

Florida Center for Reading Research

Phonics and Friends

What is Phonics and Friends?

Phonics and Friends is a supplemental program designed for phonics instruction for emergent and early readers in kindergarten through second grade. The program is intended to be used in addition to regular classroom instruction. A teacher or paraprofessional delivers 20 minute, daily lessons to the whole class or small groups. Each of the six levels in *Phonics and Friends* is comprised of a Teacher's Guide, Sing-Along Songs Big Book and CD, Rhyme Cards, Let's Read Big Books, Sing-Along Songs and Story Tapes, Phonics Storybooks, and Decodable Take-Home Books. Blackline masters in the Teacher's Guide include reproducible student practice sheets, letter cards, word cards, take-home books, parent letters in several languages and assessment tools. The Kindergarten Level A+ consists of 31 weekly lesson plans, and First and Second grade Levels B through F each consist of 12 weekly plans.

The *Phonics and Friends* weekly units follow a 3-step or 3-5 day teaching plan. At every level, the first step begins with the teacher introducing a new song and a phonemic awareness activity. A rhyme card to teach the new sound-symbol correspondence is included in step one for Levels B-F; this rhyme card is the second step for Kindergarten. In Levels B-F, the second step focuses on applying the new phonics element using magnetic boards and letters, word pocket and letter cards, student worksheets and Big Books. The Big Books are designed to integrate the new phonics element in the text and provide a repetitive language pattern to make the text easier for the children to read. The third step includes the teacher reading the Big Phonics Storybook several times with the Kindergarten students, and includes independent student reading of the Phonics Storybook at higher levels. The teacher previews each book using a picture walk, asks questions to activate prior knowledge, and introduces high-frequency words before the students read the book. After independently reading the story, the students are asked specific comprehension questions. Writing activities are also included in the third step. The last part of the unit is comprised of recommendations for related trade books and cross-curricular connections.

At each level there are suggestions for differentiating the lesson to meet the needs of the students at risk, English language learners, or gifted students. There is a Phonics Scope and Sequence in the Teacher's Guide and a list of Learning Objectives in every lesson for phonics skills, high-frequency words, and language patterns.

An assessment plan is included with *Phonics and Friends* to determine placement in the program, monitor progress after each teaching plan, and assess mastery of skills at the end of each level. The program recommends that students who know 16 or fewer consonants on the Pretest begin with Level A+ or the Sound-Review section of Level B. Throughout the program, students who score below 80% on the phonics progress monitoring tests are grouped for reteaching of the same material.



How is Phonics and Friends aligned with Reading First?

Phonics and Friends is not designed to be a comprehensive reading program that incorporates all five of the Reading First critical components (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). It focuses primarily on phonics with strategies that focus on reading words by: sight, prediction, decoding, and analogy, though phonemic awareness lessons are also included in Levels A+, B, C, and D. Level A+ teaches the letter-sound correspondence of the most useful consonants and short vowels before lower-utility consonants. After several recitations of a rhyme for a letter, the teacher explicitly points to the letter and states the letter sound. Unfortunately, opportunities for the student to repeat just the letter sound are missing. Following a brief review of individual letter sounds at the beginning of Level B, students explore more complex concepts at Levels B-F such as CVC word patterns in Level B; long vowels in Level C; blends and digraphs in Level D; long vowel, r-controlled vowels, and inflections in Level E; and variant sounds, diphthongs, suffixes, and prefixes in Level F. The teacher models the new sound then guides the students through different practice opportunities where they manipulate letters to decode and encode words using the new sounds. Explicit instruction is evident when students are taught to blend sounds into words, to sound out words using phonograms, and to segment words through spelling using boards with magnetic letters and pocket charts with letter cards. Students apply the phonics and decoding skills through systematic application of letters to words, sentences, and connected text.

Application of phonics skills to text begins in Level A+ with the teacher reading of the Big Phonics Storybook while students listen and point to the words in the Little Storybooks. The students gradually begin to pretend-read by memorizing the text and using pictures to predict the words. The concern is that in using non-decodable text, students are not engaged in activities that directly apply the alphabetic knowledge they've learned. At the end of the lesson, there is a Take-Home Book that provides the decodable text students need to apply their newly learned phonics skills. Beyond level A+, teachers use the Let's Read Big Books to present a decodable story with students volunteering to come up and read parts of the story. While the stories provide an excellent opportunity to directly apply the new phonics skills in highly decodable text, it is unclear whether or not the other students are able to see the text in order to have opportunities to practice these skills as well. An available option is to purchase a set of Let's Read Little Books so that each student is able to follow the text. Application of phonics skills in Levels B-F culminates in a guided reading lesson using the Phonics Storybooks. Picture support for the text, repetitive language patterns and pre-taught high-frequency words aid the student in reading the slightly more challenging and interesting text. To build fluency skills, students can read along with the recorded story on tape.

Other strategies for learning to read words are applied in *Phonics and Friends*; however, in some sections, the instructional methods used to teach these strategies are not fully consistent with current reading research. For instance, learning high-frequency words by sight is one strategy applied in the weekly lesson plan. In Levels A+ through D, several new words are introduced each week by saying and then spelling the word. These words occur frequently in that week's story reading, student worksheets, and take-home books but rarely in subsequent lessons. In order to fully support the struggling reader, ample practice opportunities to read, grasp the meaning, and use the new sight words are critical to securing it in the student's memory. Furthermore, when the connection between the graphemes and phonemes of

the sight word and the meaning of the word are not formed, students may have difficulties learning that word. According to Ehri, "The knowledge of letter-sound relations provides the powerful mnemonic system that bonds the written forms of specific words to their pronunciation in memory" (1995, p.172).

The lesson activities for phonemic awareness do not include lessons that build on previously taught information nor do they include clear student objectives. Additionally, explicit instruction, scaffolding instruction, and error corrections are not a consistent part of instruction. For instance, in one of the earliest lessons in kindergarten, students are asked to form a rhyme for each of these words: far, fish, fox and fat. At this point, the teacher has not prepared students by demonstrating what a rhyme is or by providing examples of rhymes. These activities are geared toward group participation, but without providing opportunities for individual responses, it will be difficult for the teacher to know if each student has grasped the concept correctly and is ready for the next phase. Although *Phonics and Friends'* hierarchy of phonemic awareness activities lists 'Substituting a Sound in a Word' as one of the most difficult tasks for young readers, students are asked to engage in this activity in the beginning of the 1st grade program. Phonemic awareness activities occur only once a week with no opportunities to repeat and review that skill until several weeks later. To meet a student's need for additional practice, teachers may select an appropriate skill from a limited bank of phonemic awareness activities in the Teacher's Guide to teach on the other days. Struggling readers could benefit from daily practice in order to acquire that skill before more difficult skills are introduced.

The professional development includes a 30-minute video overview that accompanies the curriculum kits. In addition, three sessions of professional development are offered to schools who are implementing *Phonics and Friends* school-wide. These sessions consist of 3 days, 3 half-days, or 3 one-hour training depending on the request of the school district.

Research Support for Phonics and Friends

Phonics and Friends was first published in 2000, and does not yet have published studies supporting the efficacy of the program. Although the program addresses phonemic awareness and phonics, randomized control studies by a third-party evaluator are needed to determine if the methods used to teach this content are effective.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths of *Phonics and Friends*:

- The lesson plans are easy to follow and well-organized.
- Teachers model then guide students in practicing decoding strategies.
- Phonics Storybook Tapes support repeated readings of the text.

Weaknesses of *Phonics and Friends*:

- There are no examples of what immediate corrective feedback might look like to scaffold instruction as students encounter difficulties.
- Instruction in phonemic awareness is not systematic and is included only once each week at the beginning of the week's lesson.

Which Florida districts have schools that implement Phonics and Friends?

Duval	904-390-2115	Okeechobee	863-462-5000
Hillsborough	813-272-4050	Orange	407-317-3202
Indian River	772-564-3150	Palm Beach	561-434-8200
Manatee	941-708-8770	St. Lucie	772-429-3925
Marion	352-671-7702	Volusia	386-734-7190
Miami-Dade	305-995-1430		

For More Information

<http://www.hampton-brown.com/onlinecatalog/products.asp?subID=4>

References



Ehri, L.C. (1995). Teachers Need to Know How Word Reading Processes Develop to Teach Reading Effectively to Beginners. In C.N. Hedley, P. Antonacci, & M. Rabinowitz (Ed.), *Thinking and Literacy: The Mind at Work* (pp.167-188). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Washington, D.C.

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Important Note: FCRR Reports are prepared in response to requests from Florida school districts for review of specific reading programs. The reports are intended to be a source of information about programs that will help teachers, principals, and district personnel in their choice of materials that can be used by skilled teachers to provide effective instruction. Whether or not a program has been reviewed does **not** constitute endorsement or lack of endorsement by the FCRR.

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