

# Empower™ Reading



## Taking a Scientific Approach to Reading Disabilities

The Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids) is deeply committed to improving the health of all children through the integration of care, education, and research. SickKids seeks to promote the health and well-being of children and families, and actively addresses important health promotion issues such as illiteracy.

For over 25 years, the Learning Disabilities Research Program (LDRP) at SickKids has worked to better understand the core learning problems of children and adolescents with severe reading disabilities. Our understanding is based on the experience of teaching and evaluating the progress of more than 3,000 struggling readers who have received focused, systematic remediation in small groups in our research and community classrooms.

All of the LDRP's work has been conducted according to rigorous scientific guidelines. Based on intensive research and findings, we have developed Empower™ Reading. This reading remediation program is the

result of everything we have learned from a series of remediation studies initiated in 1980, and includes what we have found to yield the best long-term outcomes for struggling readers.

While Empower™ Reading was developed for struggling readers in the LDRP's own laboratory classrooms, it is adaptable to the needs of all children struggling to learn to read. We are currently piloting the published form of Empower™ Reading in almost 100 schools across six school boards in Southern Ontario.

## What is Empower™ Reading?

Accurate efficient decoding and word reading are the foundation upon which successful reading comprehension is built. Empower™ Reading is designed to teach the child word identification skills and decoding strategies and to promote their effective use of these strategies. Using these strategies, the child can develop the basic skills needed for independent reading for meaning, information, or pleasure.

Empower™ Reading instruction starts with the teaching of five decoding strategies: *Sounding Out*, *Rhyming*, *Peeling Off*, *Vowel Alert*, and *SPY*. Struggling readers apply these strategies whenever they confront unknown words when reading.

Once students have a good understanding of the strategies, they apply a *Game Plan* that enables them to choose, use, check, and score their use of the five decoding strategies. The Game Plan dialogue guides the students' application of the different strategies they have selected to decode unknown words.

## The Goals of Empower™ Reading:

- Teach struggling readers a set of effective strategies for decoding words and understanding text.
- Allow students to experience success in reading and gain confidence in their own reading skills.
- Help students become independent readers equipped with multiple word attack strategies.
- Empower students to move beyond decoding strategies and read independently for meaning, information.



## The Five Empower™ Decoding Strategies

The five Empower™ decoding strategies are taught in sequence and are practised cumulatively over the course of the program's 110 lessons. Each strategy is taught through an introductory lesson, training of the preskills needed to successfully use the strategy, strategy dialogue instruction, prototype lessons, multi-levelled worksheets, stories, and a variety of learning activities.



### Sounding Out Strategy

Often students know about and attempt to use a 'sounding out' strategy, but lack the knowledge to do so successfully. The *Sounding Out Strategy* teaches the phonological skills and letter-sound knowledge necessary for accurate word reading using a structured format. A *Teacher Presentation Manual* is used to guide the students through the *Sounding Out* portion of the lessons.

### Rhyming Strategy

The Rhyming Strategy<sup>1</sup> teaches students how to use what they do know to figure out what they do not know. To use the *Rhyming Strategy*, students must understand key concepts such as: 'same, different, beginning, middle, and end'; rhyming rules; and rhyming skills. Students are also taught a body of "keywords" that represent the highest frequency spelling patterns in the English language<sup>1</sup> (e.g., *and, it, her ...*). Once students can identify words that share the same spelling patterns, they are taught that the keywords they have been learning can help them 'unlock' (or read) new words.



### Peeling Off Strategy

This strategy enables students to read longer and more difficult words. Students learn to identify, segment, and read affixes at the beginning (e.g., *un-, re-, mis-*) and end of a word (e.g., *-ing, -er, -tion*), thereby reducing the unknown word to a smaller root. A magnetic *Peeling Off Tree* with green leaves (beginning affixes) and orange leaves (ending affixes) is used to help students understand that prefixes and suffixes, like the leaves of a tree (which grow and fall), can be "peeled off", and that the root of a word, like the root of a tree, remains fixed.

### Vowel Alert Strategy

The *Vowel Alert Strategy* teaches students that vowels and vowel clusters have alternate pronunciations and pose difficult challenges for readers. Students learn to be 'alert' to possible decoding difficulties, to attempt alternate pronunciations of vowels in unknown words, and to keep trying until the correct word is identified. A die-cut *Vowel Alert Stoplight* with various card inserts, is used as a prompt: "Stop at the vowel when I am unsure (red light), be careful and try both vowel sounds (yellow light), and 'go' when I get the correct word (green light)."



### SPY Strategy

The *SPY Strategy* allows students to use their growing word knowledge to recognize small known words or word parts in longer, unknown words. Students learn that this strategy is most effective when confronted with compound words, e.g., *bookmark, shipwreck*.

## Acquiring and Applying the Game Plan

The *Game Plan*, modelled on a sports analogy, is introduced as soon as students have learned at least three of the decoding strategies. It is designed to help students quickly select appropriate strategies, accurately apply the selected strategies, actively monitor their application of the strategies, and evaluate the success of their efforts. Students are taught that learning to read is similar to learning a new sport, and that the decoding strategies are like sport plays: each one is composed of important skills that need to be practised; and, one must know when, where, and how to use each strategy or play. Students learn that coaches (like teachers) are important to the players in helping them to learn and practise new skills, and in providing assistance when necessary.

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1. Based on the Compare/Contrast Strategy from the Benchmark School Word Identification/Vocabulary Development Program by Gaskins, Downer, & Gaskins, 1986, Media, PA: Benchmark School. Copyright 1986 by Benchmark School. Adapted with permission.



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