

Rising Stars Reading Planet

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Is there really a 'right' way of learning to read? The fact that in schools across the world there are many experimental methods of teaching reading suggests not. Here in the UK, teaching phonics to children in a direct and systematic way has proven an effective means of improving reading skills. And because phonics is seen in such positive terms, there are other methods that have been overlooked.

Phonics, as we all know, focuses on raising children's awareness of letters and sounds by teaching through segmenting and blending. But researchers at Coventry University have shaken our understanding by pointing out a second part of phonological awareness, one that refers to the rhythmic components of spoken language. Their work found that speech rhythm (or prosody) sensitivity and lexical stress sensitivity are also important skills in children's early reading development, and that these things should be on our radar when thinking about how children learn to read. Stress placement, intonation, pitch and timing are crucial, and training children in these areas can support their reading and assist with decoding on various levels (phonemes, rhymes, word recognition, speech perception, and morphology). It also helps to combine decoding, fluency and reading comprehension.

The only programme using this latest research at the time of writing is Rising Stars' brand new Reading Planet - a resource that emphasises the importance of speech rhythm sensitivity, and shows how it can be developed through simple activities, helping children to become reading ready.

Reading Planet consists of four strands. First, the lilac Lift-Off stage features a

dozen wordless books that develop essential early-language skills for reading readiness, helping children learn how to 'tune-in' to sounds, music, rhythm and rhymes. There are audio narratives, songs, rhymes, chants and sound effects for each book, and six posters available for further practice and extension.

Next, there are 48 fully decodable Rocket Phonics books focusing on key phonemes that allow children to practise their emerging reading skills. All open with reading notes and close with comprehension questions.

The third strand helps developing confident, independent readers, and is devoted to the fun and feisty Comet Street Kids. This 72-book collection of action-packed stories is expertly levelled from Pink A to White.

To complete the programme, the Galaxy strand is a delightful library of fiction, non-fiction, poetry and plays.

All four strands have been developed by reading experts, come with Teacher's books and feature step-by-step practical guidance for making speech rhythm training a reality in your classroom. Each guide contains an introduction to the effectiveness of prosody, including access to extremely valuable CPD videos. There are easy-to-follow training ideas, guided reading notes, a free CD containing audio books of each title and clear and effective formative assessment guidance.

There is no doubt that considerable thought has been poured into the creation of this mould-breaking programme, and with top writers and illustrators on board, high quality and pupil engagement is almost certain.

Plus, in the pipeline for next

year is Reading Planet online, to which schools can subscribe for unlimited access to an eBook library, bite-size CPD videos, editable versions of the Teacher's Guide material and pupil resources that come with easy-to-use reports for



tracking progress. There is even great support for home, with helpful YouTube videos for parents, cost-effective reading records and guidance for how best to support reading outside of school.

For me, what this programme really teaches is how rhythm carries information, and that children need to tune into the music of English. When I started learning Swedish, one of the first things I did was listen to the sounds by stepping the stresses and walking the rhythms of speech, which helped me enormously. English is no different. We've got rhythm too, it's just that we haven't focused on it in teaching because we've been too busy with segmental phonological awareness. Until now.

Verdict: Another dimension

Reading Planet really redefines our understanding of how children learn to read. It challenges our approach and encourages us to think how we teach phonics. This isn't about ditching or replacing our phonics teaching, but adding to and evolving it. You won't have come across anything like this before, but because it is supported by research you know that it's no quick-fix or publishing folly. It's a highly credible approach that will change the way you teach, and it's a sound investment in more ways than one, with activities galore to explore.

