

## CHAPTER THREE

# TEACHING THE BASIC CODE

The information in this chapter, as well as the lesson plans and activities at the end, are intended for young children just learning to read, and children in the sixth month of first grade and older whose test scores in Chapter two indicate a need for these lessons.

Specifically, this chapter deals with the *basic code*. By basic code, we mean the most common sounds, and those sounds that are represented by only one letter. Teaching your child the reading mechanics needed to manage the basic code will establish the way she responds to all future text as well. This first step is very important to all that will follow. The goals of this chapter are numerous. They're laid out here with an explanation of each, and some discussion of what can go wrong if the specific goal is not met.

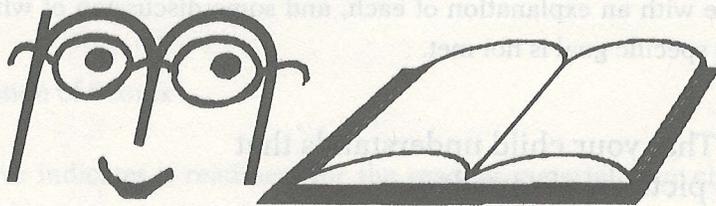
### Goal #1. That your child understands that letters are pictures of sounds

The first step in learning to read is understanding the nature of our written code. There are symbols that represent sounds. Each time we see one of the symbols, we are supposed to say the sound that it represents. We make our way through the word and when we get to the end we have meaning. At the basic code level,

all the sounds are represented by a single-letter sound picture. There is no sound 'sh' in the basic code, as this sound picture has two letters. So the words, 'cat' and 'big' and 'sad,' are all words that we can work with in this chapter, because each sound in these words is represented by only one letter. In addition, we do not, in this chapter, address any of the overlap in the code. The sound picture <a> represents only the sound 'a' as in 'hat,' even though you and I know it can also represent the sounds 'a-e' as in the word 'paper' and the sound 'o' as in the word 'want.' It's important to limit the introduction of the code in this way, to establish the goals of this level before moving on to the goals of the subsequent levels.

Many children fail to understand that letters are pictures of sounds. At some point in their literacy development they espouse the notion that letters "make" sounds. This thinking is precisely the reverse of our goal. It's confusing to children because it implies that the letter has meaning in and of itself, and that they must be stupid because they just don't get it. What we want them to understand is that the sound picture (the letter) is a symbol for a sound which they need to remember. It helps if they understand the nature of symbols, that they are arbitrary, that they stand for something else just because we agree that they will. As parents, we can help our new readers to establish a clear understanding of the sound picture nature of text by avoiding certain language when we work with them. "What does that say?" can be replaced with, "Do you remember what we say when we see that?" The term *sound picture* was developed at the Read America clinic and been found to be a very powerful and descriptive term which gently forces the logic we seek.

### If letters could read...



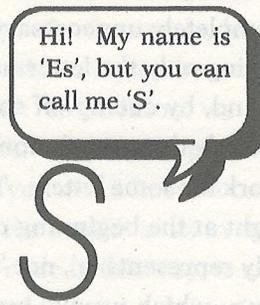
Another common mistake that some parents and teachers make that children find confusing, is the use of letter names in referring to the sound pictures. If we refer to 'see' and 'tee' and 'ef', etc., in helping our young readers, we are forcing

them to learn two names for each symbol, the letter name and the sound. This is completely unnecessary. Many children can't do this easily and end up remembering only the letter name. They are forever trying to access, or remember the sound, by cueing off some part of the letter name, "ef' um 'e'?, no um 'f'?" Although this translation step is completely unnecessary and confusing, it does work for some letters. The sound that corresponds to the letter 'tee' <t> is found right at the beginning of the letter name. But what about 'see' <c> which usually represents 'c', not 's', and 'em' <m> which represents 'm', not 'e', and 'wie' <y>, which usually represents the sound 'ee' as in the word 'happy,' and never represents the sound 'w'? If you take the time to analyze the alphabet names and sounds you realize why so many children have trouble. We recommend that you never use letter names when working with your child. Always refer to sound pictures by the sound they represent, not their letter name. The futility of letter name instruction is proven over and over again with every adult nonreader who can recite the alphabet with ease. When posing a question for your child in which you feel inclined to use a letter name, for example, "What sound does 'tee' represent?", you can easily sidestep the letter name by simply indicating the letter with your pencil or pointer finger, and saying, "What sound does *that* represent?" By mastering this and other techniques explained in the lesson plans you can avoid letter names altogether and help your child avoid reading failure from letter name interference.

One child in particular comes to mind when we think of the problems that teaching children the letter names can bring on. Stella is a really cute and super confident six-year-old girl. She has beautiful flaming red hair and a freckled nose. Stella's mother brought her into the Read America clinic in mid-September of her first-grade year. In kindergarten Stella had spent hours forming letters and eventually writing some short words, which she would proudly present to her mother, telling her what they said. She would read off the letter names "'see' 'ae' 'tee'" and then say the word 'cat.' Her mother attributed her early start at reading and spelling to Stella's obvious intelligence, and to her own hard work at teaching Stella the letter names and how to form all the letters. This certainly showed itself, as Stella had remarkable penmanship for a six-year-old, and indeed she did know each letter by name.

Stella had a lot of trouble identifying sounds. This was revealed by a code knowledge test which told us that Stella's first response to text was consistently letter names. So <c> was 'see,' and <f> was 'ef,' and <w> was 'double you.' When prompted further with the query, "Yes, that is an 'ef', but what *sound* do

you say when you see it?" Stella responded with, " 'f'." But when asked, "And this is a 'double-you,' but what *sound* do you say when you see it?" Stella responded with, "'dub', um no it's 'd'." Aside from the 'dub', which left Stella's mother's mouth agape, this is a typical response from children of Stella's age. Stella thinks the sound that corresponds with this sound picture is 'd' because the letter name (double-you) begins with the 'd' sound.



Fortunately for Stella, she was a quick learner and remediated within just twelve sessions. During that time, Stella was retrained to understand that letters are pictures of sounds and that they represent those sounds, not the letter names. Considerable effort was spent during the first half of her therapy in teaching her to respond primarily with the sounds and not the letter names.

Stella's particular reading problem is quite common. She is not alone in making the assumption that what an adult tells her about a symbol is what she should try to remember.

We received a call from Stella's mother about a month after she had finished reading therapy. Stella had so impressed her teacher with her improvement, that her teacher, the chair of the school's in-service committee, had asked Stella's mom if she could arrange for me to provide an in-service training session for the teachers at Stella's school. We accepted, happy to have an opportunity to share our insight with a group of teachers. Quite ironically, the event went well, right up until I told the teachers that they should teach sounds, not letter names. "Oh, but they have to know their letter names!" was the overwhelming consensus. We went round and round for a while. We explained that children will learn the names of the letters easily in time. We explained that I've worked with scores of adult nonreaders, who all knew the letter names, yet couldn't read. We explained that letter names confuse children and cause interference when they are trying to sound words out. But they still insisted. Then we got tough. "Okay! Let's play a game," we said. "The game is called Introductions." We went round the room and assigned each of them a fictitious name and a nickname. "This is Pat, but you can call her Harriette. This is George, but you can call him Tom. This is Tammy, but you can call her Sally." After we had so dubbed all twenty-two of them, we took three of the teachers to the front of the room and lined them up. "Okay, can anyone tell me who this is?" I asked, pointing to the first one. "Do you mean her name, or what we're supposed to call her?" one of the teachers asked.

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"What you are supposed to call her?" I responded. "I don't get it," commented another. "Why do we need two names if you just want us to remember one?" "Our point exactly," we said.

The teachers might have been able to recall the information if I had only given them the important part. But with all the extra names, they didn't have a chance. Yet, that's exactly what we do to our children when we teach them the letter names and the sounds at the same time. Or worse still, the letter names and *then* the sounds. When you teach a child anything, start with the important part. Make sure they know it intimately before you move on to the less important part. In the case of reading it is the sounds that she will need to know. If you feel you must teach letter names, do so *only* after the sounds have been firmly established. Our point is a simple one, elaborately made. Teach your child what will be the most useful bit of information to help her learn to read.

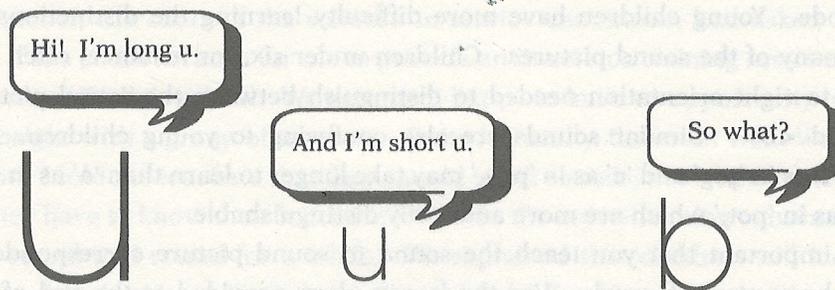
## Goal #2. That she knows the correspondence between all the sounds and sound pictures that make up the basic code

If your child is very young (under six) expect her to take a long time to learn the correspondence between all the sounds and sound pictures that make up the basic code. Young children have more difficulty learning the distinctions between many of the sound pictures. Children under six, for instance, often lack the left to right orientation needed to distinguish between the sound pictures <d> and <b>. Similar sounds are also confusing to young children. The sounds 'i' as in 'pig' and 'e' as in 'peg,' may take longer to learn than 'a' as in 'pat' and 'o' as in 'pot,' which are more auditorily distinguishable.

It's important that you teach the sound to sound picture correspondence within the context of words. Use the lesson plans provided at the end of this chapter. Do not try to teach the code in isolation, "This is 's' and this is 'p' and this is 't'." This kind of drill gives children the impression that letters exist for their own sake, rather than as components of words. It's also harder to learn the sounds in isolation. As we explained in Chapter one, learning the correspondences between symbol and sound is paired associate learning, the pairing of two items that only go together because someone says they do. Just like any other name, I am Carmen because my mother said I would be Carmen. The letter <p> is 'p' because somebody, a long, long time ago, said it would be 'p' and we all agreed to go along with that. Paired associate learning is facilitated by relevance or meaning. By teaching the sound to symbol correspondences in the context of

words, your child will see how they work to build words and she will find relevance in that. The letter <p> is one of three parts to <pig>. It represents 'p', the first thing you hear in the word 'pig.' The letter <i> is another part of <pig>; it represents the second thing you hear in the word 'pig.' The letter <g> is another part of 'pig;' it represents the last thing you hear in the word 'pig.' By using the lesson plans, your child will learn the sound picture to sound correspondence in a shorter time, because they will be tools she can use to build words. Once she knows even a few she can begin to spell and read words. When she encounters a sound picture she doesn't know, you can help her by telling her what sound it represents.

When teaching your child the basic code vowel sounds please do not make the mistake of telling her that the sounds are short sounds. Phonics programs do this and children find it very confusing. When children think of short and long, they think in terms of length, not sounds. In addition, there is nothing intrinsically shorter about the sound 'a' as in 'hat,' or 'a-e' as in 'rain.' So why bring it up at all. What your child needs to know is that there is the sound 'a' and then later, in Chapter five, we will introduce the sound 'a-e', and all the various sound pictures for that sound.



Another thing we need to caution you about is the use of "key words" to teach the sound to symbol correspondence. This is common practice among phonics programs. So the child is taught to access the sounds like this—she sees <a>, she says 'ay'... 'apple'... 'a'.

This use of a key word is intended to help her remember the sound that the letter represents. But what it actually does is add yet another step to the process. So now the child has even more to remember. By using key words, we are also running the risk that the child will start to believe that it is only the first sound in a word that is important. We've retrained many children whose strategy was to

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look at the first letter in the word and start guessing as many words as they could think of that start with that sound. This is the most common strategy that we see at the Read America clinic among first graders.

Now, we've mentioned that young children take a long time at learning the correspondences between symbols and sounds, but we haven't mentioned older kids who are having reading troubles. Older children may know the correspondences between symbol and sound, but not use the information when they read. They may have learned any or all of the bad habits we've just discussed, when they were younger. These children need lots of reinforcement to change those habits. In many cases it takes longer to break old habits than to learn new ones. In order to break old habits you must replace them with new ones that work. When your child stumbles in a word, she needs to be asked, "What sound is that?" When she doesn't know, she needs to be told, and the lessons for that sound should be practiced again. This kind of questioning and supplying of information interferes with her attempts to use the wrong information to figure out what the words say. For instance, if she is looking at the word <train> and has just said 'tree' and you say "No," she has not been redirected. So she will continue to guess another word that starts with the sound 't'. But if instead, you ask her, "What sound is this?" as you indicate the <ai> with your pencil point, she will stop the guessing and start thinking about what she needs to know in order to read this word. If she doesn't know what sound <ai> represents, simply tell her. Then later you can practice the lessons that teach the various ways to represent the sound 'a-e'. These techniques are covered in the lesson plans. If you stick to the lesson plans, you'll be fine.

### Goal #3. That she understands that spoken words are made up of sounds

The first step in coming to understand written language is understanding spoken language. In working with your new reader, you must never lose sight of the fact that written language is merely a visual representation of spoken language. You can help your child to understand this through your approach to spoken language. For young children just learning to read, we encourage use of the sound games at the back of this chapter. Ask your child what's the first thing she hears in various words. Start with very short words of two and three sounds. Optimize your time together by integrating these games into your regular activities. When you're walking on the beach with your new reader, and she discovers an interest-

ing seashell, ask, "What's the first sound you *hear* in 'shell'?" Make sure she understands that it's what she *hears*, not what she *sees* that you are interested in. When you're riding to school or day care together, ask her to think of a word that begins with the sound 'p'. When you're at the grocery store and she asks for a pack of gum, ask her to tell you the three sounds she hears in the word 'gum.' If she's young, and can't tell you all the sounds, ask for the first sound she hears. Teach her to take words apart. Children who lack this kind of intimacy with oral language have a much harder time at learning to manage written language. Research shows that they will not read as well, that their vocabularies will suffer, and that their written and oral comprehension will not be as high as that of their peers.

Older children who are working at correcting reading problems may not be willing to play sound games. Their problems can be corrected using other lesson plans. The goals are the same for many lesson plans. Each lesson plan tells you who you should do the lesson with. If you follow this advice strictly, you and your child will do well.

Some children have more difficulty than others at being able to isolate sounds within words. They appear to be able only to hear the word as a unit, 'cat,' and have a lot of trouble hearing the individual sounds, 'c' 'a' 't'. In psychological and educational parlance, this is called an *auditory processing deficit*. I caution you not to get caught up in this. Like all deficits, it simply means that your child isn't currently very good at this task. No assumptions can be made about why she isn't very good at it. It could be as simple as the fact that she hasn't been taught to do it. Before you worry too long and hard over her struggling with this skill, I will tell you that in over four hundred remediations, the Read America clinic has never had a client who couldn't be taught to hear isolated sounds in words. This includes clients with hearing aids and hearing implants. Giovanni was one such client. At eighteen months of age, he had lost his hearing to spinal meningitis. At three he received a hearing implant. At six he is reading. In fact, he is beginning to express interest in learning Italian, his mother's native tongue.

#### Goal #4. That she understands that written words are made up of sound pictures which represent the sounds in words

There are three things that young children are very good at. The first, which any parent will attest to, is getting what they need or want. Whether it's a candy bar,

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a cold drink, or a new toy, children will find a way to maneuver it into their possession. Another thing they're good at is labeling. At eighteen months of age, children label, or name five to seven new items each week, and by age five, they have learned five to ten thousand words. Think of the memory load that must be required to input that much information in so short a time. Another thing they're good at is sorting or categorizing. At eighteen months, my daughter met my neighbor's new eight-week-old kitten. In an effort to have her treat it gently, I told her it was a baby cat. She frowned deeply at me, sorted it by how many legs it had, compared and contrasted it to her prototype of baby, and quickly labeled it 'doggy.' As she had no prototype of cat to work with, she had used her existing prototype of attributes, and was able, in seconds, to match up this four-legged minibeast to a dog rather than a baby, which has but two legs. Young children have a remarkable capacity for sorting attributes. Research has shown that from birth, infants begin sorting faces into three categories, beloved, familiar, and unfamiliar.

These skills will work to your child's advantage as pictures of the sounds are added to the sound game activities mentioned in the last section. Her desire to have what she wants and needs will move her in the direction you choose for her. As we've illustrated in Chapter two, she knows she *needs* to learn to read, and with a bit of luck, she even *wants* to learn. Her natural ability as a labeler will help her to learn the sound for each of the sound pictures. And her adeptness at categorizing and sorting will assist her as she notices the attributes of sounds and sound pictures.

If you take the time to sensitize your child to oral language, but fail to introduce her to the code (the sound pictures that represent the sounds), much of your efforts will be wasted. Her pronunciation may be better than that of her peers, but it will never help her read. She must know the code. Start early and apply your efforts frequently. Your hard work and her natural inventory of skills will pay off.

**Goal #5.** That she understands that the sound pictures in written words occur in a sequence from left to right

We speak to parents all the time who are worried about their child's reading and writing development because of letters written backwards and words that run from right to left. We always remind parents that the left to right orientation of written English is completely arbitrary. It might just as easily have been right to

derstand that it's perfectly normal to reverse letters up to seven and even eight years old. Don't worry about it. Try the tips we've offered here, and relax.

### Goal #6. That she is able to segment the sounds in spoken words

When we speak of segmenting sounds in words, we are speaking of the ability to unglue and separate the smallest units of sound. For instance, in the word 'big,' the first sound we hear is 'b', and then 'i', and then 'g'. In the word 'train,' we hear 't', then 'r', and then 'ae', then 'n'. Remember, we are speaking of sounds, not letter names.

The ability to separate the sounds in words is the highest correlator to reading success. According to a University of Texas study (Juel, Connie, et al, *Acquisition of literacy, Journal of Educational Psychology*, 1986), segmenting ability also correlates to reading comprehension as well as oral comprehension. Children who learn to read without having established good segmenting ability are at much greater risk of having trouble with longer words, reading slowly, and having difficulty comprehending. This is very powerful information. Do not underestimate the importance of segmenting. The segmenting test at the back of Chapter two has told you whether or not your child needs to improve on her segmenting ability. After you complete the activities at the back of this chapter, you can retest her to see what progress you've made. As you work on segmenting with her, remember it is not just her ability to sound out words that is at stake, but also her ability to comprehend what she hears and reads to the best of her ability.

When doing the lessons at the back of this chapter, be diligent in making sure that your child's segmenting is clear. Do not allow overlap in her segmenting. The word 'sip' for instance should be 's' 'i' 'p'. Some children tend to run sounds together when segmenting:

'si' 'p' or 'si' 'i' 'p' or 'si' 'i' 'ip'

Just because all the sounds are included doesn't make these responses correct. What we seek is nice, clear segmenting. Each sound must stand alone, with no overlap, and no chunking sounds together.

In addition to overlap and chunking, another typical error that parents tend to allow when teaching segmenting is what we call sloppy 'u'.

EX: "sip" = 'su' 'i' 'pu'

The sloppy 'u' happens because individual consonant sounds, without vowels, are not very loud. It is the vowels in our language that give it volume. By adding the sloppy 'u' vowel sound to consonants, we make them more audible. The problem is that we also make them sloppy. So, 'su' 'i' 'pu' doesn't even sound like a word. We end up with a sort of Latin-sounding nonsense word. Another problem with sloppy 'u' is a spelling issue. If we want to spell the word 'tub,' for instance, and we think of 'tu' when we write <t>, the only remaining sound we need is 'b'. And of course we end up with this <tb> instead of this <tub>. Each of these errors is discussed in detail in the lesson plans, with examples of correction techniques.

Of all the skills that we ask parents to practice with their children, segmenting seems to cause parents the most difficulty, and we don't assume that you (the parent) are able to segment with ease. Many adults cannot. We recently had a child in the program whose mother called me during her second homework session with her son. "He's just not getting it," she complained. He thinks there are three sounds in 'choose.'" Well, as there are, in fact, three sounds in 'choose,' I began to wonder if Mom was getting it. When I asked her to tell me what the sounds in 'choose' are, she said, "'choo' and 'oose'." Not only did she fail to give the correct answer, 'ch' 'oo' 'z', but she also had some overlap in her answer. We hear the 'oo' sound affixed to the back end of the 'ch' sound and to the front end of the 'z' sound. We worked with Brandon's mom for about thirty minutes and cleared up this issue altogether. At Brandon's last session his mom confessed to me that she had never been a great reader, but that since I showed her how to segment, she was reading more often and with less difficulty. For parents who are having trouble segmenting themselves, please take a few moments and practice this basic segmenting activity. Say each word, and then say the sounds to the right of the word one at a time.



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### Goal #7. That she is able to blend the sounds in words

Learning to push sounds together or *blend* them into words is the last goal of this chapter. Accomplished adult readers tend to take the notion of blending for granted. They don't realize that for many children this is a very difficult task to understand and to perform. The first step for your child is understanding what happens when sounds occur in sequence. The best way to help her understand is by example. The language you would have to use to explain this is too confusing for a child. It's best to show her how this works by saying segmented sounds in sequence and then saying the word. Remember, say sounds, not letter names.

'c' 'a' 't'      'cat'

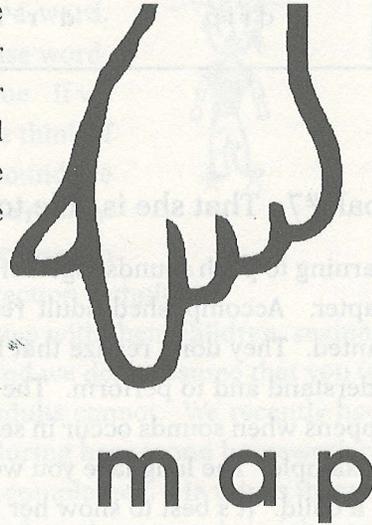
This sort of example will help her see and hear what's happening.

It's not uncommon for young children six and under who are just starting to blend to have trouble remembering all the sounds in a three-sound word. They will frequently say all the sounds 'c' 'a' 't' and then blend just the last two leaving the first sound off entirely: 'at'. The best way to help them through this is to teach them to blend the first two sounds and then add on the third: 'c' 'a' 'ca' 't'... 'cat.' This reduces the memory load. Once sounds are linked, or blended, they become a unit, so your child has only one thing to remember and then the last sound gets

added on. When you use this aid, do not teach 'ca' as if it were a new sound to learn. Some phonics programs try to teach all the possible consonant-vowel combinations and call the combinations "word families." This is very confusing to children. They end up with more to learn than is necessary. If she already knows 'c' and 'a', she doesn't need to learn 'ca', she only needs to learn to push the sounds together before adding on the last sound. Simply teach her to blend the first two first and then add the last. This is what good readers do subconsciously and very quickly. This drill allows her to practice the process, while demonstrating for her that this is what reading is, pushing sounds together to make words.

Another typical mistake that children make is to say all the sounds and then guess a similar word. For example, 'p' 'o' 't'... 'top' or 'm' 'a' 'p'... 'tap.' The same procedure explained in the previous paragraph will help alleviate this problem. You can also add a bit of simple language like this, "If this (indicate the word) was 'tap,' this (indicate the <m>) would be a picture of 't'. But it isn't. It's a picture of 'm'. Try again, please." As we've mentioned, each of these errors is covered in the lesson plans that follow. Please read each lesson plan carefully and take a few minutes to practice the steps before you begin working with your child.

When your child starts blending words with success, it's important to help her realize that she is reading. Some parents fail to acknowledge this accomplishment because the process of saying a sound, a sound, a sound and then pushing the sounds together to make a word, sounds more like an automaton than a child reading. If you fail to acknowledge this early accomplishment, you're cheating your child out of her right to feel good about herself. In time she will be reading with the fluency you both seek. For now, she needs to practice with meticulous care the skills she has learned so far. You should allow and encourage her to take it slow, sounding each sound and blending as she needs to. New readers should be told that adults read quickly because they took the time to practice slowly as children.



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As we've mentioned in Chapter two, if your child is a new reader, in first grade, sixth month, or younger, just follow the  Sound Doggy symbols throughout the book, regardless of her test scores. In this chapter, lessons are set out in three sets: Fat Cat Sat, which teaches the sound pictures <f>, <c>, <s>, <a>, <o>, <m>, <p>, and <t>; Bug On Jug, which teaches <b>, <d>, <u>, <g>, <j>, <i>, <h>, and <r>; and Ben Bun, which teaches <e>, <n>, <v>, <w>, <z>, and <l>. This order is intended to establish the sound to sound picture correspondence of the sounds in each set, and how we use these to read and spell, before moving on to the next set. So you should present all the Fat Cat Sat lessons in the order they appear before moving on to the Bug On Jug lessons, and then present all the Bug On Jug lessons before moving on to Ben Bun. If your child is older than the sixth month of first grade and has been retained in first grade, you, too, should follow the Fat Cat Sat, Bug On Jug, and Ben Bun lessons as described above.

If your child is older than first grade, sixth month, and is in second grade or beyond, do all of the lessons in the book, including the  Sound Doggy lessons, unless the readiness section says that the lesson is not necessary for your child.

Whether your child is a new reader or an older child, you can *do more than one lesson in a sitting*. We find that the biggest mistake that parents make with their children is that they fail to do the lessons repeatedly. Remember, if you are working with a young child, she needs lots and lots of repetition to learn the material. If you are working with an older child, she needs repetition in order to break old habits and replace them with new, more effective ones. *Repetition is the key*. Even when you progress to new lessons, you can *keep practicing previous lessons*. You will know your child doesn't need to continue working on a lesson when she is performing with fairly consistent accuracy.