

## Breaking The Reading Code

**Have you ever wondered why reading is so easy for some children, yet so difficult for others?** Breaking the reading code is the key to unraveling the mystery of learning to read. To decipher the code, students must first transform letters to sounds, and then blend the sounds together to form words. This is not an easy process. Yet as complex as it is, this process happens rather effortlessly for the majority of children during kindergarten or first grade.

Once children break the code, they become emergent readers, ready and eager to learn to read. These are the students who take off like reading rockets and smoothly transition through the rest of the stages of reading, eventually becoming successful readers. Ideally, this transition occurs before students enter fourth grade where they begin to use their skilled reading ability to learn all school subjects, including math and science.

For children who have difficulty breaking the reading code, however, learning to read can be an agonizing ordeal. The bad news is that as these children wrestle with learning how to read, they fall farther and farther behind their classmates. The good news, however, is that these struggling readers can be taught to read. Scientific research has provided us with the knowledge of what works best in teaching children to read, and Kumon's Reading Program—starting with its beginning levels—has put this knowledge into practice.

The purpose of developing phonemic awareness in students is to give them these linguistic insights upon which the alphabetic principle depends. By understanding that words are made up of a sequence of sounds, students easily learn the sounds that go with letters. For example, when the sound /d/ is recognized as the sound heard in **doll, dog, and day**, students quickly learn that the sound of the letter **d** is /d/. When the sound /h/ is recognized as the sound heard in **house, hat, hen, and heavy**, they understand that /h/ is the sound of the letter **h**.

**Phonemic awareness is the ultimate difference between those who catch on to reading very quickly and those who do not.** Simply put, struggling readers lack phonemic awareness. Trying to memorize which sounds go with what letters and which words begin with what sounds, will not help these students learn to read if they have not mastered this skill. Fortunately, phonemic awareness can be developed if it is taught explicitly and systematically for approximately 15 minutes per day over the course of one school year.

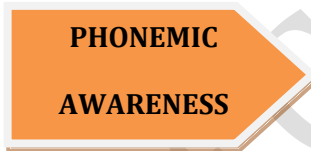
**How can struggling readers learn this skill? The development of the reading readiness skills of phonemic awareness, followed by the alphabetic principle, begins in Kumon's early Reading Program.** Children can be taught phonemic awareness by first drawing their attention to rhymes and then making their own rhymes. For instance, by rhyming words such as **cat, hat, pat, and mat**, they quickly learn to recognize the sound of /at/, and they learn that by changing the beginning sounds of rhyming words, they can make new words. When they learn to do this, they can be taught to substitute the ending and finally the middle sounds of rhyming words to form new words. For example, if they change the /t/ in **cat** to /p/, the new word is **cap**.

Next, children need to learn to play games with words. They can be taught to blend sounds together to make words. For example, if a child blends the sounds /m/, /a/, /p/ together, the word **map** is formed. A child also needs to be taught to take a word apart by breaking it into its different sounds.

Although it is not easy for struggling readers to master these skills, it is possible with daily practice. For students who learn to attend to the structure of language, the alphabetic principle will make sense and they will rapidly develop the phonetic skills necessary for reading, thus **breaking the reading code**. Once accomplished, struggling readers and beginning readers will all grow into successful readers!

**There are two parts to the reading puzzle that children need to master in order to break the reading code.**

- Part one requires the ability to recognize that words are made up of small sounds. We call this **phonemic awareness**. For example, the word **cat** is made up of a hard /c/ sound, a short /a/ sound and the /t/ sound.



- Part two requires the ability to link these sounds to letters of the alphabet. We call this the **alphabetic principle**. For example, the hard /c/ sound is represented by the letter **c**, the short /a/ sound is represented by the letter **a**, and the /t/ sound is represented by the letter **t**.



Note from the editor:

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