

Guided Reading at Home, a Two-Part Series by Cathy Puett Miller, The Literacy Ambassador®

Part I: Figuring Out Words

Reading is one of the things that every child must possess to be successful in life. Like walking, it is a skill that is learned, with lots of practice. It isn't a natural ability that we are born with. This two-part series by literacy expert [Cathy Puett Miller](#) is designed to give parents simple tools they can use at home to complement their child's school work, and offer additional one-on-one practice that is rewarding for everyone.

Today's parents often say, "They just don't teach reading the way I learned it." Yet, research overwhelmingly reports that parent involvement in children's learning is critical. So, what's a parent to do? How can you help your child get off to a strong start and succeed as a reader?

Today, many classroom teachers use an instruction method called *guided reading*. The ideas used in guided reading help children make sense of what they read, at first with help, and later on their own. Teachers often pick books that are just the right reading level for your child so he can have a lot of success in these activities. Although teachers are the experts, you can use a few of the same techniques at home with great results.

Guide Point #1: Don't give your child the answer.

Guided reading is about equipping your child. Think about teaching him to tie his shoes; you want him to eventually do it on his own. When she is reading to you, it may seem positive to just tell him the word she's struggling with. Instead, try asking questions to help your child do it on her own:

Do you know any part of this word? If a child knows the word *at*, he can read *cat*, *hat*, *sat*, *flat*, *splat*. He just adds or changes the beginning sound. Sometimes he can split the word into two words he knows like *pan* and *cake* make *pancake*. He knows *sock*, he can figure out *stock* by adding the "t" sound.

Does it follow a rule you learned from class? Here is a common sense rule in beginning phonics: When you see a word with the pattern consonant-vowel-consonant (see box for definitions), the vowel sound is usually short. This is true for words like *bit*, *sack*, *test*, *dog*, *Fred*.

When you see a word with the pattern of two consonants and two vowels, the first vowel usually says its name (is long); the second vowel is quiet. Some children learn the rule this way: "the first one does the talking; the second one does the walking." Examples include *cake*, *greet*, *tire*, *spoke*, *tune*.

What are vowels and consonants?

Vowels in English are the letters a, e, i, o, u and sometimes y when it sounds like an "i."

The consonants are all the rest of the letters in our alphabet.

EXTRA TIP: There are a few exceptions, so if your child tries the pattern and it doesn't sound like a word she knows, switch the sound from long to short or short to long. The word *give*, for example, has a short "i" sound when the pattern says words like this usually have a long "i" sound. Try saying g-i-v-e with the long sound and you get a word that isn't a word. Switch the sound and you've got it!

Does it look kind of like a word you already know? This builds on the first tip. If you know *cake*, you can read *rake, snake, bake, quake, flake*, and many more. I always tell children "big words are just little words you already know put together."

What are the beginning, middle, ending sounds? If your child is just beginning to read, he is learning to sound out words from the letters or blends within the word. Sometimes looking at a whole unknown word scares children and they are afraid to try. If they break it down into familiar parts, they can get it right. If you have questions about how the individual letters or blends should be pronounced, ask your child's teacher. One of the most common confusions is between the short "e" and short "i" sounds.

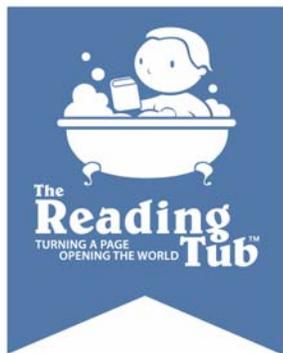
Guide Point #2: Enjoy the reading experience by being conversational and supportive. Praise their efforts and celebrate their successes.

Just because you are helping with homework or reading doesn't mean you have to turn your house into a classroom. Relax and make your questions conversational, a natural part of the reading process. Be positive and encouraging to your youngster and reward him whenever he tries hard.

Guide Point #3: Be consistent; practice makes perfect.

Choosing to spend time reading with your child every night (both letting them read to you and you reading to them) takes a commitment. When you weigh the benefits, however, you'll soon see that carving out this time is well worth it. Also remember that frustration for young children can kick in within 5-10 seconds so never allow your child to struggle for longer than that without using one or more of these suggested prompts. Taking a break and coming back to the task may also help children with limited attention spans.

Whatever your approach, be confident that you can make a difference in your child's reading abilities and his attitude toward reading in general. Your influence and interest will have a tremendous impact.



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Part II: What Does This Mean?

Reading is one of the things that every child must possess to be successful in life. Like walking, it is a skill that is learned, with lots of practice. It isn't a natural ability that we are born with. This two-part series by literacy expert [Cathy Puett Miller](#) is designed to give parents simple tools they can use at home to complement your child's school work, and offer additional one-on-one practice that is rewarding for everyone.

Good readers use specific tools to make sense of words, paragraphs and text. In the first article in this series, we focused on helping your child figure out unknown words. Now we will concentrate on helping our children make sense of what they read: the whole reason we read in the first place. When you read a mortgage contract or the newspaper, you automatically use some of these tools but our children may not have mastered those ideas yet.

Guided reading helps your child think about those tools and build a personal toolbox. Once they've practiced using those tools with help, they can become skillful at using them to understand what they read on their own.

Try these prompts with your child when they are reading:



Put on your thinking cap. Reading is an active process and, to get the most out of it, children must concentrate, think about what they are reading, and ask themselves from time to time if they understand what the author is saying.

A good way to start is to ask the child to predict or make their best guess as to what the story or text will be about. They can look at the title or caption and the pictures to start thinking about what they will read. Your child may also have a purpose for reading (to find out more about mountain loins.) Ask her what that purpose might be.



Recall, re-read, retell. As your child reads, stop from time to time and ask, "What has happened so far?" Help him focus on the most important parts of the story, not every detail. If he starts to give you too much information, ask "can you just tell me the three main things that have happened?"

If he doesn't know, ask him to re-read the section. Sometimes when children struggle at figuring out words, they put so much effort into that part of reading that their understanding suffers. Once the "figuring out" has happened, re-reading can help them get the meaning.



Relate. Another way we understand what we read is to relate the material to our own experiences, our world, or something we've read elsewhere. While we are reading, we are thinking about how it relates to us, our world, and perhaps other texts. Help your child do that by asking questions like:

- “What would you do next if you were this character?”
- “Why do you think he made that choice?”
- ”Doesn’t that puppy look like our dog, Joey?”
- “Does this remind you of another story?”
- “I’d like to know what happens next, would you?”

Share your thoughts and what *you* wonder about. “I think that’s really funny. Why would she do that?” Listen carefully to what your child says. That will help him learn AND bring the two of you closer.



Monitor and self-correct. If you come across a word your child can pronounce but she doesn’t know the meaning, what should you do? You can explain the meaning to her in your own words or you can look it up in a dictionary together. You can also continue to read to see if the rest of the sentence helps you understand the word’s meaning. For example, perhaps you don’t know what the word “admonished” means in this sentence:

"Elizabeth felt as though she had been sent to the doghouse when Amanda *admonished* her for running at the pool."

If your child understands what “sent to the doghouse” means, or that no one should run around a pool, then she can probably figure out that *admonished* means scolded. Finally, you can look at the pictures in a picture book (perhaps your child knows what a giraffe is but has never seen the word).

Teaching your child to listen to herself when she reads and stop when she mispronounces a word or when something doesn’t make sense is very important. Prompt her from time to time: “Did you hear what you just said; it didn’t make sense to me. Will you read that again?” or “Did you realize what you just read didn’t make sense; what can you do to fix that?” Praise her when she uses that tool on her own. Encourage her to always stop when she gets confused. Before long, you’ll see her voluntarily re-read, puzzle over a section, or ask a question on her own.



Process and rethink. When you’ve finished reading together, ask questions that can not be answered “yes” or “no” and questions that require more than just spitting back one-word answers. Here are a few to try:

- "What did you learn from this book?"
- "What was your favorite part and why?"
- "Is there something more you’d like to know after reading this piece?"

You can also revisit retelling and recalling. Sometimes books include questions at the back or the teacher may provide questions for your child to answer. If he doesn’t know the answer, go back to the ‘re-read’ activity and let him look for the answer rather than pointing it out.

As they say, “this is just the tip of the iceberg.” Still, these simple techniques can give you confidence in helping your child. Ask your teacher if they are working on specific strategies during guided reading at school and whether you can help with those at home. Most teachers will

be happy to give you a quick explanation. You don't have to use all of them at once; try out a few and add to them as you enjoy the reading experience together.

Known as the "Literacy Ambassador," Cathy Puett Miller is a practicing children's and family literacy consultant. Her writing appears in such print publications as Atlanta Our Kids, Omaha Family, and The Georgia Journal of Reading, and online [at Literacy Connections](#), [Parenthood.com](#), [Education World](#), and [babyzone.com](#). She works nationally to promote the value and pleasures of reading with schools, PTA/PTO groups, and non-profit family friendly agency. Visit Cathy's Website [Reading is for Everyone – Home of the Literacy Ambassador®](#) for information about her services and to read her articles. You can also get great information and reading tips at [Parents and Kids Reading Together](#), her blog.