

Pre-Reading Skills Checklist

Track the foundational skills children need before formal reading instruction begins

Reading readiness isn't about age -- it's about whether these foundational skills are in place. Most children develop these between ages 3–6, but the timeline varies widely.

Print Awareness

- Holds a book right-side up — Understands the physical orientation of printed materials.
- Knows print goes left-to-right, top-to-bottom — Follows along when you point to words while reading.
- Recognizes that print carries meaning (not pictures alone) — Points to words on signs and asks 'what does that say?'
- Can identify the front and back of a book — Understands basic book structure.
- Understands that spaces separate words — Beginning to see individual words as units, not a stream of letters.

Phonological Awareness

- Recognizes and produces rhyming words — Can tell you 'cat' and 'hat' rhyme. Generates rhymes during play.
- Claps out syllables in words — 'Wa-ter-mel-on' = 4 claps. Start with their own name.
- Identifies the first sound in a word — 'What sound does 'ball' start with?' /b/
- Blends sounds together to make a word — '/c/ /a/ /t/ = cat.' This is the foundation of decoding.
- Segments words into individual sounds — 'Cat = /c/ /a/ /t/.' Harder than blending. Critical for spelling.
- Detects and manipulates sounds (delete, substitute) — 'Say 'cat' without the /c/' = 'at.' Advanced phonological skill.

Letter Knowledge

- Recognizes and names most uppercase letters — Can point to and name letters when shown out of order.
- Recognizes and names most lowercase letters — Lowercase is harder. b/d and p/q confusion is normal until age 7.
- Knows the sound that most letters make — Letter-sound knowledge is a stronger predictor of reading than letter naming.

- Can write some letters (even imperfectly) – Motor practice with letters reinforces recognition.
Perfection isn't the goal.

Vocabulary & Language

- Uses and understands 2,000+ words (age 4-5 typical) – Vocabulary size is the strongest long-term predictor of reading comprehension.
- Speaks in complete sentences (5+ words) – Oral language complexity predicts written language understanding.
- Asks and answers 'why' and 'how' questions – Shows causal thinking and ability to process complex information.
- Follows 2-3 step verbal directions – Requires working memory and language processing together.
- Uses past and future tense correctly most of the time – Tense markers show grammatical development supporting comprehension.

Narrative Skills

- Retells a simple story with beginning, middle, end – Narrative structure understanding predicts reading comprehension.
- Makes predictions about what will happen next in a story – Shows active engagement and inference-making.
- Connects story events to their own life – 'That happened to me too!' Shows comprehension and schema building.
- Creates original stories during play – Inventive storytelling builds the narrative brain pathways used in reading.

MOST CHILDREN READ-READY

Ages 5-7. There is wide normal variation.

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

The #1 predictor of early reading success.

LETTER KNOWLEDGE

Letter-sound knowledge matters more than letter naming.

VOCABULARY

Best built through conversation and read-alouds, not flashcards.

READING READINESS

If your child is 5+ and most boxes are unchecked, that's useful information -- not a diagnosis. Talk to their teacher or pediatrician. Early intervention for reading readiness is highly effective.

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