school. Keeping a close eye on your child's reading progress in elementary school is an important way you can help your child become a strong reader.

How do teachers know how your child is doing in reading?

One way teachers get the information they need to track student reading progress is from the results of the reading tests your child takes at school. Classroom reading tests, universal reading screeners, and the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) show how your child performs in early reading skills, fluency, and comprehension. Teachers also use your child's classroom performance to get a complete picture of your child's progress.

It is important to keep in mind that reading progress looks different for each child as every child grows and develops at their own speed. To stay aware of your child's reading progress, review all reading reports shared with you by your child's teacher, and ask questions if something is not clear.



Important to know:

- Research shows that the best approach to reading instruction for all students is explicit and systematic, which means children are taught step by step, with clear explanations and with many opportunities for practice.
- During the school day, every child works with on-grade-level reading material, including practice with on-grade-level vocabulary, and discussing on-grade-level stories.
- Every child's reading progress is regularly monitored at school. Any child who needs extra help with reading will receive it.



What to Do if Your Child has Trouble Reading to You at Home

You can help the school identify areas of reading difficulties your child may have by paying close attention when he or she reads to you at home.

If you notice a pattern of reading mistakes your child makes regularly, reach out to your child's teacher, and share your concerns. By working together with your child's school, you will make sure your child gets the reading help they may need.

Consider the following questions as your child reads aloud to you at home.

- Does your child have trouble sounding out words?
- Is your child using a different sound for a letter or having trouble telling letters apart?
- Does your child misread the same common words used in a story?
- Is your child skipping over many words or saying a different word than the one printed on the page?
- Does it take your child a long time to read a few sentences?
- Does your child seem overly frustrated when reading to you?
- When you ask your child questions about the story after reading, can he or she answer correctly?
- Can your child give you basic information about a story's beginning, middle, and end?





How to Know if Your Child has Dyslexia

You may wonder, “If my child has trouble reading, does he or she have dyslexia?”

Children with dyslexia struggle with reading and spelling words easily. They can also struggle with reading fluency. Fluency is the ability to read words correctly at a good pace with expression. Dyslexia can lead to problems with reading comprehension, learning new vocabulary, writing, and even math.

In Tennessee, schools are required to screen students for **characteristics of dyslexia** so that every student gets the support needed. If the screening shows a child struggling with basic literacy skills and requires dyslexia-specific support, the school will notify the families that the child is showing characteristics of dyslexia. If, at any time, a parent or teacher thinks a child is showing characteristics of dyslexia, they should refer the child for an evaluation to see if they need more specialized instruction through special education.

Children with characteristics of dyslexia can improve their reading skills with support from home and school.

At Home



- Read out loud with your child every day.
- Provide books that are interesting to your child.
- Consider listening to audiobooks.
- Visit your local library to check out printed books or audiobooks. Look for apps to help with spelling or note-taking.
- Encourage your child; give praise for trying!

At School



- Students are screened for reading risks three times each year in grades K-6 and at least once a year in grades 7-12.
- Some students whose performance shows they are at risk for a reading deficiency will receive additional tests to help the school determine how to help. Students may need extra help in reading whether they are identified with characteristics of dyslexia or not.
- More information about dyslexia-specific help can be provided by your child’s teacher.

Additional Information

- You can request dyslexia screening for your child by contacting your child’s teacher, counselor, or school psychologist.
- If you have questions, please reach out to your child’s school first.
- You may also email Say.Dyslexia@tn.gov with questions.



Glossary

This glossary contains terms found in **Understanding Literacy: A Toolkit for Families** from the Tennessee Department of Education.

Tennessee English Language Arts Academic Standards. A common set of expectations for what students will know and be able to do at the end of a grade for each subject area.
[Tennessee ELA Academic Standards](#)

Audiobooks. Books read aloud by a storyteller and recorded for the listener to hear and sometimes follow along with as they read.

Comprehension. Understanding a text that is read or listened to.

Decoding. Sounding out words.

Dyslexia. A specific learning disability in which students often have difficulties with word reading and/or spelling.

Fluency. The ability to read words automatically and meaningfully; at a good pace and with expression.

Foundational Literacy Skills. When learning to read, foundational literacy skills are considered the building blocks of reading and include phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency.

Phonemic Awareness. The ability to notice, think about, and work with phonemes, or the smallest individual sounds in spoken words.

Phonics. The connection between letters and sounds. For example, the letter 'a' can make the /ah/ sound like at the beginning of "apple."

Sounds-first. An instructional approach that teaches sounds (phonological and phonemic awareness) and the connection between sounds and the letters that represent those sounds (phonics) before we expect students to read whole words.

Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP). Assessments designed to measure true student understanding, not just basic memorization and test-taking skills. It is a way to assess what our students know and what we can do to help them succeed in the future.

Universal Reading Screener. A universal reading screener is an assessment used to screen student performance on grade-level reading skills and tasks compared to same-age peers.

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