

PHONICS: MORE THAN MEETS THE EAR

Video Workshop Transcript

At one and the same time, it's the most awesome job of homeschooling and it's most fearsome. We know the worlds that are unlocked for our children when they become readers. William James describes it this way: "So it is with children who learn to read fluently and well: They begin to take flight into whole new worlds as effortlessly as birds take to the sky." Or as Dr. Seuss puts it, "The more you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go."

We know instinctively that our child's success or failure in life rests largely on his ability to read. Mortimer Adler (of Encyclopedia Britannica fame) tells us that "Reading is a basic tool in the living of a good life." Ralph Waldo Emerson puts it even more succinctly: "A man is known by the books he reads."

We also know instinctively that our success or failure as a homeschooling parent rests upon our child's ability to learn to read. After all, we've seen the quip "If you can read this, thank a teacher." We want desperately to succeed but we fear desperately that we might fail.

There's another related paradox. We think it surely can't be all that hard to teach a child to read. Look how many people have done it. And yet, we hear of all the learn-to-read failures; all the children who cannot read. The public schools don't have a good track record. Homeschoolers seem to do better—but what if it's *my* child who struggles to learn to read? Then there are all those scary diagnostic terms—dyslexia, processing disorders, etc.

I'm Janice Price, and I want to welcome you to our workshop on phonics and reading. Some have called me Rainbow's senior consultant. That's just a polite way of saying that I've been around the homeschooling world a long time. And part of that time was spent in exactly the same place you might find yourself today—wondering if I was going to be able to teach my children to read.

We started homeschooling our children in the mid '80s. Back then most of the curriculum available to homeschoolers had been developed for Christian Schools. Both Abeka and Bob Jones had determinedly kept phonics as the preferred way of teaching reading even though the public schools had largely abandoned it in favor of the whole word approach. Homeschoolers picked up the phonics standard and even though there weren't many of us, we used phonics almost exclusively to teach our children to read.

About the time my family started our homeschooling journey, two phonics programs, developed independently of the Christian Schools, were being talked about—*Sing, Spell, Read, & Write* and *Play 'n Talk*. Mary Pride, in her first *Big Book of Home Learning* suggested that the two programs together were the perfect approach to phonics and reading and because we wanted to do it in the best way possible, we bought both and used both. Today's version of *Sing, Spell, Read & Write* is largely the same as what we used. *Play 'n Talk*, however, even though an excellent program, has disappeared. I think the program did make it into cassettes, but our version had records. My two oldest children—both girls—did well with this combination and were soon reading fluently. My third child, a son, was another story. After going through both of these programs plus one more, he was still painfully sounding out every word—and he was starting 3rd grade. Needless to say I was starting to panic.

As the name of this workshop implies, today we are primarily concerned with the phonics method of teaching reading. We're going to look at the history of teaching reading and sort through the phonics or no phonics squabbles that are part of that history. I'll define some basic terms you may have heard and some you probably haven't. I'll also describe a few of the most popular approaches to phonics, and give you an overview of the phonics/reading curricula that's available. Lastly, although it's not the main focus of this workshop, we'll spend a little time looking at some paths you can take if you have a struggling reader like my son.

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Perhaps this is a good place to emphasize that our goal is not really to teach phonics; our goal is to produce fluent readers. Years ago, I read a wonderful quote from *someone*. I think it might have been Ruth Beechick, although maybe Mary Pride, but unfortunately, I've been unable to locate the quote again. She said that there are three levels of phonics knowledge—the amount you need to learn to read; the amount of phonics you need to know to teach a child to read; and the amount of phonics you need to know in order to write a curriculum that will teach a child to read. Let's not lose sight of *our* goal—we want to teach a child to read—but that doesn't necessarily mean we need to know enough about phonics to write a curriculum.

History of Reading Education

Phonics-based reading programs are a relative newcomer to the long history of teaching children to read. Historically—at least in America's past; in the 18th century colonies and on the frontiers—children were taught to read, often by their parents, using books. The Bible, Pilgrim's Progress, and Shakespeare were the most common “tools of the trade.” These were even used in the towns and cities where there might be schools or in wealthier families where there might be a tutor.

Although Noah Webster's *Blue-Backed Speller* was in use first, the McGuffey Readers were among the first textbooks developed as a basal reading series for the growing number of community schools. “Basal” just means a series of graded books. McGuffey's Book 1 and Book 2 included stories that emphasized the sounds of letters in the words. Interestingly, there is a difference in the phonics philosophy of the original series with its 1836 copyright and the series of revisions that lead up to its 1876 copyright. The original McGuffeys used the alphabetic method of teaching reading, which seems disorderly to our eyes because the alphabet is not presented in order. Revisions refined this process until it begins to look somewhat more like modern day phonics. In fact, in the 1879 copyright edition, the preface to its first reader states that it can be used to teach reading by the phonic method, the word method, or the word method and phonic method combined. *What?* That sounds amazingly like the reading education squabbles of a century later.

The upper level McGuffey's books are anthologies of stories drawn from a variety of sources—especially classical sources. The series, in all its editions, had a strong emphasis on moral values but many feel the 1836 edition had a view of God that was more stern than did revised editions. Education during the McGuffey period—which lasted practically an entire century tended to be teacher-centered with students doing a lot of rote memorization. Although it's a little unclear how these statistics were gathered, some have said that the American literacy rate was at its highest during this time period.

The Progressive Education Movement emerged during the first part of the twentieth century. This movement pushed for instruction that focused on the interests of students. Basal readers began to include more and more stories that emphasized particular sounds and targeted specific reading skills. These merged into specially written stories that utilized very controlled and oft-repeated vocabularies and which, unfortunately, were sometimes of little interest to students. These gradually became the “whole word” approach made famous by *Dick and Jane*: “See Dick. See Dick run. See Jane. See Jane run.” Sometimes called Look-Say, this method teaches children to recognize words through repetition.

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The Whole Word approach reigned from about 1940 into the '70s but after Rudolph Flesh published *Why Johnny Can't Read* in 1955, it was much criticized. Flesh and other phonics proponents wanted to return to an emphasis on sounding out words based on how they are spelled. Definitions of what was meant by the Phonics approach began to get painfully complicated, as we'll see in a few moments. However, in essence, this method just means to teach both the sounds of letters and basic spelling to a child who is beginning to learn to read. Interestingly, even though the general approach was a reincarnation of methods used throughout the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries, all components were given new names. Now we had *phonemes*, *onsets* instead of beginning sounds and *rimes*—spelled r-i-m-e-s—instead of word families. Nevertheless, phonics in one form or another started showing up consistently in reading programs again.

Whole Language, which is the newest reading education buzzword—is an approach designed to flow out of a literacy-rich environment, combining speaking, listening, reading, and writing, and emphasizing the meaning of texts over the sounds of letters. In other words, the beginning reader constructs a personal meaning for a text by using their prior knowledge to interpret the meaning of what they are reading. This approach—a subtle reworking of some of the Whole Word philosophy—started showing up in the 1990s.

The last half of the 20th century saw an active on-going debate between phonics advocates and whole word (and then whole language) advocates.

Phonics proponents say that it makes sense to teach reading from the parts to the whole, and for spelling to be coordinated with learning to read. They note that students with large vocabularies can quickly move to reading library books once they get the basics down.

Those critical of phonics remind us that English is not a rules-based language—there is no one-to-one correlation between letters and sounds. Homonyms are troublesome. Many words don't fit into the common phonics rules and must be learned as sight words: “of” and “was,” for example—not to mention the articles “a” and “the.”

Many educators also feel that success with phonics methods is related to socio-economic class. In other words, differing dialects of English and limited pre-reading vocabularies negatively impact its success.

Whole language advocates insist that this approach emphasizes reading comprehension rather than “just” decoding. Rather than parts of words, whole words are seen as the basic components of language. But whole language approaches have a lack of structure and many mourn the loss of the graded literature found in basal phonics readers.

The *phonics vs. whole language* debate resulted in an extensive review of research by a specially designated National Reading Panel, which published their findings the first year of the new millennium, the year 2000.

They found that students who come from “high literacy” households tend to learn to read well regardless of the teaching method used. “High literacy” households are those where young children are read to on a regular basis, where there are lots of children's books and where adults read regularly. In other words, these children already have large vocabularies and reading readiness skills. Marilyn Jager Adams tells us, “Reading aloud with children is known to be the single most important activity for building the knowledge and skills they will eventually require for learning to read.” Emilie Buchwald says it this way: “Children are made readers on the laps of their parents.”

Nevertheless, the Panel's analysis showed, however, that systematic phonics instruction produces significant benefits for students in kindergarten through 6th grade and for children who are having difficulty learning to read. Also, systematic synthetic phonics (and we'll define this in a few moments) has a positive and significant effect on the reading skills of disabled readers, as well as low-achieving students who are not disabled.

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Because of these findings many educators today are looking for ways to blend phonics with whole language calling it a *Balanced Approach to Reading*. They maintain that neither approach by itself is effective all the time but that both approaches possess merit. They suggest carefully designed reading programs that employ part whole language and part phonics and which take into account each student's learning style and demonstrated strengths and weaknesses. Does this remind you of McGuffey's? It seems that what goes around, comes around.

I think that's more than enough philosophy to get us grounded, don't you?

Definitions

Now I want to provide some definitions for some of the words that are floating around out there as you look at reading and phonics curricula.

- **Phonemes**—or phonograms—are an abstract linguistic unit. They are the most basic unit of language capable of making a difference in meaning. In other words, it's the sounds that letters or combinations of letters make: the sounds of "d" or "t" or "st" or "ng" or "thr."
- **Phonemic Awareness**—is a critical skill for learning to read an alphabetically written language. It's a cognitive skill that consists of three pieces—a linguistic unit (or phoneme); awareness of that unit; and the ability to know what to do with such units. In other words, it's the ability to consciously that words are made up of phonemes. And in still other words, it's knowing that B-A-T starts with a "buh" sound and ends with a "t" sound.
- **Reading Comprehension**—is the ability to derive meaning, particularly that intended by the author, from the printed word—in short, reading comprehension is understanding the meaning of written language.
- **Decoding**—the ability to derive a word's phonological representation from the sequences of letters that represent it. In other words, decoding is the ability to look at a word and be able to correctly pronounce it. For instance, s-t-o-p is pronounced *stop*.
- **Fluency**—is the speed of reading as well as the ability to read materials with expression. In other words, fluency is the ability to read smoothly, without interruption.

I'm sure you've heard some of these terms already, but I've mentioned some other terms that also need good working definitions.

When we were talking about the National Reading Panel and its findings, we mentioned **Systematic Phonics Instruction**. You'll also hear me mention this when we start talking about specific programs. Systematic Phonics Instruction just means that a set of phonics elements—or phonemes—is identified and these elements are taught in a specific order.

This sounds like a general category, and it is! There are differences concerning how many elements need to be taught and in what order they are taught. Consequently, there are a variety of methods that are all considered to be systematic phonics.

Much of the time when we use that term we mean what educators call **Synthetic Phonics**. This is where students are taught to link an individual letter or letter combination with its appropriate sound and then blend the sounds to form words. In other words, the sounds are being synthesized into words. This is what happens when you learn that st-o-p means, "stop."

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Another form of systematic phonics instruction is **Analogy Phonics** (also known as the word families approach). This method teaches students unfamiliar words by analogy to known words. In other words, recognizing that the rime segment of an unfamiliar word is identical to that of a familiar word, and then blending the known rime with the new word onset (or beginning sound), such as reading *brick* by recognizing that—*ick* is contained in the known word *kick*. Analogy Phonics will typically start by teaching at least a few phonemes and blending them into words but then vocabulary is built by adding words from the same word family.

Systematic phonics programs vary tremendously in terms of what sounds are taught when. Some programs start by following a beginning consonant blend method. In other words, “baa,” “beh,” “bih,” “baw,” “buh.” And then “maa,” “meh,” “mih,” “maw,” “muh.” All before adding the ending consonants to make real words. These are typically the **Synthetic Phonics** approaches. *Horizons Phonics and Reading*, *Phonics Pathways*, and *SSRW* all use this method. Others will teach an ending consonant blend method. In other words: “at,” “am,” “an,” “ad,” before adding beginning consonant sounds to make words. Many times the focus is on just blending the sounds, whether or not they make recognizable words. *AlphaPhonics*, *Ordinary Parent’s Guide to Teaching Reading*, and *Reading Made Easy* all follow this approach. Although not always the case, these will often be **Analogy Phonics** programs, because the next step will be to recognize word families—such as the “at” family and begin making words: “bat,” “cat,” “rat,” “sat,” “mat,” etc.

While these designations will show up in the research and sometimes in the literature surrounding phonics programs, I prefer the much more simplistic—and to my way of thinking, more useful—designations of **Intensive Phonics** and **Basic Phonics**.

Intensive Phonics teaches all letter combinations as rules and they are taught in specific sequence. The child consciously learns each rule and practices reading words derived from the rules. By contrast, **Basic Phonics** teaches a few basic rules to get the student reading stories quickly. These might or might not be taught in any specific order. Additional reading vocabulary is developed by exploring word families and adding phonemes as the student is learning to read.

Intensive Phonics covers more or less the same territory as **Synthetic Phonics** while **Analogy Phonics** are more likely to fall into the **Basic Phonics** camp.

Accordingly, programs like *All About Reading*, *The Phonics Road to Reading*, *Logic of English*, *Spell to Write and Read*, the new computer-based *Discover Intensive Phonics for Yourself* and other approaches either similar to the *Writing Road to Reading* or the Orton Gillingham method would be considered **Intensive Phonics**.

The Writing Road to Reading, by the way, is an involved phonics-based reading program developed by Romalda Spaulding. Its teachers are required to take week-long training seminars. Many of the programs just mentioned are adaptations of the Spaulding Method, but are designed to be more user-friendly for homeschools.

Orton Gillingham refers to a multi-sensory phonics approach towards reading, based on the research of Samuel Orton and Anna Gillingham.

Most of the other phonics programs that we carry would be considered **Basic Phonics**.

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Phonics/Reading Curriculum Overview

If you feel that your head is starting to spin—or that you can't keep it all straight, remember what we said at the beginning. Our goal is not to teach phonics; our goal is to produce fluent readers. We don't need to know all the ins and outs of phonics education but we do need to know enough to choose a curriculum product that will do what we want it to do.

To help with that, we've compiled a phonics program comparison sheet that's available on our website.

So, in the final analysis, it comes down to: *what* is reading? Reading is dependent on two cognitive processes:

- 1) comprehension—which is the ability to understand language; to make sense of what we hear.
- 2) decoding—the ability to derive a word's phonological representation from the sequences of letters that represent it. In other words, to look at a collection of letters and know that it is a particular word; to “hear” it in your mind.

Sometimes you will hear that this or that is a “research-based program.” This is a reference back to that National Reading Panel and the research that they compiled. Their conclusion was that there were five aspects to learning to read and that reading programs should contain these elements:

1. phonemic awareness
2. systematic phonics instruction
3. vocabulary development
4. reading comprehension and
5. fluency

So, in other words, a research-based program will include those five elements. A good example of a new reading program, constructed with this research in mind is *All About Reading*. *All About Reading* starts with phonemic awareness in its pre-level 1 portion and then in Levels 1 & 2, it incorporates systematic phonics, an emphasis on vocabulary development, reading practice for comprehension and fluency, and then encouragement to continue family read alouds.

Most of the programs that Rainbow carries are phonics-based although a few reflect some blending of phonics and whole language. In general, though, most include some type of systematic phonics.

So let's take a few moments to look at what you'll find as phonics-based reading programs.

First of all, there are what I call **Complete Programs**. These include: coordinated systematic phonics, reinforcing activities, reading practice and maybe read-aloud suggestions (these are often tied together with a common theme). These are usually in grade level sections and cover reading from introductory skills such as consonant and short vowel sounds through the syllabication rules and advanced tri & quadric - graphs (three and four letter that make a single sound like “tch” in “watch”).

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Some examples of complete programs are:

All About Reading
Bob Jones Phonics & English
Horizons Phonics & Reading
Logic of English
McRuffy Phonics & Reading
Saxon Phonics
Sing, Spell, Read & Write (which has a racetrack theme)
Veritas (which has a museum theme)

Complete programs are typically more expensive—but everything is provided for you—workbooks, lesson plans, teacher helps (including scripting), reinforcement and drill activities, and readers for reading practice. Most of these will also include some introductory general language arts, including handwriting.

The next group of programs are what I call **Manuals**. These provide complete instruction for beginning phonics through advanced syllabication all in one book. In other words, the program is sequential rather than graded. A manual-type phonics program will typically include systematic phonics, some reading practice and suggestions for reinforcement. Sometimes there will be supplementary workbooks and readers (like those available for *AlphaPhonics*) or supplementary reinforcement activities (like *Phonics Pathways Boosters!*) that provides reinforcing games for the Phonics Pathways program.

A manual approach will often be less expensive than a complete program but you might find you need some of the supplements or you will need to prepare reinforcement materials—or round up additional reading material.

Some examples of manual-type phonics programs are:

AlphaPhonics
Ordinary Parent's Guide to Teaching Reading
Phonics Pathways
Reading Made Easy

Probably the least expensive way to approach phonics is by using workbooks. There are some excellent series that provide systematic phonics along with some reinforcing activities. To round these out, you will need to provide reading practice options—readers—and you may need to provide some additional reinforcement activities.

Some examples of systematic phonics workbooks are:

Explode the Code
Adventures in Phonics
Phonics Plus
MCP Plaid Phonics

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Reading practice options are literally everywhere—at the library, on your own library shelves—and, of course, at Rainbow. In addition to beginning readers like *Bob Books* or the *Primary Phonics Readers* and graded readers like the *Pathways* and *Elson* readers, there are also readers in different subjects like the *Let's Read and Find Out* science series or the *Nature Readers*.

When you talk about phonics and reading, there are always exceptions. And that's true for Phonics/Reading programs as well. Here are a few programs—some that have been popular through the years but which don't fall neatly into any of the previous categories.

Primary Arts of Language—this program from the Institute for Excellence in Writing calls itself a “blended sight and sound program” and is based on the teaching methodology of a delightful octogenarian who has taught countless children to read. This program does incorporate systematic phonics instruction but it also introduces many words as sight words. Some of these are later shown to follow a phonics concept rule that is more advanced.

The *Blue* and *Red* programs from *Learning Language Arts Through Literature* provide systematic phonics but also include a rich language arts and literature environment, even suggesting a companion read-aloud library.

Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons has been a long-time favorite in the homeschooling community. I've lost track of how many of my friends have used this program to successfully teach their children to read, and now I can add my daughter to this list. That being said, the manual—which provides a type of very basic systematic phonics—does not get into the more advanced phonics concepts. Many supplement with *Explode the Code* books—or a grade 2 level of another phonics program. Or you can do as my daughter has done, and pick up with a manual approach for the more advanced concepts.

Reading Reflex—probably the most unique of the not-quite-phonics programs. *Reading Reflex* uses a system of graphics to represent sounds and teaches children how to combine these sound/graphics into words. This program is sometimes surprisingly effective for children who have difficulty with other methods.

Struggling Readers

Lately, when I have my weekly Facetime visit with my grandchildren, I listen to my six-year old grandson read through a book. Such a joy! I'm proud of my daughter—organized and thorough as she is—who sorted through various options—some of them hand-me-downs from our homeschool—and cobbled together an effective program that is working beautifully. My grandson is well on his way to joining a family of readers and lovers of books.

But what about those times when everything does not work so well? Perhaps your child is like my son, still painfully sounding out words when he should have been reading chapter books. Perhaps your child has spent time in the public school and was a child in danger of being left behind before you started to homeschool. What if you suspect that the difficulties your child is experiencing in learning to read are rooted in some sort of learning disability?

When I'm talking to homeschool moms, I talk a lot about the “click” factor. I know I should have a more scientific term—something that sounds just a little more... well, professional. But “click” works for me, and seems to work for other moms, as well.

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Children do not learn at the same speeds. If you have more than one child, you know exactly what I mean. Some children can learn all the phonics rules; can sound out the words, and yet they are not reading fluently. Reading has not “clicked” for them. For these kids, sometimes the best remedy is “tincture of time” as my grandmother would say. Personally, I would couple that with reading practice. This is what worked for my son—we started the ambitious project of reading through Genesis when he was still in that painful decoding place. The first chapters were laboriously slow but each day was a little better and somewhere along the line—the whole process “clicked.” We made it through the entire book—right on time—one chapter per day.

Katherine Von Duyke—writing for *Practical Homeschooling*—has a similar suggestion:

“Children processing phonics often run into points where they just don’t seem to be getting it. This is similar to a computer processing a program [you know, when that little circle is spinning]—they just can’t put any more information in. The child just needs time to process and get things filed away. Come back to it in a few days and they’re good to go.”

Children also do not learn in the same way. If one program is not working, you might try another program that teaches more to a particular learning style. For instance, the *Sing, Spell, Read and Write* program uses songs to teach the phonics rules. Other programs—like *All About Reading* utilize a multi-sensory approach rather than rely on a single learning avenue. *Touchphonics* adds a tactile element to phonics instruction. *Discover Intensive Phonics for Yourself* employs a computer-based format with reinforcing games and interactive learning activities. Some programs, like Saxon Phonics, build in lots of review and repetition. Others, like *Phonics Pathways*, provide games for reinforcement. Some, like Bob Jones or Horizons *Phonics and Reading*, have colorful components while others do not. Each of these seemingly small differences might be significant for a particular child.

When your struggling reader is in an upper elementary grade or middle school, the situation becomes a little different and you may need to consider several possibilities.

If your child has spent time in the public school system or if he has not been taught systematic phonics approach, you might want to provide some remedial phonics instruction. *Saxon Phonics Intervention* is designed for middle school and older students who need additional phonics instruction. Other helpful possibilities are *Teaching Syllable Patterns* or *Phonics and Word Study for Struggling Readers*. *Phonics Pathways* is a manual approach that can provide phonics instruction for older children without being too babyish.

Your child might have eye-tracking problems. These can be very tricky to diagnose—even for eye doctors. If you suspect a tracking problem, have your child checked by your eye doctor and ask specifically about tracking problems. *Reading Pathways*—a supplement to *Phonics Pathways*—provides exercises designed to improve eye tracking. Some eye doctors also offer Vision Therapy, which can drastically improve not only reading issues but other developmental issues as well.

That brings us to the scary words—dyslexia and processing challenges. These are real, but perhaps not as common as we’re often led to believe. Don’t jump to the conclusion that your struggling reader is dyslexic although you might want to keep your mind open to the possibility. For one thing, interestingly, the typical recommendation for dyslexic readers is consistent, repetitive, intensive phonics. Remember the National Reading Panel? It showed that intensive phonics provided help for disabled readers. In other words, even if your child is dyslexic, the best plan may be to continue doing what you’ve been doing.

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To get a professional evaluation or not is often the question. You will need to weigh the pros and cons of obtaining a diagnosis and the subsequent label that will be attached to your child. There are effective treatment paths for students diagnosed with dyslexia. For instance, the Barton method or an Orton-Gillingham approach. The same is true of those with processing disorders—or who face right-brain/left-brain issues or sensory issues. In those situations, Dianne Craft's *Brain Integration Therapy* is worth investigating.

I would caution you about attaching any of these labels to your child without a professional evaluation and diagnosis. Being able to say that “my child is dyslexic” may make you feel better but it may not serve your child very well in the long run. On the other hand, I have a good friend who is the mother of a severely dyslexic daughter. She was formally diagnosed in third grade and was able to take advantage of some special programs but her mother says she wishes they had done the evaluation much earlier.

If you're a new homeschooler, ready to start down the path of teaching your child to read—Enjoy the Journey!

Victory Hugo tells us: “To learn to read is to light a fire; every syllable that is spelled out is a spark.”

If you're the parent of an older struggling reader—Rejoice! Homeschooling is the best possible environment for your child. In your homeschool, he will not be labeled and left behind. Instead, you can give her the time she might need; or the additional attention that he might need; or the special accommodations that she might need right along with the loving acceptance and encouragement that all children need.

Your late reader can go on to college—and graduate with high honors (my son did!). Your dyslexic daughter can go on to get her master's degree (my friend's daughter did!).

And you, mom, can have the satisfaction of knowing that you have unlocked a world for your children.

Or as Martin Tupper says: “A good book is the best of friends, the same today and forever.”

As Elizabeth Hardwick has said: “The greatest gift is a passion for reading.”

Thank you for joining us today. If you have additional questions about reading and phonics, please call us at Rainbow and talk to a consultant.