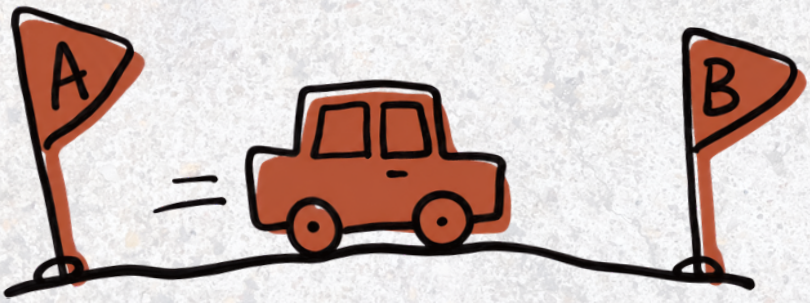


A GUIDE FOR FAMILIES

HELPING YOU NAVIGATE YOUR CHILD'S LITERACY JOURNEY



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INTRODUCTION

THINK OF THIS GUIDE AS YOUR CAR'S MANUAL

Learning to read is one of the most important things your child will do, and one of the most complex. It does not happen automatically. It takes strong instruction at school, consistent practice at home, and a real partnership between families and educators.

This guide uses simple car-care and travel metaphors to help you understand how reading skills develop, how to spot problems early, and how to partner with the school so your child can reach every milestone on the route to reading. You'll also find easy-to-use ideas and infographics you can print out for reference at home, as well as a Literacy Glossary at the end of the guide. To download the infographics, visit improvingliteracy.org/route-to-reading.

This guide is brought to you by the National Center on Improving Literacy. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, NCIL is a partnership led by Boston University's Wheelock College of Education and Human Development, along with Florida State University and RMC Research Corporation. Together, we serve as a comprehensive national resource center dedicated to advancing evidence-based teaching methods for pre-K through grade 12 students with literacy-related disabilities, including dyslexia.

HOW READING SKILLS DEVELOP

MAPPING THE JOURNEY

Understanding the fundamentals of how reading and writing skill development work together is much like understanding how the engine and transmission work together to move a car forward.

Oral (spoken) language skills form the foundation. These include understanding and using sounds, words, and ideas from speaking and listening. When children learn to recognize rhymes, break words into syllables, or use new vocabulary in conversation, they're building spoken language skills that directly support reading.

Written language skills build on that foundation. These involve understanding and using sounds, words, and ideas from reading and writing. When children learn to match letters to sounds, blend sounds to read words, or express ideas in writing, they're developing written language skills.

Spoken language and written language are like the front and rear wheels of a car: both are essential to move your child forward.

It’s also important to understand the pillars of the literacy journey. Research shows that effective reading instruction includes five essential components:

Phonological Awareness: Hearing and manipulating sounds in words

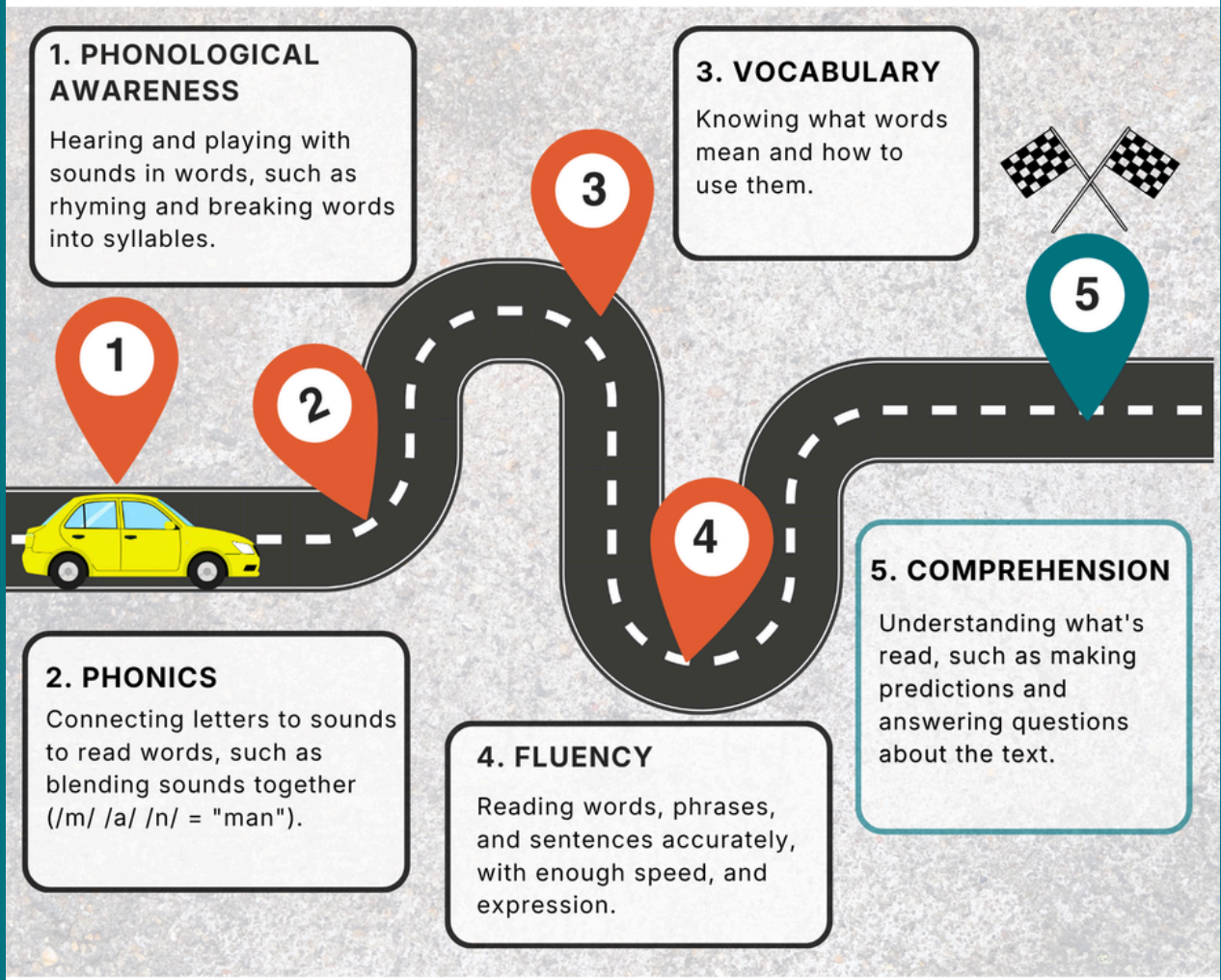
- Phonics: Connecting letters to sounds
- Fluency: Reading smoothly and accurately
- Vocabulary: Understanding the meanings of words
- Comprehension: Understanding and thinking about what’s read

THE READING JOURNEY

ROUTE TO READING

HOW LITERACY SKILLS DEVELOP

Understanding how reading skills develop is like understanding a journey with important stops along the way. Each milestone builds on the one before it.



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HOW SCHOOLS TRACK AND SUPPORT READING PROGRESS

YOUR CHILD'S DASHBOARD

You may have heard teachers or school staff mention terms like "screening," "CBM," "progress monitoring," or acronyms like "PSF," "NWF," or "ORF." These can sound confusing, but they're all types of reading assessments that help track your child's progress.

For students receiving extra reading support, schools use Curriculum-Based Measurement (or CBM for short) as screening assessments 2-3 times per year (typically fall, winter, and spring) to check all students for early warning signs that a child might be at risk for reading difficulties.

Just as a mechanic runs diagnostics to catch small problems before they become big ones, schools use screening to identify which students may need additional support before small struggles become bigger problems. All students are screened, but only students whose screening results show risk receive extra reading instruction.

For students receiving extra reading support, schools also use CBM for ongoing monitoring to see whether the child is making progress and if the intervention is working.

Screening, progress monitoring, and tiered support all work together as part of a schoolwide framework called MTSS-R, or Multi-Tiered System of Support for Reading. You may hear this term at school meetings or in conversations with your child's teacher. MTSS-R is the school's system for making sure every child gets the right level of reading support: strong classroom instruction for all students, additional small-group help for those who need more practice, and intensive intervention for students with significant reading difficulties. Knowing this framework exists can help you ask better questions and understand the options available to your child.

What do these assessments check?
In kindergarten through grade 2, these tools check early reading skills, including:

- Letter-sound knowledge (knowing letter names and sounds)
- Decoding
- Phoneme awareness (breaking words into individual sounds)
- Word reading

When testing decoding, teachers often ask children to sound out made-up words like "lat" or "mip." Since children have never seen these words before, they can't just memorize them; they have to use their decoding skills to sound them out. This shows whether a child can truly decode new words, which is a key reading skill.

Research shows that these two skills – decoding nonsense words and reading real words — are strong predictors of overall reading achievement. Students who do well at both also tend to succeed on longer, more comprehensive reading tests, which is why schools use these brief checks as reliable indicators of reading progress.

When discussing screening and progress monitoring, schools often use acronyms for specific assessment tasks. Here are a few you might encounter and what they mean:

- PSF (phoneme segmentation fluency) - Breaking words into individual sounds
- NWF (nonsense word fluency) - Decoding and sounding-out skills
- ORF (oral reading fluency) - Reading real text aloud smoothly and accurately

Don't hesitate to ask your school which assessments they use, how often your child's progress is checked, how they decide whether additional support is needed, and how you will receive the results.

Reference: January, S. A. A., & Klingbeil, D. A. (2020). Universal screening in grades K–2. Journal of School Psychology, 82, 103–122.

YOUR CHILD'S DASHBOARD

ROUTE TO READING

READING ASSESSMENTS EXPLAINED

You may have heard terms like 'screening,' 'CBM,' 'MTSS-R,' or 'progress monitoring' and wondered what they mean for your child. They're all part of how schools identify needs, provide support, and track reading growth.



YOU'RE IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

Ask for your child's screening, progress monitoring, and support plan.
Use the data to ask questions, advocate for support, and stay involved.

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MONITORING PROGRESS OF READING GOALS

CHECK YOUR MIRRORS

Just as a driver checks the mirrors before moving forward, understanding where your child has been is the first step to knowing where to go next. Reviewing your child's reading progress gives you the baseline you need to set meaningful goals and stay on course.

Here is how to get started:

- First, ask your child's teacher to review your child's literacy assessment progress to date. This look back tells you your starting point: what skills your child has mastered, where gaps exist, and what needs attention next.

- Next, work with your child's teacher to establish clear literacy goals that are "SMART": Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-based. These goals give everyone a shared sense of direction and a way to measure whether your child is making progress.

- Finally, keep checking your mirrors. Don't wait for formal conferences. Check in regularly with school staff to see whether your child is on track, and speak up if something feels off. If progress stalls, ask about adjustments to the approach or additional support.

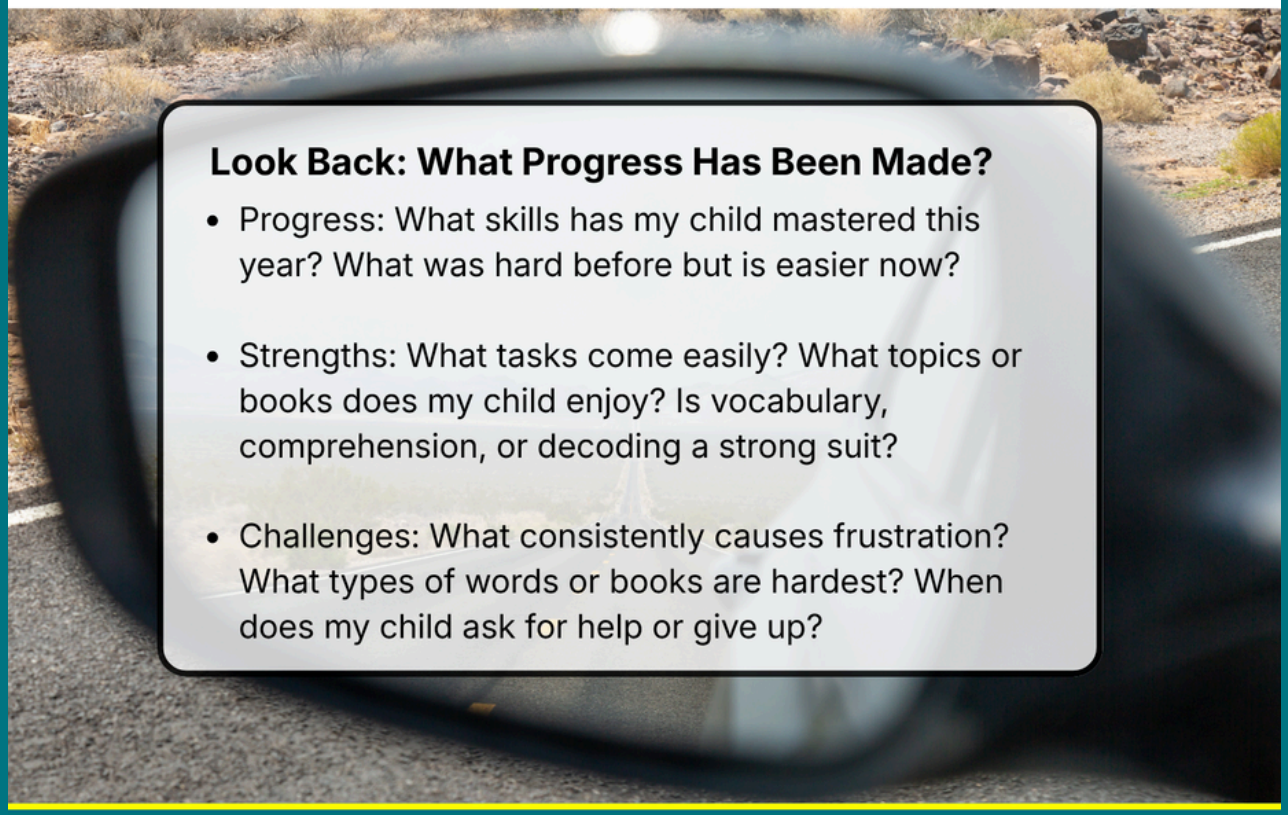
Children with, or at risk for, reading disabilities need targeted, evidence-based interventions with the right tools and support to complete the journey successfully. Share what you notice with your child's teacher. Your observations from home are an important part of the picture.

CHECK YOUR MIRRORS

ROUTE TO READING

MONITORING YOUR CHILD'S READING PROGRESS

Just as drivers check their mirrors to see what's behind them before moving forward, caregivers need to look back at their child's reading journey to know where to go next.



Look Back: What Progress Has Been Made?

- Progress: What skills has my child mastered this year? What was hard before but is easier now?
- Strengths: What tasks come easily? What topics or books does my child enjoy? Is vocabulary, comprehension, or decoding a strong suit?
- Challenges: What consistently causes frustration? What types of words or books are hardest? When does my child ask for help or give up?

SHARE YOUR OBSERVATIONS

Be specific when sharing what you notice and talk often with school staff about progress. Don't wait for parent-teacher conferences — check in regularly.

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HOW TO PRACTICE READING AT HOME

YOUR STARTING POINT

As a caregiver, you are your child's primary tour guide on the literacy journey. You have a unique perspective on your child's learning: You see him or her practice at home, notice what causes frustration, and celebrate victories, all of which is invaluable for supporting progress.

When you're reading with your child or helping with homework, follow this simple approach:

- Listen carefully to notice speech sounds, letters, words, or ideas that seem hard.
- Look for skills or tasks that seem difficult—sometimes the struggle is visible in body language or frustration level.
- Wait and give your child time to self-correct before jumping in; if he or she needs help, provide a hint rather than the answer.
- Encourage with praise and reassurance as you talk about the book or activity—reading should feel positive, not punishing.

Talk with your child's teacher about what you learned during these sessions. This information helps teachers understand how to better support your child at school.

YOUR STARTING POINT

ROUTE TO READING

HOW TO PRACTICE READING AT HOME

The journey starts at home. When you read with your child or help with homework, these five steps will help you support them — no special equipment or lesson plans needed.



Listen

Notice sounds, letters, or words that seem hard. Hesitation is a signal.

Look

Watch for frustration in your child's face and body, not just their words.

Wait

Give your child time to work it out. Offer a hint, not the answer.

Encourage

Use praise and reassurance. Reading should feel positive, not punishing.

Talk

Share what you notice with your child's teacher. Your home observations matter.

BE YOUR CHILD'S NAVIGATOR

You don't need to have all the answers. Listen, look, wait, encourage, and talk. That's everything your child needs from you.

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You don't need special equipment or lesson plans to practice at home. Children can build literacy skills during everyday activities. Here are some ideas to try.

Fuel Up: Practicing Phonological Awareness

Every car needs the right fuel to run smoothly. For reading, that "fuel" is phonological awareness, which is the ability to hear and play with the sounds in spoken words. Helping children with speech sounds supports early reading success and keeps the literacy engine running strong.

Start by:

- Singing or listening to classics like Jack and Jill, Humpty Dumpty, or Baa, Baa, Black Sheep. The rhyming patterns help children hear the sounds in words.

- Playing word-counting games by saying a sentence aloud and asking your child to count or tap the number of words he or she hears. This helps children understand that speech is made up of individual words.

- As your child progresses, you can explore how words themselves can be broken down.

- Talk about compound words—how some words can be broken down into smaller words and how two words can be put together to make another word, like "strawberry."

- Try playing with even smaller sounds in words, breaking them into syllables like "zip-per" or individual sounds like "s-u-n."

Keep the Engine Running: Sounding Out Words

A car's engine runs by combining fuel, air, and spark in just the right way. Similarly, reading works by blending individual sounds to create words. Helping children stretch apart and connect sounds to sound out words supports early reading success and keeps the reading engine “humming.”

To foster blending sounds, try this simple script:

·“What’s the first sound?” /mmm/
·“What’s next?” /aaa/
·“And the last sound?” /nnn/
·"What happens when you put them together?" Your child blends them: "/mmmaaan/."
·"What is the word?" "man!"

This process teaches children how our alphabet system works—that letters represent sounds, and sounds blend together to make words. It's one of the most powerful tools you can give a child for reading success.

Reach the Final Destination: Comprehension

Every road trip has an endpoint, and comprehension is the ultimate destination of reading.

To foster comprehension, asking your child to answer questions can help them understand what they're reading and help you make sure they're not just going through the motions. Aim for questions that can be answered with more than one or two words:

- Before you start reading: Look at the cover together and talk about what the book might be about. This activates your child's background knowledge and gives him or her a framework for understanding the story.

- During reading: Pause occasionally to ask about letters, sounds, words, or ideas. Encourage your child to use information from the book to answer — this teaches paying attention to the text and illustrations.

- After reading: Ask your child what happened in the book. Have him or her make connections to life by asking questions like "Have you ever felt that way?" or "Does this remind you of anything that happened to us?"

Tune-Ups at Home

Everyday moments at home are full of opportunities to practice literacy skills. You don't need a lesson plan, just a little intentionality.

- When playing with your child, use toys and games as opportunities to talk about how spoken words are made up of sound parts. Building blocks can become a chance to segment words: "Let's build a /h/ /au/ /s/ - house!"

- When preparing meals together, gather ingredients and talk about what they are and what step comes next. This builds vocabulary and sequencing skills while you're cooking dinner.

- Before leaving home for the day, make a list of tasks to do together. Say them aloud and write them down together, focusing on sounds, letters, words, or ideas your child knows. "First we'll go to the /s/ /t/ /or/ — store! Let me write that down. What letter makes the /s/ sound?"

Tune-Ups in the Community

Your community is full of opportunities to practice literacy skills. Think of every outing as a chance for a quick tune-up on the go. Children can practice speech sounds and letters during everyday life, turning errands into learning opportunities.

- At the grocery store, make shopping playful by saying what you need in syllables and letting your child guess. "I need /pep/ /pers/. What do I need?"

- When you're at the laundromat waiting for clothes to dry, sort clothes together into colors or item types while naming them aloud. Then think of other words that start with the same sound as what you're sorting: "These are socks. Socks starts with /s/. What else starts with /s/? Sun! Sand! Sister!"

- When traveling, whether it's a road trip or just the drive to school, look for letters on signs you see. Make it a game to find ones that have a letter in your child's name and say its sound. "There's an 'M' on that sign! That's in your name, Maya. It says /mmm/."

- When visiting family, encourage your child to greet relatives, share new information about life, ask questions, and listen to others' stories. These conversations build vocabulary and social language skills.

- At the library, give your child opportunities to communicate with librarians. Have him or her tell the librarian about interests or ask where to find information on a topic. "Can you ask Ms. Sarah where the books about dinosaurs are?"

These real-world language experiences build confidence and communication skills that support literacy development.

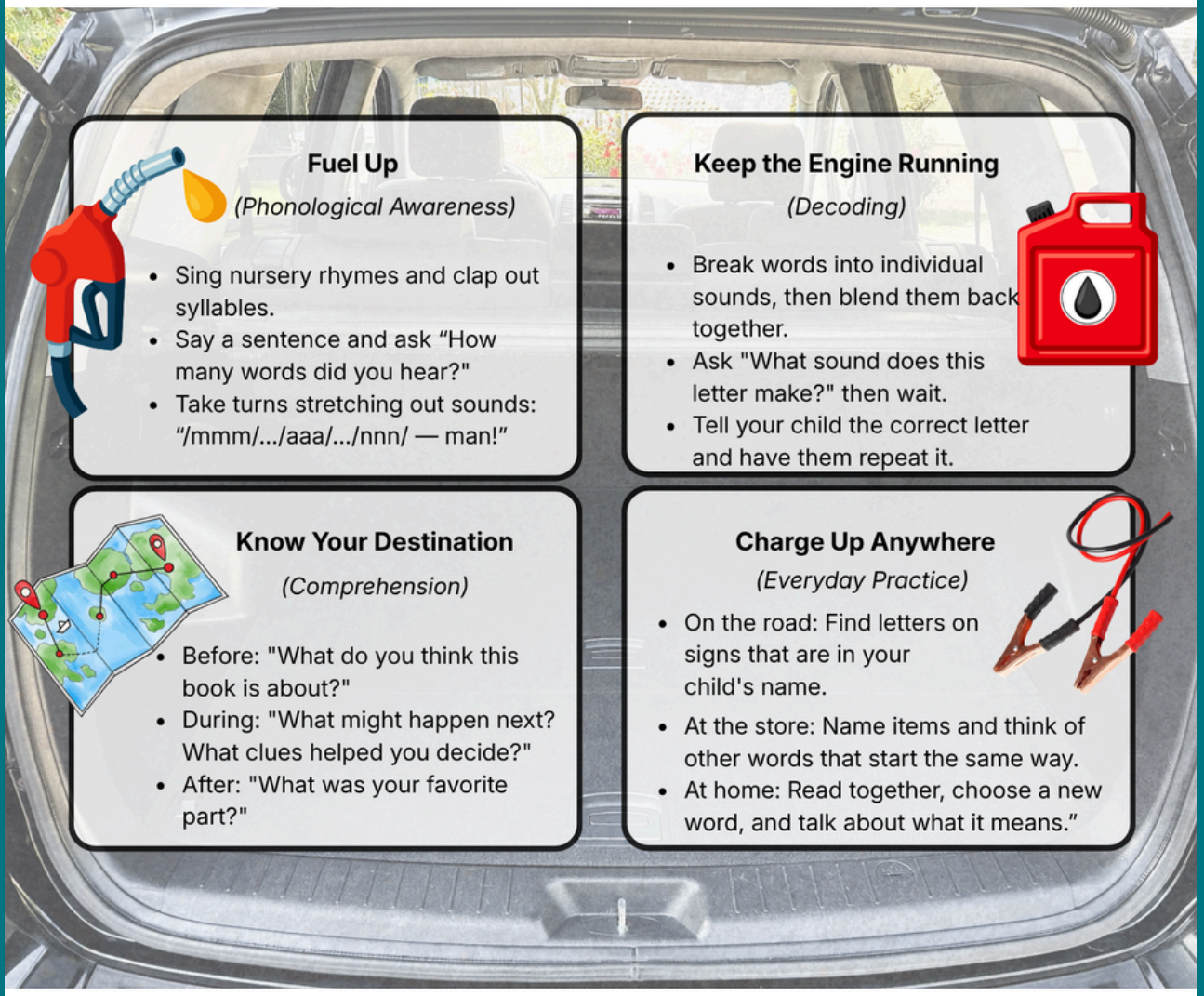
Adapted From: Foorman, B., Beyler, N., Borradaile, K., Coyne, M., Denton, C. A., Dimino, J., Furgeson, J., Hayes, L., Henke, J., Justice, L., Keating, B., Lewis, W., Sattar, S., Streke, A., Wagner, R., & Wissel, S. (2016). Foundational skills to support reading for understanding in kindergarten through 3rd grade (NCEE 2016-4008). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE), Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from the NCEE website: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuides

THE RIGHT GEAR

ROUTE TO READING

A TOOLKIT FOR READING SUPPORT

Every good road trip means being prepared. As a caregiver, you already have everything you need to support your child's reading, at home and on the go.



Fuel Up

(Phonological Awareness)

- Sing nursery rhymes and clap out syllables.
- Say a sentence and ask "How many words did you hear?"
- Take turns stretching out sounds: "/mmm/.../aaa/.../nnn/ — man!"

Keep the Engine Running

(Decoding)

- Break words into individual sounds, then blend them back together.
- Ask "What sound does this letter make?" then wait.
- Tell your child the correct letter and have them repeat it.

Know Your Destination

(Comprehension)

- Before: "What do you think this book is about?"
- During: "What might happen next? What clues helped you decide?"
- After: "What was your favorite part?"

Charge Up Anywhere

(Everyday Practice)

- On the road: Find letters on signs that are in your child's name.
- At the store: Name items and think of other words that start the same way.
- At home: Read together, choose a new word, and talk about what it means."

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EVERY MILE COUNTS

ROUTE TO READING

HOW TO PRACTICE READING ON THE GO

Your community is full of opportunities to practice literacy skills. Every errand, outing, and car ride is a chance for a quick tune-up on the go.



Before you leave: Write your to-do list together and sound out the words. "We're going to the /s/ /t/ /or/ — store!"



In the car: Make it a game to find letters on signs that are in your child's name. "There's an M — that's in your name! It says /mmm/."



At the store: Say what you need in syllables and let your child guess. "I need /pep/ /pers/ — what do I need?"



At the park: Call out what you see and ask your child to rhyme it. "What rhymes with swing?"



On a walk: Point out letters and words on signs, storefronts, and street names as you pass them.



At the library: Let your child choose books on topics they love. Reading what interests them builds motivation.

PRACTICE HAPPENS ANYWHERE

Talk about new words wherever you go.
Ask "What does that word mean?" then ask your child to use it in a sentence.

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STRONG INSTRUCTION AND INTERVENTION AT THE SCHOOL

KNOW A GOOD MECHANIC

Just as a good mechanic follows a clear process to diagnose and fix a problem, strong reading instruction follows a reliable approach that gets children where they need to go. Here is what to look for.

- Reading instruction should be explicit, meaning direct and step-by-step, with teachers explaining and demonstrating each skill before asking children to try it on their own. There should be no guessing about what to do or how to do it. Teachers should model skills, explain their thinking, and provide guided practice along the way.

- Instruction should also be systematic, meaning skills are taught in a carefully planned sequence, building from easier to more difficult. Each new skill connects to what children already know and prepares them for what comes next. Nothing is left to chance.

- Finally, look for evidence-based instruction, built on approaches that research shows are reliable and effective, not just engaging or popular.

The same applies when your child needs additional support. Good intervention, whether in small groups or one-on-one, should also be explicit, systematic, and evidence-based. If your child is receiving extra help, ask whether these same principles are guiding that support.

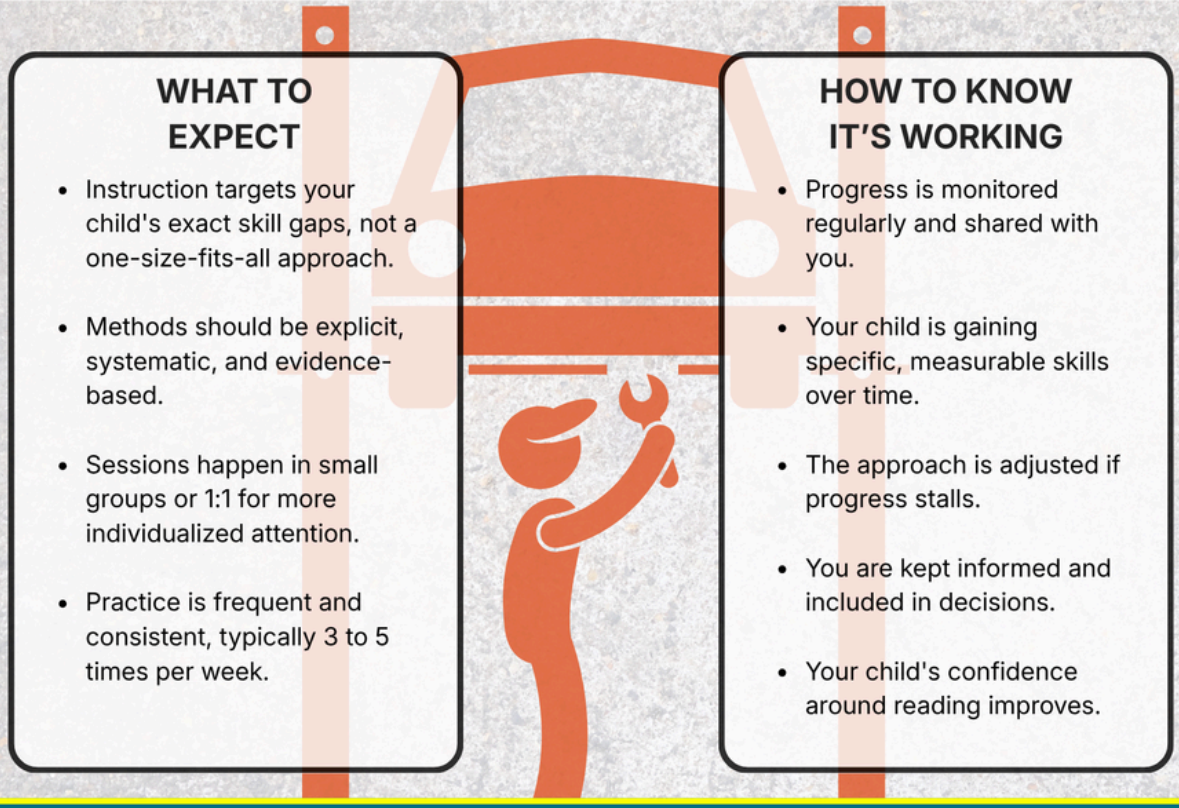
Reference: Cowen, C.D. (2016). What is Structured Literacy? International Dyslexia Association. https://dyslexiaida.org/what-is-structured-literacy/

KNOW A GOOD MECHANIC

ROUTE TO READING

WHAT GOOD READING INTERVENTION LOOKS LIKE

Every car that needs fixing goes into the shop. Good reading intervention works the same way. It is not a last resort. Think of it as targeted repair work that gets your child back on track.



WHAT TO EXPECT

- Instruction targets your child's exact skill gaps, not a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Methods should be explicit, systematic, and evidence-based.
- Sessions happen in small groups or 1:1 for more individualized attention.
- Practice is frequent and consistent, typically 3 to 5 times per week.

HOW TO KNOW IT'S WORKING

- Progress is monitored regularly and shared with you.
- Your child is gaining specific, measurable skills over time.
- The approach is adjusted if progress stalls.
- You are kept informed and included in decisions.
- Your child's confidence around reading improves.

IF PROGRESS STALLS, RECALCULATE

Good intervention is flexible. If your child is not making progress after a reasonable period, ask the school to review the approach and adjust the plan.

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HOW TO SPOT INEFFECTIVE READING INSTRUCTION

AVOID A LEMON

Just as car buyers need to watch out for lemons -- vehicles that look fine but have hidden issues -- families need to be able to spot literacy instruction that seems helpful but actually isn't. Here's what to look for across three key skills.

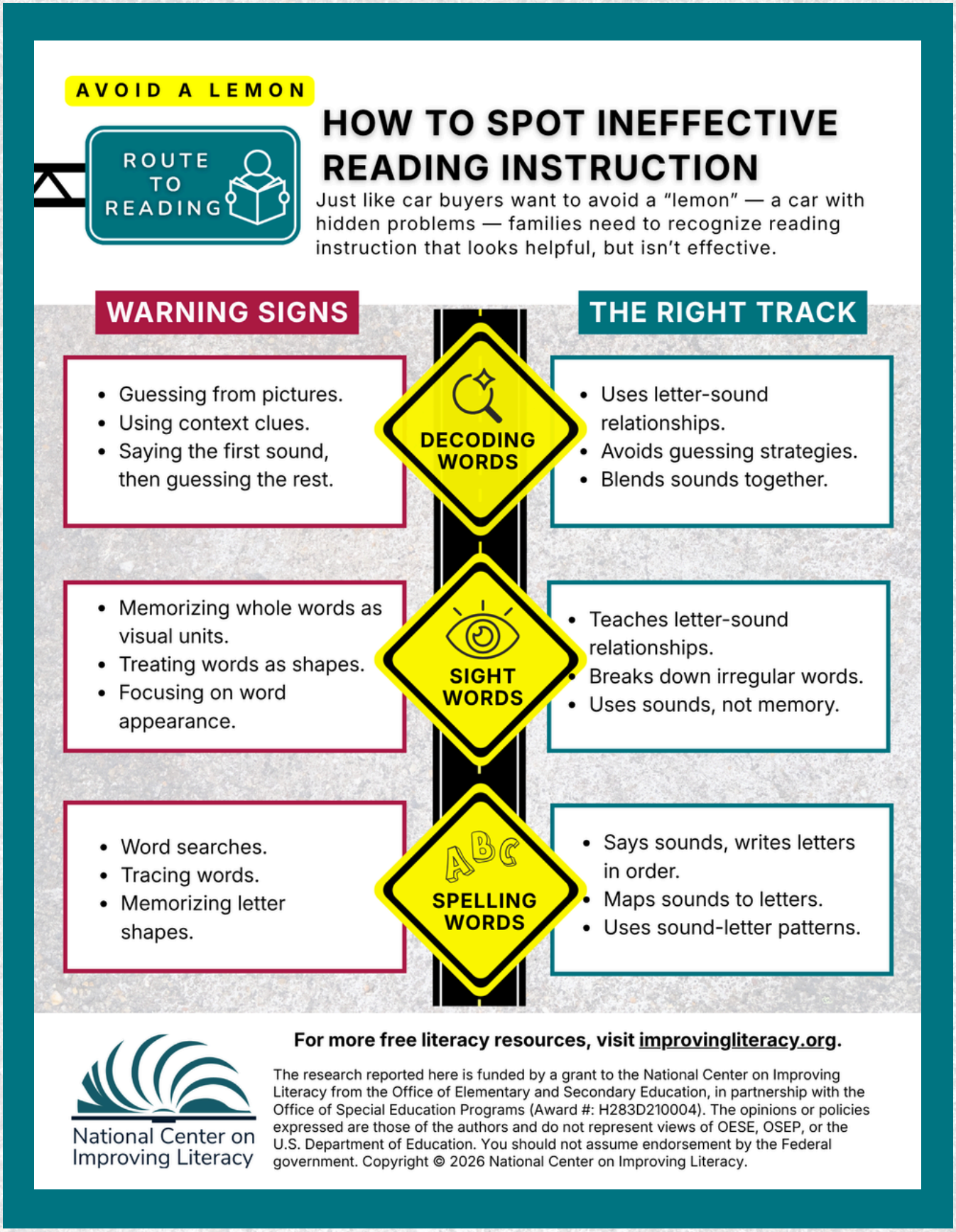
Decoding words is your child's ability to figure out unknown words correctly. It's a fundamental skill: children who can't decode often don't become strong readers. Decoding requires knowing how letters and groups of letters link to sounds, not guessing.

Watch out for strategies that encourage your child to guess at words rather than sound them out, such as using pictures as context clues, saying the first sound and guessing the rest, or looking around the page instead of at the word itself. Research shows these habits don't lead to strong reading. Children need to look at all the letters and blend the sounds together. Effective decoding instruction teaches your child to use letter-sound relationships to read unfamiliar words -- sounds and letters, not pictures or guessing.

Sight words are words that your child should recognize instantly, whether spelled regularly (like "cat") or irregularly (like "said"). There's a common misconception that children learn sight words through visual memory -- by memorizing what a word looks like as a whole shape. This doesn't work well because there are simply too many words to memorize that way.

Effective sight word instruction teaches children to use speech sounds, letter-sound relationships, and letter order, not visual memory. Even irregular words can be broken down: children decode the regular parts and learn only the truly irregular portion. Ask the school how sight words are being taught, and look for an approach that uses sounds and patterns rather than whole-word memorization.

Spelling, like reading, is not about visual memory. Activities that seem engaging -- word searches, tracing, rainbow writing, or memorizing letter shapes -- don't build the underlying skills children need to become good spellers. Effective spelling instruction teaches children to say the sounds in a word and write the letters in order, mapping each sound to a letter or pattern. The same sound-letter knowledge that supports reading supports spelling.



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PARTNERING WITH YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL



FORM YOUR PIT CREW

Think of your child's teachers and school specialists as skilled mechanics. A good mechanic keeps your car running smoothly, but only if you tell them what you're noticing. You're the driver. You know what sounds off, what feels sluggish, and how your child behaves on the road at home. When you share that with the school, and the school shares back, your child's literacy engine runs stronger.

Regular check-ins like parent-teacher conferences, quick emails, progress updates, or phone calls are your "scheduled maintenance appointments." Don't wait for problems to arise. Just as you wouldn't ignore your car's warning lights, frequent communication helps catch small concerns before they become bigger ones.

Partnership is a two-way street. When you come to the school, bring what you know. Share:

- What reading looks like at home, including what comes easily and what causes frustration
- How your child talks about school and reading
- Questions or concerns as soon as they come up, not just at formal conferences
- What is working at home so teachers can build on it at school

Ask the school the questions that will help you understand and support your child's progress:

- How is reading being taught, and what support is available if my child struggles?
- What are my child's current literacy goals, and how is progress measured?
- What evidence-based interventions are used if my child needs extra help?
- What accommodations does the school provide?
- How can I support these goals at home, and what does my child need to work on next?
- Who is my main contact for literacy questions, and what is the best way to reach them?

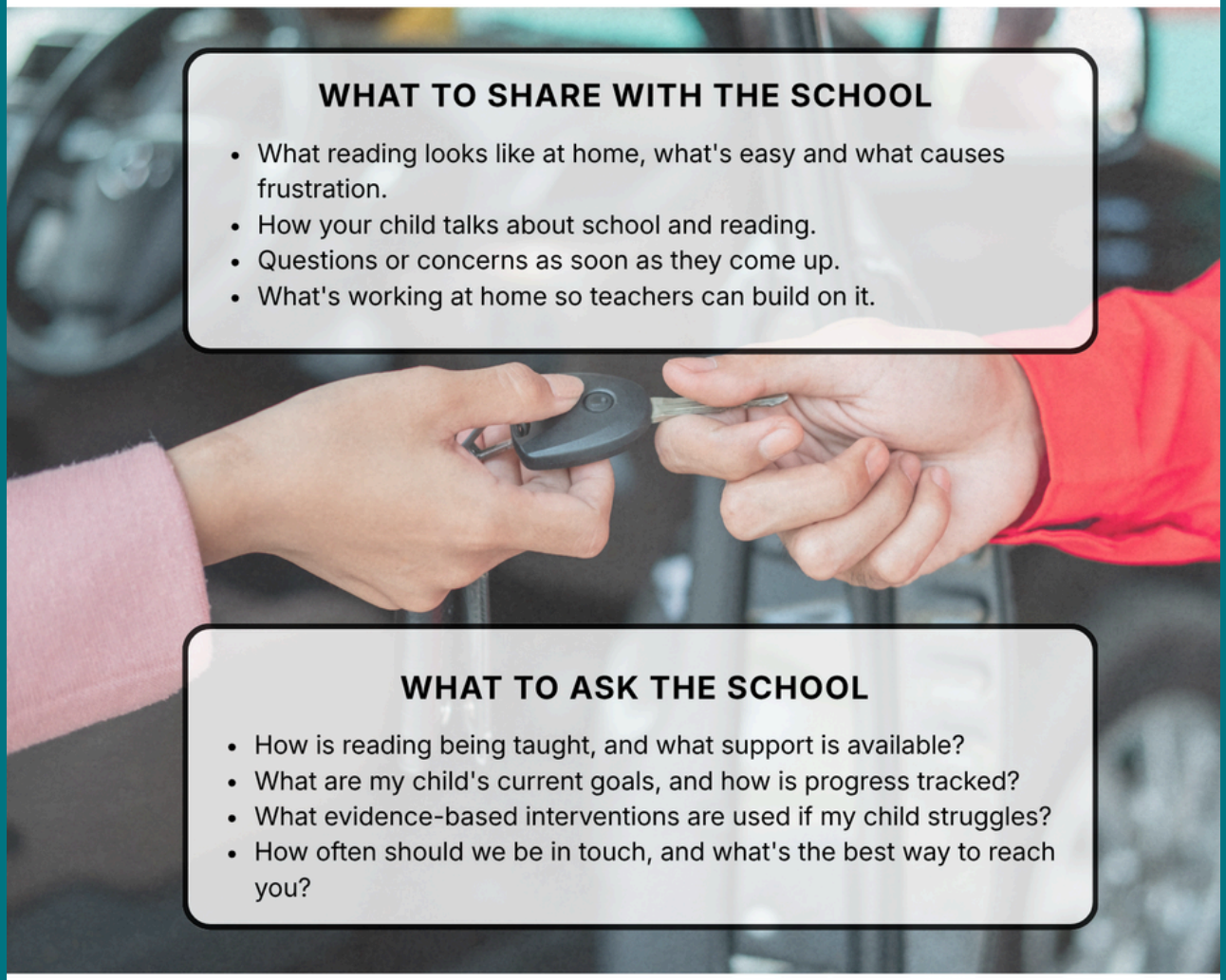
The more openly you and the school communicate, the better equipped your child's pit crew is to keep the literacy engine running strong. You bring knowledge no teacher has. Your observations from home are part of the map.

FORM YOUR PIT CREW

ROUTE TO READING

THE KEYS TO READING SUCCESS: SCHOOLS AS YOUR PARTNER

A good mechanic keeps your car running, but only if you tell them what you're noticing. Your child's teachers are the mechanics. You're the driver. The more you share, the better they can help.



WHAT TO SHARE WITH THE SCHOOL

- What reading looks like at home, what's easy and what causes frustration.
- How your child talks about school and reading.
- Questions or concerns as soon as they come up.
- What's working at home so teachers can build on it.

WHAT TO ASK THE SCHOOL

- How is reading being taught, and what support is available?
- What are my child's current goals, and how is progress tracked?
- What evidence-based interventions are used if my child struggles?
- How often should we be in touch, and what's the best way to reach you?

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IF YOUR CHILD STRUGGLES

WHEN TO PULL OVER

When your check engine light comes on, you don't ignore it; you get it checked out right away. The same principle applies to reading difficulties. The earlier problems are identified and addressed, the easier they are to fix. Speak to your child's teacher if you have concerns about your child's progress, and don't hesitate to ask:

- What evidence-based literacy instruction and interventions are being used?
- What happens next if my child continues to struggle?

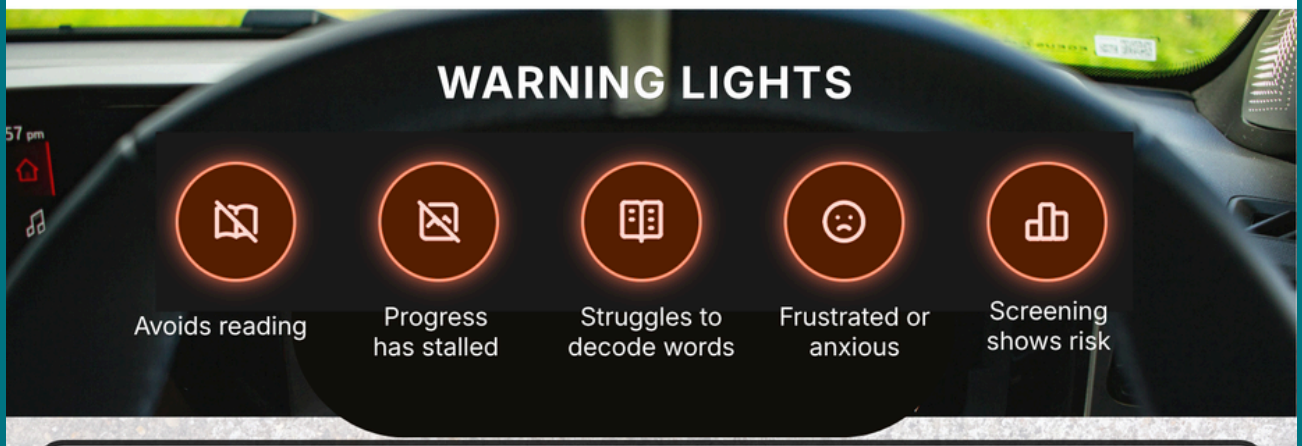
Every child's reading journey is unique, but you don't have to navigate it alone. By staying connected with your child's school, using simple routines at home, and watching how reading skills grow over time, you become an essential part of your child's route to reading. Your support and partnership help keep your child moving forward with confidence.

WHEN TO PULL OVER

ROUTE TO READING

SIGNS YOUR CHILD MAY NEED READING SUPPORT

Just like a check engine light signals it's time to stop and get help, certain signs in your child's reading development mean it's time to act.



KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK THE SCHOOL

- What does screening data show about my child's needs?
- How is my child's reading being supported in class?
- What evidence-based interventions are being used?
- What support is available if my child is struggling?
- What accommodations does the school provide?
- What would happen if my child needs extra help?
- What happens next if progress stalls?
- How can we develop or adjust literacy goals together?
- What does my child need to learn next?
- How can I support these goals at home?

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LITERACY GLOSSARY

ACADEMIC LANGUAGE
The formal language common in books and at school that students need to understand and communicate in academic disciplines.

ACCURACY
The ability to read words correctly.

ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE
The ability to name letters and know their sounds.

ALPHABETIC PRINCIPLE
The idea that letters and groups of letters match individual sounds in words.

AUDITORY PERCEPTION
The ability to understand what you hear.

AUDITORY PROCESSING
The ability to quickly and correctly hear a sound, like in words, and make sense of it.

AUTOMATICITY
The ability to read a word correctly and instantly.

BIAS
A characteristic of some tests that causes students to receive higher or lower scores for reasons other than the trait being measured. A test is not biased simply because two or more groups receive, on average, different scores. A test is biased if members of different groups receive different scores even though they are equal in the trait being measured.

BLENDING
Reading words from left to right by linking each letter or group of letters to their sounds.

CLASSIFICATION ACCURACY
How well a measure detects a condition or risk for a condition. Classification accuracy is often discussed in terms of true positives, false positives, true negatives, and false negatives.

COGNITIVE PROCESSING
Brain-based activities that influence learning, including attention, memory and reasoning.

CONNECTED TEXT
A group of sentences that relate to one another.

DECODABLE WORDS
Words that sound the way they are spelled or can be sounded out because they have letter-sound relationships already learned.

DECODING
Using your knowledge of letter-sound relationships to sound out words.

DIAGNOSIS
Identification of a disorder determined by a medical or educational professional.

DYSCALCULIA
A neurologically based specific learning disability in math, such as difficulty making sense of and working with numbers.

DYSGRAPHIA
A neurologically based specific learning disability in writing, such as difficulty with spelling, handwriting, or recording your ideas.

DYSLEXIA
A brain-based learning disability that specifically impairs a person's ability to read.

ELIGIBILITY CATEGORY OR CLASSIFICATION
One or more of the categories identified in IDEA to qualify a child for special education services.

EVIDENCE-BASED
An intervention, tool, or practice that meets one of the four evidence levels in the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by ESSA (strong, moderate, promising, or demonstrates a rationale).

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING
Learning processes like the ability to plan, organize, problem-solve, sustain attention, and manage tasks and schedules.

EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION
Teaching that is direct and step-by-step, including explaining and showing how to do something.

EXPRESSION
The ability to read "like you talk." To change your voice and pause when reading to emphasize the meaning of the story.

EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE
Language that you use to communicate.

FLUENCY
The ability to read words, phrases, sentences, and stories correctly, with enough speed, and expression.

GRAMMAR
The set of rules that explain how words are used and put together in a language.

GRAPHEME
A printed letter or group of letters that represent a sound in a syllable or word.

HIGH FREQUENCY WORDS
Words that appear in print most often.

IDENTIFICATION
A process used to determine whether a child has a disability.

INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM
A written learning plan for special education services that is designed to meet the specific learning needs of a child.

INTERVENTION
Additional small group or individualized instruction that is tailored to children's needs so they can make progress and be on track to meet grade level learning goals.

IRREGULAR WORDS
Words that are hard to sound out because the letters and sounds do not match up (for example, said).

LANGUAGE PROCESSING
The ability to quickly and correctly match meaning to sound groups that form words, sentences and stories.

LISTENING COMPREHENSION
The ability to understand what others read and say to you.

LITERACY
The ability to read and write well.

LITERACY RICH ENVIRONMENT
A place that encourages reading and writing, such as listening to stories read aloud, reading together, and talking about ideas.

MORPHOLOGY
The knowledge of word parts that have meaning, such as affixes, root, and base words.

MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORT
A schoolwide framework that supports students who are struggling with reading, math, or social and emotional issues through different levels of intensity.

NONVERBAL LEARNING DISABILITIES
A brain-based disorder that makes it hard to understand communication like body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions.

ORAL LANGUAGE
The way you communicate with others through speaking and listening.

ORTHOGRAPHY
The knowledge that the written language is connected to oral language, including how to spell words.

PHONEME
The smallest sound part in spoken language, like /c/ in “cat”.

PHONEMIC AWARENESS
The ability to identify and play with individual sounds in spoken words.

PHONICS
Reading instruction on understanding how letters and groups of letters link to sounds to form letter-sound relationships and spelling patterns.

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS
The ability to recognize that spoken words are made up of individual sound parts.

PHONOLOGICAL MEMORY
The ability to store and recall the sounds of speech in short term memory. It is distinct from phonological awareness, which only refers to the ability to identify sounds.

PHONOLOGICAL PROCESSING
The ability to quickly and correctly hear, store, recall, and make different speech sounds.

PRAGMATICS
How we use language to communicate.

PRINT AWARENESS
The understanding that what is read is linked to the words on the page, rather than to the pictures.

RAPID AUTOMATIZED NAMING (RAN)
The ability to quickly read aloud the names of familiar objects (e.g., colors).

READING COMPREHENSION
The ability to understand what you are reading.

RECEPTIVE LANGUAGE
Language that you understand.

RELIABILITY
The consistency of a set of scores that are designed to measure the same thing. Reliability is a statistical property of scores that must be demonstrated rather than assumed.

SAMPLE REPRESENTATIVENESS
How well a sample in a scientific study corresponds to the population in which the study's findings will be applied. For instance, nationally representative samples of students are often desirable when research findings will be applied nationally.

SCAFFOLDING
Teaching that provides temporary instructional support, like an example or feedback, during initial learning of a concept or skill.

SCREENING
Short processes to find students who need help in reading, writing, spelling, or math.

SELF-MONITORING
The ability to think about what you are learning and understanding while reading, including using a strategy when you are confused by a word or idea.

SEMANTICS
The part of language that has to do with the meaning of words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs.

SPEECH AND LANGUAGE IMPAIRMENT
A condition that causes difficulty with communication, such as speech and understanding language.

SYNTAX
The part of language that has to do with the grammatical forms and structure of sentences.

SYSTEMATIC INSTRUCTION
Teaching that has a carefully planned sequence, including building from easier to more difficult tasks and breaking down harder skills into smaller parts.

VALIDITY
How well something measures what it's supposed to measure. The reliability and validity of scores from assessments are two concepts that are closely knit together and feed into each other.

VISUAL ACUITY
The ability to see clearly.

VISUAL PERCEPTUAL/VISUAL MOTOR DEFICIT
A disorder that makes it hard to draw or copy or understand information that you see.

VOCABULARY
Knowing what words mean and how to say and use them correctly.

WRITTEN LANGUAGE
A form of communication that involves both visual symbols and systematic rules to represent spoken language.

National Center on Improving Literacy

The National Center on Improving Literacy (NCIL), operated by Boston University's Wheelock College of Education and Human Development with funding from the United States Department of Education, is a partnership among literacy experts, university researchers, and technical assistance providers from Florida State University, and RMC Research Corporation.

Our mission is to ensure that every child, regardless of their learning differences, has the opportunity to become a confident reader and writer by increasing access to, and use of, evidence-based approaches to screen, identify, and teach students with literacy-related disabilities, including dyslexia.

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