Steps in Learning to Read

Learning to read is a complex process, which involves many interrelated skills. I would like to summarize those here for you to better understand the work your child is doing in school and where it fits in with this process. The skills are not always sequential. Sometimes they are learned simultaneously.

The skills a child must master are as follows:

1. **Recognizing the letters of the alphabet**
   First uppercase letters will be recognized and then lowercase letters. Recognition is followed by production and being able to write the different letters of the alphabet, not always in sequence. This will allow a child to encode sounds he/she hears. For example, writing 'b – a – t' to stand for the sounds heard in the word "bat."

   The letters of the alphabet can be difficult to learn since many are so similar to each other. Some are mirror images of others (b and d, q and p), some are the same except for small details (n and h, r and n) and some are flipped over (w and m, and u and n). Therefore, we work on visual perception skills learning to see the differences between letters, groups of letters and individual words.

2. **Learning the sounds associated with the letters of the alphabet**
   First individual sounds (the sound of the letter 'b' for example) and then initial sounds in short words followed by the ending or final sounds are learned. The middle or medial sounds are the last sounds learned. First children learn to recognize and match the sounds heard, then encode a letter for the sounds heard.

3. **Word families and word building**
   Students must be able to recognize familiar patterns of letters as a way to read new words that are similar to known words: call and ball for example. Word building takes this skill a step further. A child learns to attend to the part of the word that has changed and encode that with a new letter. For example, the word 'hat'. Change a letter to make the word 'sat'. The child must change the 'h' to an 's', leaving the remaining letters the same.

4. **Sight word vocabulary**
   Sight word vocabulary helps a child learn to read words that are difficult to decode phonetically. A child will build and read short sentences with sight vocabulary. The next step a child will take is to acquire "word sense." Word sense is recognition of groups of letters as a word, decoding and reading, with particular meaning attached.

5. **Decoding**
   Decoding is learning the phonetic rules that tell us how to pronounce sounds of letters in conjunction with each other. For example, a consonant-vowel-

consonant (CVC) word such at 'bit' will have a short 'i' vowel sound whereas the word 'bite', which is a CVC word with an added vowel changes the vowel sound to a long sound. Short vowel sounds are learned first as these are more consistent. Long vowel sounds are studied next and must be recognized and decodable by a child if further growth in reading is to occur.

6. **Punctuation and capitalization**

Punctuation and capitalization conventions are taught as signals in the reading (and writing) process. Early readers need to learn to stop at a period, which marks the end of a sentence and to pause at a comma. Recognition of basic punctuation is followed by more advanced conventions, apostrophes to represent contractions and possessives, and quotation marks to denote conversation.

7. **Spelling patterns**

A more advanced component in learning to read involves being able to recognize the different possible pronunciations of the letter or spelling pattern. For example, the sound of long 'a' can be spelled in two ways in the following example: wait or weight.

8. **Comprehension**

Finally, a reader needs the ability to pull all of these components together to create meaning (comprehension). This involves being able to indicate the beginning, middle and ending of a story as well as specific details of the story. In order to offer an alternate ending, the reader needs to understand the theme of the story. This allows the reader the ability to infer meaning beyond what was explicitly written in the story.