

# Teaching Tips

## Making Homeschool teaching effective

Research has yielded several important ideas that make teaching effective. Each of the headings below represents one of these concepts from research. The heading is followed by explanations of how you can put these ideas into practice specifically using *Letterland Homeschool*.

### Create an environment that is inviting, interesting, affirming and enabling

If a positive atmosphere is important in any learning situation. Letterland's colorful, friendly characters, educational songs, dramatic role-playing, and many game-like activities help you make homeschool time a bright, engaging part of the day for your child. All this is not just 'fun stuff,' it is sound educational practice based on the way children learn. Keep your lessons positive and engaging using Letterland stories and the other related suggestions below.



### Help children develop executive functioning skills

There is a joke that explains what education psychologists mean by 'executive functioning skills': "I was going to work on my executive functioning, but I got distracted." For children who struggle with reading, executive function is no joke. Many of these children who struggle haven't learned to make themselves pay attention. They don't know that listening closely, thinking actively about what is going on and participating are ways to enjoy learning and to succeed. One of the first things all teachers need to deal with, whether in a school or home environment, is helping students monitor their own attention and practice effective learning behaviors.

Most teachers in schools have some kind of discipline or behavior management plan that helps maintain an effective learning environment. Children at home should also understand that there are behavior expectations and consequences will apply at home as well.

What is suggested here goes beyond just ensuring 'good behavior' to helping children become aware of how to manage their own attention and stance toward learning. The plan suggested is like a layer on top of your basic discipline plan. This self-monitoring plan will help your child become better self-regulating learners.

## Sammy Snake's Super Student Game

Play this game each day with your child/children. Start out by telling them that they can be super students like Sammy Snake by asking themselves a few simple questions to help themselves learn. The questions in **bold** below are examples, but you can make up your own, too. The words in parentheses are discussion points that you will bring up in your introduction to Sammy's questions and the game.

- **Am I ready to learn?** (sitting up straight, keeping my hands still, thinking about what I need to do)
- **Am I looking?** (What should I be looking at right now? The teacher, my friends when they are speaking, the book, the letters or word cards)
- **Am I listening?** (What should I be listening to right now? The teacher, my friends when they are speaking, myself as I am reading)
- **Am I thinking of the answer in my head?** (Do I stop myself from blurting out the answer? Am I saying the answer to myself while waiting my turn?)

Discuss and practice these Super Student questions on the first day of your Letterland teaching. As you review the questions on other days, work toward having your child carry most of the discussion. Once your child knows the questions well, review very briefly every few days and more in-depth if they need reminding.

## Playing the Super Student Game

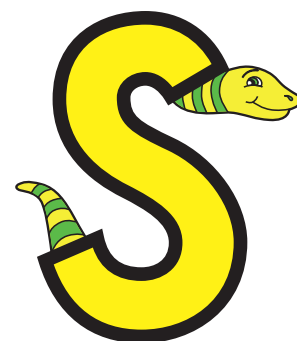
Tell your child/children that from time to time you will give them points if they are showing that they are Super Students by looking, listening, trying hard, thinking, and taking turns. They are a learning team and they can earn their points together. You, the teacher, are the other team and you get points if they are not following Sammy's rules. At the end of the day or week, you will total up the scores to see whether the students or the teacher has won! Mark down a few points as tally marks after each activity and explain why you are giving them: *I am giving you five points because most of the time you were looking and listening and trying, but I am giving myself two points because sometimes you got very distracted or I will give you two points because some of the time you were listening, but I get three points because you were not listening carefully all the time.*

It is best if you simply state your reasons for points and move on. Don't let children argue about points or scold each other for not listening, etc. If they do these things, immediately give yourself a few points and explain that arguing keeps them from learning, so you get the points instead of them.

You don't have to wait until the end of an activity to give points. If you want to call attention to a special effort, a thoughtful answer, or some other positive behavior, describe that behavior and give the team points. Also, if children are particularly distracted, you might mark down a few points for yourself. Encourage them to explain how they can prevent this next time.

At the end of the week/class, total up the tally marks for your child/children and yourself. The children should almost always 'win'. Praise them for their teamwork and perhaps mention some aspect of the lesson in which their effort was special, or ask them, *How did you get so many points?* You may want to give the score card to one of the children who did a particularly good job that day to take home. Make sure everyone gets a chance to take the score card home occasionally.

Every once in a while, the Super Student game doesn't work. Children get discouraged and may even say something like, "**We want to give you more points, so we aren't going to try**" or at least they imply as much. Sometimes you just have to say, *I don't think we'll play the game today. We might try next time.* Put the score card away and move on. Don't give up on the game, it will probably work during the next lesson.



## Making teaching more explicit

Explicit teaching involves directly teaching the steps in a process with clear presentation.

The term explicit teaching is also meant to convey the idea that children are not asked to do something until they have been taught directly how to do it, whether that be a particular strategy or the sound of a digraph, etc.

One of the ways to keep this process of explicit teaching in mind is to use the often recommended teaching mantra, **I do, we do, you do.**

In its simplest use, this expression reminds you as a teacher to...

- 1) **I do:** model what you want your child/children to do.
- 2) **We do:** do it with them (you and your child/children together).
- 3) **You do:** have your child try it on their own while you observe and give feedback.

These steps are the primary means of delivering instruction with *Letterland Homeschool*. We can expand this idea to include additional aspects of explicit teaching as shown in the chart on the next page with an example from a **Section 1 Phonemic Awareness** activity. The purpose of this lesson is to develop awareness of the initial sounds in words.

<b>I do</b>	You demonstrate You 'think-aloud'	I will say Clever Cat's sound /c/ and then name these pictures, cup, cow, moon. Which ones start with a /c/ sound? I'll say /c/ and then say the word. /c/, cup, yes that says /c/, /c/ cow, yep that one is okay. /c/ moon, nope that one doesn't start with Clever Cat's sound.
<b>We do</b>	You and your child together You guide with questions	Here are three new pictures, (pointing) carrot, bird, clock. Let's say them together. (You and your child name the pictures). Let's say Clever Cat's sound. (Both say /c/.) Now let's say the sound with each picture. Both: "/c/ carrot." You: Does carrot start with /c/? Child: "Yes." (You and child continue together.)
<b>You do</b>	Children do the task You help with questions and corrections, as needed	You: (displaying three more pictures) What do we do? Child: "Say the pictures." You: Yes. Would you point while I say them. (You name the pictures) You: What next? Child: (points at the first picture and says) /c/crab. You: That's right. Let's say that together as you point. Both: "/c/ crab." (Child agrees that crab begins with /c/, etc.)

These steps toward independence may occur over several lessons or all three may occur on one day. The eventual aim is for your child to do a similar task independently such as choosing pictures that begin with the sound in the *Phonics Workbook*.

This gradual release of responsibility is an integral part of homeschooling. 'I do, we do, you do' is used not only when introducing a new concept or strategy, it can also be used any time a child is having difficulty applying previous learning. You'll find other suggestions for supporting or scaffolding children's learning in the section **Ensuring teaching is 'just right'** on page 257.

## Using cumulative review

Children may show that they have learned a new letter sound or a blending method one day and then forget it a few days later. This is a normal part of learning for all of us. The solution is cumulative review. Even when they have mastered a word or concept, they need to review it continuously. Of course, you can't review everything every day, but do try to systematically come back to each letter sound, digraph, suffix, or Tricky Word over time.

Much of this cumulative review is built in to this guide. For example, the 'Letter Sound Cards for review' listed in each Unit include letters recently learned and also includes some taught much earlier. When you choose words for your child to blend or segment, your **Blueprint** reminds you to include some review words. Review of previously learned phonics and Tricky Words is also built into the *Phonics Readers* stories that they read every day and in *Fluency Lists* that provide practice on phonics concepts and words learned in previous units.

As you teach your child, take note of which concepts or strategies may need review either immediately or in the next few Units.

## Make teaching systematic

Systematic instruction involves step-by-step teaching in a carefully designed sequence from easier to more difficult. It also refers to breaking learning down into manageable chunks and making sure children learn one concept before moving on to the next. Systematic teaching is built into the teaching order in the *Homeschool Teacher's Guide* and into the concepts taught and strategies used in each Unit. By making sure children are confident with one step before moving on to the next, you ensure their success.

## Providing active and interactive learning

Literacy researchers say that children need to have many opportunities to practice literacy tasks and receive feedback. *Letterland Homeschool* provides this type of active, interactive learning with every activity. Children are nearly always doing a task rather than just listening to you. The activities are designed for frequent responses from your child even when you are introducing new material.

There are many ways to keep your child attentively involved. For example:

- In blending and segmenting words with *Letter Sound Cards* or the *Magnetic Word Builder*, you will often want to make them a 'Blending Leader' or 'Segmenting Leader'. This means that they demonstrate the multi-sensory method of blending or segmenting a word before you both repeat it.
- When an answer involves a choice among *Letter Sound Cards* or other cards that are displayed on the table, you can teach your child to 'point with their eyes'. In other words, stare intently at the correct card. In a sorting activity, they can eye-point at where they think the next *Word Card* should be placed. You can sometimes tell if they are eye-pointing correctly and sometimes not, but the important thing is that the child is thinking about the correct answer and holding on to the idea. This is a practice that effective learners follow naturally but others may need to be taught.

## Ensuring teaching is 'just right'

Children learn fastest when teaching is neither too easy nor too challenging but 'just right' like Goldilocks' porridge. You need to be aware of this idea:

1. When deciding whether to move on to the next Unit or to continue with the current one
2. When making adjustments to a lesson, ensure high levels of successful response from your child.

In this section, you will find suggestions for making adjustments on the spot to make the task 'just right' for your child.

During the Unit, it is important that your child experiences a high level of success. This means that when they respond to a question or try a task (e.g. blend a word), they should be correct at least 80% of the time. This practice builds confidence and ensures that your child is not 'practicing errors'. You adjust the questions, the choice of words, or the size of 'chunks' of information from moment to moment within the Unit to ensure that children get the answer right most of the time. One way to achieve this level of success, is by using the idea of 'I do, we do, you do' discussed on page 255–256.

The scenario below provides important ideas to make use of when adjusting your homeschool teaching:

Your child has learned about the suffixes **-s**, **-ed**, and **-ing**. Your child is looking at the word **jumping**. You ask, **What is the base word?** Your child has a blank stare. You know that your child has been dealing with base words and suffixes successfully. You suspect that they may not recall the terminology. You quickly write **-s**, **-ed**, and **-ing** on a board which you show to the children. Then you asks, **Do you see any of these suffixes on the end of this word?** Your child now responds correctly. You ask, **So, what is the base word when we take off the suffix?** Now, they know the answer to the original question and are eager to share it.

1. Recognition is easier than recall. For example, let's say you have forgotten the name of someone you just met earlier in the day. You just can't recall it. A friend says, "Was it Jon or Jason?" Immediately, you recognize the name, and say, "Oh, it was Jason, I am sure." The information was stored in your memory but you couldn't recall it without some help. Look back at the example above to see the ways that the teacher made the task one of recognition rather than recall.
2. Break down the task into smaller 'chunks.' Rather than going directly to naming the base word, the teacher first guided children to recognize a familiar suffix, and then asked them to mentally remove the suffix to find the base word.



**Time to think** Another concept important to ‘just right’ teaching is giving children time to think. Sometimes this idea is called think-time or wait-time. This may mean just waiting a few seconds after asking a question before letting your child answer. For questions with one or two word answers, you might count to three silently. When a more complex answer is asked for, you might allow more wait-time.

## Giving helpful feedback

When children make an error or are having difficulty, it can be ‘a teachable moment’ that affirms the child or it can be another incident that frustrates and discourages the child.

Letterland’s characters and phonic fables provide many avenues that allow you to respond to children’s errors in ways that help them use what they *do* know to build a bridge to new understanding. This teaching process is sometimes called ‘error correction’. A better term might be ‘guided self-correction’.



## Guiding students to self-correct their errors

The following extended scenario illustrates the idea of guided self-correction. You will see how the adult not only leads the child to the correct answer, but affirms that the child has useful knowledge for answering and clarifies how the child can find the answer for himself.

Logan, a kindergarten age child, is shown a picture of an egg. The adult says, **Say egg**. Logan says the word correctly. The adult asks, **What is the beginning letter?** Logan says, “f.”

Is this just a random guess by the child? Maybe not.

If we could hear what the child was thinking, it may be this, ‘**Hmm, what letter does egg start with, eeeegg, /ě/-/ě/? Which letter says eh?**’ The child starts reciting the alphabet to himself, ‘**A, B, C, D, E, F... eff! When I say ‘eff,’ I hear eh. Egg must start with... “F,”**’ he says proudly.

The child has done a number of things correctly. He prolonged the beginning sound of the word to listen for the first phoneme. He isolated the phoneme. Then he tried to associate the sound with what he knew about letters, the letter names. It was not a random error at all, but it is also not an answer that will help the child learn to read or spell.

Fortunately, individual homeschool or small group teaching gives you plenty of opportunities to guide the children to self-correct errors in ways that help them gain confidence and knowledge in the process. The adult can guide the child to the right connection in this way.

Teacher: **I think I see how you got that.**  
**Let’s try another way. Say egg.**

Child: **“Egg.”**

Teacher: **What is the first sound?**

Child: **“Eh.”**

Teacher: **Yes, and who in Letterland says, ‘Eh?’**

Child: The child hesitates, looking back and forth at several plain letter cards displayed on the table.

Adult: (after waiting a few seconds) **Say the sound and stretch it out, Eeeeeeeeh!**

Child: **“Eeeeeh...”**

Adult: (as the child says the sound) **Whose name are you starting to say?**

Child: **“Eeeeeh, Eddy Elephant!”** (He points to the e.)

Adult: Yes, you figured it out. How did you figure out egg started with Eddy Elephant's letter?

Child: I said the sound and thought of his name!

Adult: Eeeeexcellent!

By responding with questions, the adult has led the child from discouragement to discovery. Guiding self-correction can be done with any type of teaching. Here are a few more examples of the ways in which Letterland provides special ways to guide corrections.

Child's error	Guiding self-corrections
Child begins to write the letter <b>d</b> instead of a <b>b</b> .	<p>Adult: I am trying to think how do we start Bouncy Ben's letter? Let's see 'Brush down Ben's big, long ...' (from <i>Handwriting Song</i> for <b>b</b>)</p> <p>Child: "Ears!"</p> <p>Adult: Oh, yes, tell me what to do. (Writes on a small whiteboard).</p> <p>Child: "Brush down his ears..."</p> <p>Adult: Oh, yes. (draws a straight line down.) Then I 'draw round his...'</p> <p>Several children: "...head so his face appears!"</p> <p>Adult: (complete the <b>b</b> on her board) So what direction is he facing in?</p> <p>Children: "The Reading Direction!" (The child forms <b>b</b> correctly.)</p>
Child writes a lowercase <b>p</b> above the bottom line like a capital <b>P</b> .	<p>Adult: What do Peter Puppy's ears do?</p> <p>Child: "They hang down."</p> <p>Adult: Oh, yes, and when I write his letter, where do his ears go?</p> <p>Child: Down! Below the line. (Child writes the <b>p</b> in the proper position.)</p>
Child reads the word 'ran' as 'run.'	<p>Adult: Pointing to the vowel. What's that sound?</p> <p>Child: "Annie Apple?"</p> <p>Adult: That is her. Start to say her name again.</p> <p>Child: "/a/"</p> <p>Adult: "Now, can you sound out that word."</p> <p>Child: Child uses the Roller Coaster Trick to sound out the word and read it correctly.</p>
Child reads the word "late" as lat (short <b>a</b> )	<p>Adult: What is that last letter on the end of that word?</p> <p>Child: "Silent Magic e."</p> <p>Adult: Yes and you remembered the final <b>e</b> is silent, and what do Magic e's sparks do?</p> <p>Child: "Make the Vowel Man appear. Oh, /l/ /a/ /t/, late."</p>
Child is stuck on reading the word 'chin.'	<p>Teacher: (Pointing to the <b>ch</b>.) What happens when those two Letterlanders are together.</p> <p>Child: "/ch/, chin" (and the child keeps reading).</p> <p>Teacher: (Rather than interrupting the reading, she waits until after the story and then writes the word <b>chin</b> on a whiteboard.) How did you come up with the first sound in this word?</p> <p>Child: "I remembered that Harry Hat Man's hairy hat makes Clever Cat sneeze, /ch/"</p> <p>Teacher: I bet it felt good to figure that out for yourself.</p>