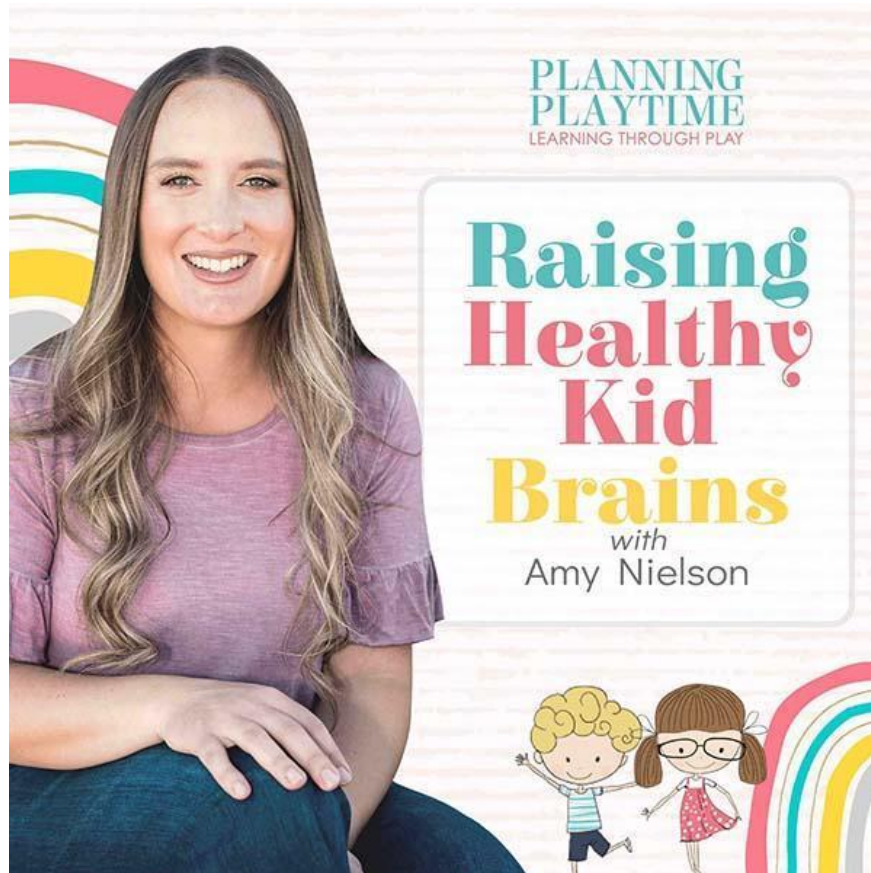


## Ep #36: How to Help Your Child Become a Proficient Reader (Part 1)



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Amy Nielson**

[Raising Healthy Kid Brains](#) with Amy Nielson of Planning Playtime

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What is the science of reading and why should you care? We are doing a three part series on the science of reading, the latest in neuroscience, cognitive science around reading, how it happens in a child's brain, what we can do to help it happen more efficiently and effectively so that children can become confident, proficient readers. Teaching a child to read and helping them become confident, proficient readers is one of the biggest, most critical jobs of a school teacher, an elementary school teacher.

It's also a huge job for parents because we support that and help that at home. Now, talking about reading might not sound like the most exciting topic in the world, but I actually think you'll find it kind of fascinating, I certainly have. And we make it kind of fun too. I love to make it playful and so I hope you enjoy this series. It's starting right after this.

Welcome to the *Raising Healthy Kid Brains* podcast where moms and teachers come to learn all about kids' brains, how they work, how they learn, how they grow and simple tips and tricks for raising the most resilient, kind, smart, compassionate kids we can. All while having lots of grace and compassion for ourselves because you know what? We all really need and deserve that too. I am your host, Amy Nielson. Let's get ready to start the show.

The science of reading has become a huge buzz phrase in the education community over the past few years, and there is a really good reason for that. It's kind of amazing what neuroscientists have discovered around children's brains and what is happening as they're learning to read and how we can help them read more effectively. So why should we care? Don't most kids learn how to read in school? Well, there's some interesting statistics. Actually the vast majority, 67% of 4<sup>th</sup> graders are reading below level.

And the National Assessment of Education Progress says that 27% of our 12<sup>th</sup> graders are below proficient. That's a huge number and we can do better. What's interesting is that research is showing us that with the right tools and strategies, 95% of neurotypical students can learn to read by the end of 1<sup>st</sup> grade. And so what we want to do is set more of these kids up for success and this is where the science comes in. We have been learning from cognitive

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science about how to learn to read for years and years, but now we can actually do imaging and see what is happening.

The neuroscientists are watching what is happening in a child's brain as they're learning to read. And how easy is it really for a child to learn how to read? I think for a long time, people kind of thought that children mostly naturally learn to read if they're given a lot of exposure to good books. If we're reading aloud to them, things like that, they're going to kind of pick up on it naturally. Well, there's some really good statistics around it. And so about 5% of children will learn to read effortlessly, just 5% that's just going to happen.

In group two, about 45% of children will learn to read fairly easily with some broad instruction. So yes, about 50% of children will learn to read if given some broad instruction or a very small percentage of that group will learn to read kind of naturally on their own. But what we've discovered is that about 35% of children require explicit, systematic sequenced instruction. And then there's 15% that require that same explicit systematic sequence instruction with a lot, a lot of repetition. So let's talk about what's actually going on in your brain when you're reading.

When you're reading, you're taking symbols from paper and converting them over into speech. Now, what's interesting is that our brains have evolved to have an area for the visual part of their brain, where we can see things, like these symbols on paper. And we have an area of the brain for speech. The problem is, there isn't actually a part of our brain that is evolved to read. And so what happens is, is we kind of have to hot wire the visual part of our brain and the speech part of our brain, we kind of have to build some connections there and kind of hot wire this new space in our brain that allows our brain to read.

Now, how do we know this? Well, neuroscientists are doing imaging and watching what's happening. And they say that in a non-reader, the back of the brain, the visual part of their brain, lights up as they're seeing symbols. But when you're talking or listening to something that's not reading, the speech area of your brain lights up more. When they're watching the scans of a reader, they will see connections flowing from the visual part of the brain to the speech part. So

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they watch that connection happening, they can see it going on while a child is reading.

Now, when a child becomes a very proficient reader, as an adult if you're a proficient reader, you've rewired your brain to be able to do this so quickly that you don't even realize it's happening. But of course, we know if you've ever helped a child read, it starts slow and you have to build and build those connections with practice. So our brain kind of reads in four steps.

The first step is you see the symbols. So we look at a word and we see symbols. Those symbols to someone who doesn't know what they mean, they have no meaning. For example, I am learning Korean because I think it's really fun and I think it's fascinating that they have these characters, but they're built out of an alphabet but it looks completely different than anything I was exposed to as a child. And so I had to learn that because when I just looked at those characters before I had learned any of that, I had no idea what they meant. So we see characters and we don't really know what they mean.

The next thing we do is we start to kind of break them down into clusters. So for example, if you're looking at the word 'chip', you see letters C-H-I-P. And then when you're starting to kind of connect them into clusters, you can kind of break that out. So we would say, "Okay, there's a Ch and then there's I and then there's P at the end. The next part is, is that we're going to start working on pronouncing that if you have learned to do that. And we're going to break that up into the ch-ip.

And then the fourth and final part is that after we've read the word then we attach the meaning to it. So you might go through all the different images in your head of what the word chip could mean. Is it a wood chip? Is it a potato chip? What kind of chip, is it a chip in your windshield? And we have all these different meanings and we find the right context that fits what we're talking about right now.

So those are kind of the four steps of what happens as your brain is reading. Now, you'll notice that only the first one is visual. This is important because if you're trying to teach a child to read by memorizing words, if we're focusing a lot on sight words or trying to help children just become familiar with words by

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repeating them over and over and over again, this does not work very well. You would have to know every font type if you're memorizing just what words look like. You would have to memorize them in lowercase and capital.

And basically your brain would have to save thousands of versions of a single word in the visual part of our brain to read visually. Instead, we have to work through that process of the next two steps, which is helping children be able to kind of decode, break down words and be able to read any kind of word. And then we're also doing that last step, which is helping them connect it with meaning. Now, once we do all those, if we can combine all of those things, what we're doing is helping children store words in their orthographic lexicon.

And once they're there, they can read them so quickly. Those pathways between the visual part of their brain and the speech part of their brain for that word is so, so fast that it's not even noticeable. They have it immediate on recall. They can just pull it out and become very proficient readers. Now, we talked about how children are going to need that systematic, explicit instruction and a lot of that comes from phonological awareness and phonemic awareness.

Now, this phonological awareness, how aware children are of sounds and how they interact with each other has a profound impact on how active their brain circuit will be as they start to read actual words. And what's so cool is that we can do a lot of this before they're starting to read. We can do a lot of those exercises with them. It's a precursor skill of kids being very aware of the visual symbols or of letters and being able to connect those auditory sounds they hear and know.

So we can do a lot of this work before kids are even starting to read and play games and make this so fun, so that when they start being introduced to the symbols. It's just so much faster and easier because they're already aware of how sounds interact and how words kind of break down and you can play with them.

We're going to talk more about phonological awareness later in a follow-up episode. But just to give you a little bit of an idea, there are some studies done that show that teachers who focused on teaching a kid how to focus on sounds and parts of a word, the learning on that is slower. It takes longer. It's a little bit

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more tedious. But the left side of the brain lights up after children see a word when they're learning this way. And what's interesting about that is that is very similar to the brain scan of an expert reader.

So when we are teaching children to read, focusing on sounds, focusing on that phonemic awareness, it helps children build those expert reading circuits that they're going to need, and the same ones that we see in very proficient readers. In contrast to that, when we're focusing on kind of more of a sight word method or whole word method where we're kind of just having them try to guess the word based on the first letter or a context.

If they're looking at the picture and doing their best guess based on the beginning sound, things like that, which is what we were doing in schools for years and years trying to teach children to read. They pick it up maybe a little bit faster, the learning is maybe a little faster in those initial couple of years, but their learning is much more fragile. And what neuroscientists have found is when they do scans of the brain of children that are learning to read this way. The right side of the brain or the visual side of the brain, is what's lighting up very dissimilar to an expert reader.

I think a lot of times we like to think that our brain is a muscle and that if you use it, it will just get stronger and stronger. And with reading, the challenge with that is, is that there's a difference in just using a muscle and doing strategic work to rewire the correct parts of your brain, to work the correct parts of the muscle, to allow your brain to grow in the spaces you need it to grow. To be able to hot wire that space between the visual part of your brain and the speech part of your brain that allows you to read.

What is so fantastic about our brains is that they are really flexible and we can help them grow. If we focus our attention onto a specific area, we can really grow that area. And so our job as teachers, as parents with reading, which is one of the most critical things we can teach a child in their youth is how to really focus in and grow that part of their brain that does hot wire the visual part of their brain and the speech part of their brain so that they can grow the reading part of their brain and be able to do it really successfully, very proficiently.



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It's almost like being a little bit of a brain engineer because you get to help design or grow this part of a child's brain, which I think is so cool and amazing and what a neat thing to be able to do. And what's fantastic, as children grow this mastery of their decoding skills and being able to read proficiently. This allows the brain to free up a little bit. It gets more automated, leaving more of their attention open for comprehension and understanding of what they're reading, which is ultimately what the whole point of it all is.

So if we're taking this slower route that's less fragile learning, that's better learning, that's going to work that left side of the brain and build that connection between the visual and the speech part of the brain, it's going to take a little bit longer. And so the instruction needs to be engaging. And we also want to use multiple modes and senses to teach this.

We use play and multi-sensory learning techniques for a variety of reasons. Now one of those is because it's fun and it's engaging and kids actually want to do it over and over and over again. And what we know is that goals are less driving than experience. So if we can make the experience amazing, kids will come back and they'll do it longer and they'll do it more often. And we have a better chance of helping children progress further just by changing the experience. But also what happens as we're engaging multiple senses in different parts of the brain using play is that we're building stronger connections.

We're actually building out that portion of the brain even stronger by building it using multiple senses that create stronger connections in our brain. Students using multiple senses to learn are more likely to retain information. They are more likely to make meaningful connections with it. And it's also really accommodating and gives exposure to different learning styles.

Using play to learn, I think we already know, is just such an effective way to promote cognitive and social, emotional and physical development in children, it's more natural. It helps build social and communication skills. It is great for building fine and gross motor skills. And it really sparks creativity and imagination and encourages the growth of that in children as well. It improves focus and attention, and it even supports language development using vocabulary in natural ways.

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This is why we are so passionate about combining the science of reading with best practices to help children become proficient readers, based on the neuroscience, the cognitive science, all of those things with the science of play. Because we know how impactful that is and how that impacts a child's brain. When we can put those things together, we greatly reduce the need for intervention for readers.

While we can't entirely eliminate the need for intervention, we can significantly reduce it by combining what we know the latest science of reading and stacking that with the science of play, which is pretty impactful and amazing. So what does this actually look like? We know it's important, but what does it actually look like and how are we supposed to do it? Over the next couple of episodes of the podcast, we're going to be breaking down a little bit of the science of reading and then talking about how we kind of bring in that play to it and stack that science of reading with the science of play.

And so in the next episode we'll be talking about word recognition and be kind of breaking that down for you and what that looks like. And then in the episode after that we'll be talking about language comprehension. And the different parts of that, giving you some suggestions and ideas of how to bring play into that and make it amazing for a kiddo, whether you're teaching a child to read at home or working with a child who's maybe been struggling with reading. Or if you're in a classroom and working with children in a school setting. It's a lot of fun. It's interesting.

I can't wait to nerd out with you a little bit about it and I will catch you here next week on the next episode of the *Raising Healthy Kid Brains* podcast.

We have talked about how powerful the science of reading is and how impactful it can be when you stack that with the power of play, which is exactly what we've done with the Play to Read program. The Play to Read program takes the power of play and combines it with the science of reading and helps children become proficient, confident readers while having an absolute blast and building their fine motor skills, their communication skills and probably their relationship with you.



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It is being used successfully all around the world and you can use it too today. Go to [playtoreadfun.com](http://playtoreadfun.com) to grab that program. Again, that is [playtoreadfun.com](http://playtoreadfun.com) to get Play to Read Fun today.

Thank you for hanging out with me today for this fun chat on *Raising Healthy Kid Brains*. If you want to see more of what we're doing to support kiddos and their amazing brains, come visit us on our website [planningplaytime.com](http://planningplaytime.com). See you next week.