# Florida Center for Reading Research

SpellRead

## What is SpellRead?

*SpellRead* (Phonological Auditory Training) is a reading intervention that offers instruction in phonemic awareness, phonemic decoding, spelling, reading fluency, reading comprehension, and writing. So that students' comprehension is not sacrificed by reading that is labored and inefficient, phonological automaticity is one of the program's fundamental goals and integrated into all activities. *SpellRead* is designed for students aged 5 to adult and targets a wide range of readers, writers and spellers who struggle with the sound-symbol system or encounter difficulty with fluency and comprehension. Instruction occurs daily for 60-90 minutes in small groups of 3-5 students and may be taught by general or special education teachers, reading specialists, psychologists, speech-language pathologists or paraprofessionals. The entire program consists of 140 highly structured lessons divided into 3 specific phases. Each lesson is composed of 35-40 minutes of phonemic and phonetic activities, (designed to develop mastery of phonemic awareness and phonics skills) followed by 15-20 minutes of share-reading, 7 minutes of free-writing, and 1-3 minutes of wrap-up. Three comprehensive sets of teacher's manuals include a scope and sequence, individual lesson objectives and clear and detailed explanations to easily guide teachers through each lesson. Instructional cards and activity books accompany each phase.

Phase A of the *SpellRead* intervention contains 60 lessons that introduce the 44 sounds of our language. Early lessons begin with sounds and word types that are easier to hear and manipulate, such as CV, VC words, and progress to more difficult sounds, sound combinations and word types. All students begin with Phase A, regardless of their grade or entry level; however their pacing through the program will vary considerably. A characteristic feature of the *SpellRead* program is the use of pseudowords or non-words and syllables as the primary vehicle for auditory and visual phonemic activities. This is done to ensure that students are relying on the sound-symbol system they are learning rather than their visual memory of words. Phonemic activities within the program include 1) building: where single sounds are used to build a syllable or combination of different syllables; 2) blending: combining individual sounds to form a syllable or word; 3) analyzing, which involves breaking a syllable into its individual sounds; and, 4) listening: indicating whether an individual sound is in the initial, medial or final position of a spoken syllable, or, identifying a specific sound in one of those positions.

Phase B of *SpellRead* introduces secondary spellings or vowel variants, consonant blends, open vowels and syllabication to the two syllable level. Phase C involves the teaching of the most common clusters, the –ed and –ing verb forms, and continued development of fluency with polysyllabic words. Activities for Phase B and C are similar in structure to Phase A.

The phonemic awareness and phonics activities in each lesson are followed by share-reading and free-writing. Books are leveled according to the Fry and Spache readability formulas, and as the levels increase, the number of polysyllabic words is also taken into consideration. To conclude the lesson, students write in their journal about what has just been read.


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## How is SpellRead aligned with Reading First?

The report of the National Reading Panel (2000) revealed five essential components of an effective reading program: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. The *SpellRead* program incorporates these five critical elements with a particular emphasis on the first three. A basic underlying assumption of the *SpellRead* intervention is that fluency in phonological skills will free a student's mental capacity permitting an unhindered focus on comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

Phonemic awareness activities are prevalent in the *SpellRead* program. Listening exercises involve phoneme isolation of initial, medial, and final sounds, segmenting a syllable or word into its individual sounds, blending a word that the teacher has segmented, and phoneme manipulation. Activities in phonemic awareness and phonics occur side-by-side to facilitate the acquisition of the alphabetic principle. The advanced phonics applications with secondary vowels, consonant clusters and polysyllabic words found in Phase B and C are a crucial part of reading and spelling instruction for older struggling readers. Activity books are aligned with instruction so that the writing of letter-sounds, syllables and words emphasizes the speech to print connection. Initially, phonemic awareness and phonics tasks concentrate on developing accuracy and then they build speed. A highlight of this program is the creative and varied array of phonemic awareness and phonics exercises that enhance student motivation while simultaneously working and reworking a skill to the point of automaticity.

Fluency is another important goal of the program and is addressed uniquely in terms of automaticity of response in all phonemic awareness and phonics activities. Speed-reading is one activity that occurs daily and consists of the student quickly reading the word or syllable cards. Another aspect of fluency work involves placing students in the correct book level so that reading flows effortlessly.

During the share-reading and free-writing portion, students are able to synthesize and apply the skills they have been learning to the stories they are reading. Each student and the instructor takes turns reading orally for a short time while the others follow along (shadow) in their own books. Literal and inferential questioning is the primary comprehension strategy of this program. Before reading begins, teachers pose questions to stimulate prior knowledge, recall events of the previous day's reading, or to prompt students to make a prediction. While students read aloud, the teacher will prompt the first sound and then say the word if a student is struggling with an unfamiliar word. In order to address potentially difficult new vocabulary during reading, teachers may read a sentence from the story and ask the students what they think is meant. After reading, by means of questioning and written response, students are asked to sequence, summarize, give a title to the chapter, or reflect on events or situations that arise in the story. Through students' writing, teachers check for general understanding of ideas or vocabulary, and return a written response to each student. The following day, vocabulary understanding is addressed in the context of reading.

Successful delivery of the *SpellRead* program is a high priority for the SpellRead company; therefore, instructors of the intervention are trained by the company and must have strong phonological skills, and high school level reading, spelling and writing. In order to meet students' needs, homogenous groups are formed based on word identification, fluency and comprehension scores. Teachers are encouraged to use the daily lesson planner to note concerns, errors, and objectives that need to be addressed. Instructors receive 8 days of training, in-class coaching for the first week or two, and on-going support.

## Research Support for SpellRead

The *SpellRead* program was developed by Kay McPhee in 1994 and grew from her evolving knowledge of and experience with the hearing impaired and students with learning disabilities.

A study at an elementary school in Newfoundland, Canada (Rashotte, MacPhee, & Torgesen, 2001) was conducted to determine the effectiveness of the *SpellRead* program delivered in small groups of 3-5 students, to poor readers from grades 1-6 during an 8-week period. The school population was socially and economically disadvantaged with 75% on social assistance and 55% coming from single parent homes with low levels of adult literacy.

The sample size included 116 students in grades 1-6 selected because they were struggling with basic reading skills (roughly below the 20$^{th}$ percentile). Students fell in the average range of verbal ability as measured by the Vocabulary Subtest of the Stanford-Binet (Thorndike, Hagen, & Sattler, 1986). Students were randomly assigned to treatment Group 1 (n=58) or control Group 2 (n=58). Due to the limited amount of time remaining in the school year, the first part of the intervention lasted 8 weeks. Children in the treatment group received fifty minutes of daily instruction that was delivered in small groups of 3-5 students over an 8-week period. Children in the control group received their regular classroom instruction. Immediately after the 8-week intervention, an adaptation of a multiple baseline design allowed the control children to receive instruction with the *SpellRead* intervention and the intervention for the treatment children was stopped.

Posttest-1 results for treatment Group 1 at the end of the first 8-week (35 hour) intervention were impressive and indicate that the *SpellRead* program significantly impacted all grade levels. Grades were combined into 3 units: grades 1-2, grades 3-4, and grades 5-6. Effect sizes for phonetic decoding ranged from 1.67-2.20 for the 3 grade-level groups; effect sizes for the 3 phonological awareness measures ranged from .96 for grades 1-2, 1.35 for grades 3-4, and 1.56 for grades 5-6. Effect sizes for the comprehension measures were equally large showing an average of 1.48 in grades 1-2, .73 in grades 3-4, and .54 in grades 5-6. Word–level reading showed moderate effect sizes across all grades and stronger effects for word accuracy in text reading for grades 1-4. When Group-2 (the original control group) received 7 weeks of the intervention, they showed similar positive results at Posttest-2. It is important to note that growth was sustained from Posttest-1 to Posttest-2 for Group-1.

Outcomes for several clinical samples of children taught with the *SpellRead* program were reported as part of a discussion of intervention outcomes that included results from other intervention methods (Torgesen, Alexander, Alexander, & MacPhee, 2003). One of the questions explored in this paper was how much intervention is needed to bring reading skills into the average range for students who begin instruction at different levels of reading skill. In three different samples that began instruction with word level skills from the 10$^{th}$ to the 30th percentile, exposure to instruction with the Spell Read program produced powerful instructional effects ranging from one to two standard deviations depending on the specific reading skill being measured. Depending on the amount of instruction provided, most of the reading skills of the older students in these samples were in the average range following intervention.

For example, one of the samples began with word reading accuracy scores at approximately the 10$^{th}$ percentile. Sixty percent of these children qualified for free or reduced lunch, and 53% were receiving special education services. Forty five percent were Caucasian, and 55% were African American or other minorities. Their average age was 12 years. These children received an average of 100 hours of instruction in groups of 4-5 spread over a 5-month period. During the course of

the intervention, these children improved from the 20th to the 75th percentile in phonemic decoding, from the 7th to the 40th percentile in text reading accuracy, and from the 7th to the 40th percentile in comprehension. They also improved from below the 1st percentile to the 9th percentile in reading fluency.

In conclusion, the content and design of the *SpellRead* program are aligned with current scientifically based reading research. One study involving random assignment to intervention and control groups showed that the *SpellRead* program, when implemented properly, can produce significant and substantial effects on reading skill for children ranging in age from grade one through grade six. Results from several clinical samples support the finding that the *SpellRead* program can provide instruction that is sufficiently powerful to normalize most of the reading skills of struggling readers older than 12 years of age. Currently, the *Spell Read* program is being studied as part of the largest randomized field trial of intervention methods ever conducted. For information about this field trial, see http://www.haan4kids.org/power4kids/.

## Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths of *SpellRead*:

- Multiple and varied phonemic awareness and phonics activities, often in an instructional game format, are a motivating and integral part of the program.
- The explicit, highly structured, step-by-step format, with frequent repetition and immediate feedback can be helpful for struggling readers.
- A priority of the program is the intense focus on fluency contributing to eventual mastery of skills.
- Review begins each phase to ensure a firm foundation of the previous level's skills.
- The teacher's manual is clear and easy to follow.
- The type of consistent questioning during Share Reading can be effective in guiding the students' focus to the gist of the story.
- Written responses to writing clarify whether or not students understand what they have read.
- Research studies for this program have demonstrated substantial gains across grade levels and among students with differing ability levels.

Weaknesses of *SpellRead*:

- None were noted.

## Which Florida districts have schools that implement SpellRead?

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## For More Information

www.spellread.com

## References

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Date Posted: December, 2003



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