

## **PREFACE**

On January 23, 2024, the Ontario Ministry of Education issued a news release that outlined a new Back-to-Basics Kindergarten Curriculum reform. Among the many points in the release was the following message.

The driving force for this reform is recommended by the 2022 Ontario Human Rights Commission Right to Read inquiry report, which identified that Ontario's kindergarten program was failing to teach many students to read and promote reading confidence... As such, the province is focused on modernizing the way reading is taught and assessed in schools to help improve student literacy. Currently kindergarten students learn from a "program" that was developed eight years ago...New and mandatory learning will include the understanding of sound-letter relationships, developing phonics knowledge and using specific vocabulary.

When a similar deficiency in the kindergarten curriculum arose during the 1990s, the Canadian Psychological Association together with the Canadian Association of School Psychologists (disbanded in 2019) endorsed a program known as CANSTART. As part of that program, three research-based publications were produced with the aim of informing teachers of the best ways to help children who were unable to meet what many considered appropriate kindergarten expectations. Among these publications, *Promoting Reading Success* focused entirely on what the Ministry of Education has now called for: classroom activities designed to provide children with an understanding of the phonetic structure of words. As an aid to the Ministry, the Canadian Psychological Association is pleased to re-issue this publication in a more user-friendly format intended for teachers.

The justification to re-issue, as opposed to updating and revising this material, was based on several factors. Foremost among these was a comprehensive report released by the National Reading Panel in 2000. Organized at the request of Congress, the purpose of the panel, which consisted of 13 prominent researchers in the field, was to "assess the status of research-based knowledge, including the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching children to read" (p. 1-1). Among the many findings, the panel concluded that phonological awareness is an important element in preparing children for reading and can be taught in various ways "including identifying or categorizing the phonemes in words, segmenting words into phonemes, blending phonemes to form words, deleting phonemes from words, or manipulating onsets and rimes in words" (p. 2-41). It was these ways in conjunction with many of the activities that already had been suggested by others over the years and that were recently further endorsed by Gillon (2018, see Chapter 10), and already incorporated in *Promoting Reading Success*, that permitted the Canadian Psychological Association to consider it appropriate to re-issue and re-format this earlier publication as an aid to teachers.

Throughout the booklet are examples of activities for five- to six-year-old children derived from the phonological awareness exercises used or recommended by Anthony and Francis (2005), Ball and Blachman (1988, 1991), Blachman (1984, 1991), Blachman et al. (1994, 2000, 2019), Bradely and Bryant (1985), Byrne and Fielding-Barnsley (1991,1995), Castle et al. (1994), Cunningham (1990), Goldsworthy (2001), Kurtz (2010), Lundberg et al. (1988), Olofsson and Lundberg (1983), Rivers et al. (1996), Torgesen et al. (1992), and Williams (1980). To ensure that the more demanding activities are

delayed until the children have mastered the prerequisite skills, the four sections that appear below have also been arranged using the developmental sequence recommended by Catts (1991), Griffith and Olson (1992), Spector (1995), and Yopp (1992).

Section 1 contains two sets of preliminary activities designed to help children become aware that spoken words not only convey meaning but have sound properties as well. The first set focuses on the global sound properties of words while the second, slightly more advanced set, emphasizes sounds at specific locations within words. Once the children master these activities, they can be guided through the intermediate activities in the next section, which consist of syllabic awareness and onset-rime exercises,<sup>1</sup> before moving to the phonemic awareness activities in Section 3. The transition-to-reading activities in the last section of the booklet are included because there is evidence to suggest that these activities form an important step in helping children link their developing skills in phonological awareness to the reading process itself (Hatcher et al., 1994). As the major purpose of the booklet is to enable teachers to assist children who are weak in phonological awareness, also included is the Yopp-Singer Test of Phoneme Segmentation (see Appendix A), which is a brief screening device designed to help teachers identify those most in need of the type of assistance provided by these activities.

While there are no specific guidelines concerning length of training, some, such as Yopp and Troyer (as cited in Yopp, 1992), have reported gains in phonological awareness alone with as little as one 15- to 20-minute session each day for two weeks. In most programs where the ultimate aim is to improve reading performance, however, the norm seems to be several brief sessions each week over a period of three to four months (Carson et al., 2013). In the Blachman et al. (1994) program, for instance, the children met in groups of four or five and training, which was conducted by the children's classroom teacher, consisted of the same 15- to 20-minute sessions four times each week beginning in March and ending in May.

There are also no guidelines regarding pace of training. Instead, the most that can be stated is that children should be allowed to set their own pace. Some children may need to spend considerable time on the first set of preliminary activities in Section 1. With other children it may be possible to skip these and proceed directly to the second set of activities. We mention this point because even though the sections, and the activities within the sections, have been organized in a developmental sequence, it may not be necessary for all children to be exposed to all the activities in each section before advancing to the next section.

When employing these activities there are also four points that should be kept in mind. First, although the activities are typical of the ones that have proven successful in reducing the risk of reading failure, it is not our intention to suggest that these are the only activities likely to be helpful. Sources such as Badenhop (1992), Dallas (1992), Gould (1988), Honig (1996), Rosner (1986), Slavin et al. (1996), and Wallach and Wallach (1976), all cited in the References section below, contain additional activities as well as recommendations on how to integrate the activities into the children's daily schedule. Using the many examples that appear throughout the booklet as guides, teachers should also feel free to develop their own activities. As long as the activities are entertaining, hold the children's attention, and conform to the developmental sequence outlined above, progress is likely to be made. It may be helpful, however, to become acquainted with the nature and scope of the developmental sequence outlined below prior to implementing any of the activities.

Second, in the beginning, words should be presented orally, not in the form of pictures. Asking children to select one or more pictures that represent objects whose name(s) starts with a selected sound, according to Catts (1991), is a relatively difficult task and may be too difficult for some children to master. Indeed, Lewkowicz and Low (1979) found no advantage in using pictures and even reported greater gains on at least some tasks when pictures were not employed. Similarly, because most children at-risk for reading failure have only a limited command of the alphabet (Simner, 1983), it is best to delay the introduction of the letter shapes until after the children have successfully mastered several of the letter sounds. For this reason, instruction in letter-sound/letter-shape recognition is reserved for the last section of the booklet.

Third, if the activities are to be effective, the key sounds in each activity need to be emphasized; hence, although it is important to speak naturally, it is equally important to speak slowly and enthusiastically.

Fourth, although parents should be encouraged to employ many of the activities described below at home (especially those in Section 1), it is important to ensure that parents view the activities as enjoyable experiences to be shared with their children. Treating the material as homework assignments that must be completed on a daily basis could cause their children to develop a negative attitude toward reading, which in turn could further reduce their children's chances of later becoming successful readers.

Finally, in light of the often-acrimonious debate over beginning reading instruction, the activities described below may seem inappropriate to some because they run counter to a frequently held position which holds that basic skills instruction is antagonistic to good teaching practices. While it is not the intention of the Canadian Psychological Association to promote one form of instruction over another, together with the Ontario Ministry of Education and the Ontario Human Rights Commission, we do ask that careful consideration should be given to the research findings which show that training in phonological awareness can be beneficial to children at-risk for reading failure. When commenting on the significance of these findings, as Honig (1996) so aptly put it, "Imagine the implications: Most children who will fail at beginning-reading tasks are only 15 hours away from removing a major barrier to succeeding in first grade, if [only] the right intervention is provided early enough" (p. 33).