

Why public and school libraries should stock DECODABLE BOOKS

About one in five Australian children has difficulty with learning to read. Those who can't read reasonably well by the age of nine are, statistically speaking, on the literacy scrap heap. But there is hope, as speech pathologist ALISON CLARKE reports.

When children reach the critical age of nine, schools switch over from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn', leaving a substantial number of poor readers behind. Their parents then often have to pay for professional intervention to teach them how to learn to get words off the page, but, of course, many parents can't afford this.

Libraries can make a huge difference to these children by offering books designed to help them systematically build their decoding skills.

WHAT MAKES IT HARD TO LEARN TO READ ENGLISH?

English represents speech sounds with letters and letter combinations in a complex, opaque way.

Most English words come from the languages of the Anglo-Saxons, Vikings and Norman French, as well as Latin and Greek. We've also borrowed words from almost every other language, thanks to the British Empire, wars, trade, tourism and the internet. As a result, many spellings represent more than one sound, like the *ch* in *chips* (Germanic), *school* (Greek) and *chef* (French).

Our sounds have changed over time. We now have 44 sounds represented by over 200 spellings of one, two, three or four letters. Most sounds have multiple spellings. A good example of this is the *ay* sound in *make*, *sail*, *day*, *paper*, *eight*, *they*, *vein*, *fete*, *cafe*, *melee*, *sundae*, *break*, *gauge* and *straight*.

A Finnish, Spanish or Italian child typically learns to read reasonably well in about a year, because each sound in their languages has only one or two spellings. English-speaking children, on the other hand, take about three times as long.

To start reading and writing, children need to learn how to pull words apart into sounds and represent them with letters, and how to blend sounds into words. Once they start recognising familiar words automatically, they only have to sound out unfamiliar words and can focus more on building their comprehension, vocabulary and fluency.



Alison Clarke

HOW IS EARLY LITERACY TAUGHT?

Unfortunately, teaching about sounds and their spellings (phonics) has been out of educational fashion for a long time. Children have usually instead been taught to:

- memorise lists of high-frequency words as wholes
- learn initial 'A is for apple'-type phonics, but not all the main spellings of all the sounds in all word positions
- read repetitive and predictable texts, for example, 'I like eating ice cream, I like eating apples, I like eating sandwiches ...', with encouragement to guess words from pictures, first letters and context rather than sounding them out.

Most children can learn to read when taught this way, but about 20 percent of children struggle. They need sounds and spellings to be broken down more for them and to be taught in child-sized mouthfuls.

Books with simplified spelling patterns

Children with these learning difficulties need to read decodable books, that is, books that at first contain only short words with simple spellings, with more and more spellings added over time. Eventually learners will be able to read well enough to tackle storybooks on their own.

We teach beginners to swim in the paddling pool using floaties, kickboards and noodles. We don't throw them straight into the deep end.

Decodable books are like paddling pools and floaties for beginners. They maximise early skills, success and confidence, and minimise the anxiety and failure that comes from constantly running into 'a' as in *want*, *all* and any when you're still grappling with 'a' as in *cat*.

DECODABLE TO WHOM?

The word *decodable* is a relative term. Most printed matter is decodable to literate adults. As children learn more spelling patterns and word-attack skills, they find more and more texts decodable.

Decodable books usually have lists of their spellings and word types on their covers. They come in sets that should be read in order, with each book adding a new pattern or two.

If you know which spelling patterns a learner has been taught, then you can work out which decodable books they should be able to read independently.

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Aim for 90–95 percent decodable

A book in which a learner can read 95 percent or more of the words is suitable for independent reading; 90 percent decodable books can be tackled with support from a fluent reader.

Once you drop below 90 percent decodable, you start to descend into frustration and failure territory. Imagine if about every tenth word you had to read was utterly indecipherable.

WHAT ABOUT QUALITY CHILDREN'S LITERATURE?


Children should be read plenty of quality children's literature until they can read it for themselves. But typical storybooks tend to contain too many long words and complex spelling patterns for beginners and strugglers to tackle on their own. Encouraging them to attempt to read such books themselves is simply setting them up to fail.

We've got both kinds

Parents of beginners and strugglers often don't realise that there are books suitable for reading to their children (storybooks), and different types of book that are suitable for their children to read themselves (decodables).

If these books are kept together in the library and well signposted, everyone will understand the difference, borrow books that are fit for purpose, and avoid setting novices up to fail.

Displays and website information can also support appropriate book choices and help set beginners and strugglers on the path to reading success and confidence.

A list of decodable books with links to publishers and suppliers can be found at goo.gl/1R5Vmn. 

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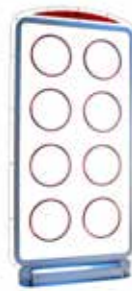
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