

Florida Center for Reading Research

Headsprout Reading Basics

What is Headsprout Reading Basics?

Headsprout Reading Basics is the first part of Headsprout Early Reading, a supplemental beginning reading program for 4- to 7-year-olds who are not yet reading or who are in the beginning stages of the reading process. Designed to teach the foundational skills and strategies that are critical in becoming a skilled, fluent reader, this internet-based program captures the attention of the pre-kindergarten child through the use of engaging, highly interactive activities, and serves as an on-line tutor, providing one-on-one instruction. Requirements for this program are any internet-connected PC or Mac computer on school-site premises. Schools receive access to Headsprout's on-line lessons, automated classroom and individual progress reports, a teacher's guide, phonics-based flashcards, and a license to download and print all 35 Headsprout stories and progress maps from the Headsprout website. Children always use the latest software since upgrades for *Headsprout Reading Basics* are automatic and free.

Headsprout Reading Basics consists of 40 lessons for pre-kindergarten children. Before starting the lessons, a brief tutorial gives children practice in all of the mouse movements and types of activities they will encounter in the program. Children demonstrate that they have the entry level skills necessary to begin the program by passing the tutorial. Typical 4-year-old language skills were considered in the development of the instructional language within *Headsprout Reading Basics*; however, the program is not recommended for pre-kindergarten children who do not pass the tutorial session. Children work independently 3-5 times a week with interactive, web-based lessons or episodes lasting approximately 20 minutes. If the children exit the episode sooner, but return within 60 hours, they start with the unfinished activity or the very next activity. Lessons begin with easier skills that gradually increase in difficulty by building upon each other through guided practice, repetition, and cumulative review. Instruction includes securing the alphabetic principle, beginning decoding strategies, developing fluent reading of sounds, words and short sentences and deriving meaning from print. A scope and sequence portrays the components of reading found in the 40 lessons. Another chart delineates the sequence of individual sound and units of sound introduction for each lesson, including decodable words and sight words, giving a snapshot view of what a child should accomplish at various points in the program.

Many unique aspects inherent in the *Headsprout Reading Basics* were designed to facilitate the child's acquisition of early literacy skills. First, in an attempt to reduce errors, the necessary skills and strategies of reading are broken into their component parts (Twyman, Layng, Stikeleather, & Hobbins, 2004). The careful construction of each lesson explicitly, sequentially and systematically leads a child to mastery of that lesson's objective. Another important aspect is the program's ability to adapt to the unique needs and pace of each child, allowing some children to move through lessons quickly while others who require extra practice are given more instruction. This is accomplished by the technology responding to a child's pattern of errors. A series of correction procedures exist that are sequenced by the intensity of support they offer children. Depending on the child's response, immediate feedback is given and a simple error correction is begun. If the child persists with the error, a



more supportive correction routine is supplied, additional learning and practice opportunities are created, or, the skill is taught again and the child is returned to the original task. The pedagogical framework within each episode of *Headsprout Reading Basics* is designed such that children only exit after they have achieved mastery of the lesson's key objectives. This particular feature of *Headsprout Reading Basics* increases a child's likelihood of success in the following lesson.

How is Headsprout Reading Basics aligned with Current Reading Research?

Headsprout Reading Basics is different from many supplemental pre-kindergarten programs in that it focuses exclusively on phonemic awareness, rather than other lower level phonological awareness skills, and also because it includes text reading fluency and reading comprehension, which are absent from many other programs. *Headsprout* intends to develop these skills by providing scaffolding, repetition, reinforcement, and monitoring of instruction so that the child is able to perform successfully at this level. The focus is on one child and one skill at a time with opportunities to practice each component skill until specific mastery and fluency levels are met. A complete description of the Headsprout program for K-2nd grades can be found on FCRR's website under the category, supplemental programs.

This report focuses on elements of *Headsprout Reading Basics* that include the components of a pre-kindergarten program critical to the development of early language and pre-reading skills: oral language, phonological awareness, and print knowledge. At the pre-k level, oral language skills encompass the development of listening comprehension and vocabulary through expressive and receptive language experiences. In the Headsprout program, oral language activities focus on applying words that are most likely in a child's spoken vocabulary to words in the developing reading vocabulary. When unfamiliar objects or words are presented, they are introduced and labeled prior to encountering them in an activity. The meaning of the word is given through animation then used in other contexts. The children learn to listen to their own speech through activities that ask them to say a word then match the word with a character that says it just like they did. Grammatically correct and consistent instructional routines within the program are intended to shape the child's language. The goal is for children to focus on the complexities of learning to read instead of the complexities of the instructional language.

Phonological awareness activities focus on work with individual sounds or sound blends in isolation followed by identifying the target sounds in the context of a word. Children practice seeing, hearing, and saying individual sounds while continuously being made aware of the fact that the sounds they hear are part of words. These activities are carefully intertwined with phonics instruction using visual techniques to indicate the separation of sounds when learning sound blends, how letter-sounds join to form a word, and when blending and segmenting words. There is an assumption that the children have previously had activities involving earlier phonological awareness activities although they are not expected to demonstrate competency in this area prior to beginning the program.

Activities intended to develop concepts of print occur throughout each lesson. The *Headsprout Reading Basics* program includes instruction on letter sounds for 34 phonetic elements (listed in the teacher's manual), conventions of print such as left-to-right, top-to-bottom, and first and last, and the concept that print has meaning.

These skills are reinforced through game-like activities on the computer and during the teacher reading of the nine Read with Me Stories. The child is motivated to follow along in the story as it presents an opportunity to read a specific part and answer questions about the story. Other individual booklets are available for the children to practice the skills taught on-line. The six Headsprout Readers provide decodable, short stories using the skills taught directly on-line and the 15 Companion Stories provide longer, decodable stories where the child generalizes the skills taught on-line by sounding out novel words in the context of story reading. All 30 booklets will soon be available in published format.

In addition to *Headsprout Reading Basics*, other early literacy activities such as shared reading for an oral language exchange and early phonological awareness and letter identification activities should be included in the pre-kindergarten program.

Professional development exists as a half- or whole-day training addressing current reading research and how to best use *Headsprout Reading Basic*. This may take place in person or via telephone and the Web, is tailored to the needs of the school, and is available for an extra cost. Due to the self-explanatory nature of the program, extensive professional development may be less critical for implementation. During initial implementation however, telephone and email support are available.

Research Support for Headsprout Reading Basics

Research on the development of the *Headsprout Program* is discussed in the primary report on *Headsprout Early Reading* at http://www.fcrr.org/FCRRReports/PDF/headsprout_final.pdf. To date, no studies specifically demonstrating the efficacy of *Headsprout Reading Basics* for improving literacy skills in preschool children have been conducted. There is a need for randomized control studies to provide reliable information about the effects of this program on the early literacy skills of pre-kindergarten children.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths of *Headsprout Reading Basics*:

- The program adapts to a child's pattern of response, offering corrective feedback and teaching routines that are supportive and instructional
- The sequence of sounds in this program was chosen because of their consistency in pronunciation.
- Sounds are held out or stretched during pronunciation and sounding out of words.
- Decodable texts on-line and in printed booklets provide children with the chance to apply the skills they have been learning.
- By weaving cumulative review throughout all episodes, the potential for increasing the retention of skills and strategies is augmented.
- All lessons are highly interactive and provide multiple opportunities for practice, which in turn, increase student involvement.

Weaknesses of *Headsprout Reading Basics*:

- Although the instructional design encourages oral responses that are verified by a comparison model, it is not clear that pre-kindergarten children would continue to respond independently.
- There are no data that support the effectiveness of the program with preschool children.

Which Florida districts have schools that implement Headsprout Reading Basics?

Baker	904-259-1387
Bradford	940-966-6800
Orange	407-317-3202

For More Information

www.headsprout.com

References

Twyman, J.S., Layng, T.V.J., Stikeleather, G. and Hobbins, K.A. (2004). A non-linear approach to curriculum design: The role of behavior analysis in building an effective reading program. In W. L. Heward et al. (Eds). *Focus on behavior analysis in education*, Vol. 3. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.

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