

Using Headsprout: Helpful Hints for Parents



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Introduction

Headsprout®'s Early Reading program is designed to teach a typical beginning reader the critical skills and strategies essential for their reading success. In Headsprout, children learn through direct positive experience that letters and sounds go together to make words, words go together to make sentences, and sentences make stories. They also learn that stories and text have meaning, and stories can be read for information and enjoyment. The basic component skills and strategies necessary for reading, such as phonemic awareness (the sounds within words), print awareness, phonics, sounding out, segmenting and blending, etc., are explicitly mastered in a fun, “learn-by-doing” manner.

When you purchase the first half of Headsprout Early Reading (Episodes 1-40), you receive a package from Headsprout that contains a glossy, color version of a Progress Map for tracking your child's ongoing accomplishment, stickers to place on the map when an episode is completed, and six Headsprout® Reader story booklets for your child to read at specific points in the program. During the Free Trial, you are able to print a Headsprout® Progress Map from the “My Headsprout” page on our website. You are also able to print the first Headsprout Reader after your child finishes Episode 5.

Helpful hints before a lesson

Headsprout Early Reading produces the best results when children are relaxed and ready to enjoy learning from the program. Establish a time for viewing the lessons that is convenient for you both. We suggest that you select a time when your child is free from other distractions (toys, siblings, the TV, etc.) and you are free to observe and give help if needed.

Getting the computer ready

Many parents have found these suggestions helpful:

- Moving the keyboard behind the computer (the keyboard is not needed during the program)
- Pressing the F11 key (at the top of your keyboard) once the program is loaded (to maximize the screen image and hide other toolbars)
- Using headphones or good quality speakers (check the volume before each lesson)

Using a mouse

We recommend using a mouse rather than trackballs, track pads, or other pointing devices. If you are using a multi-button mouse, it may be helpful to place a textured sticker (such as a soft Velcro dot) on the button used to click (typically the left mouse button). Your child may need to be told this is the button to click. If the wrong button is

clicked, simply move the mouse and click the correct button--the menu will disappear. We have found that children learn to click the correct button pretty quickly.

Practicing mouse skills

Our Mousing Around mouse readiness program, which is always available from your My Headsprout page, provides practice in all the mouse movements and types of activities your child will experience in Headsprout Early Reading. In addition most parents find that poor mouse skills improve significantly after just a few episodes.

Helpful Hints During a Lesson

Sitting with your child

Headsprout episodes are designed to teach your child to read without requiring extra help; however, your support is critical to learning. Parents often either sit with their child during the program or are available nearby, allowing their child to complete the episodes independently.

Letting the program teach

A key feature of Headsprout Early Reading is that children can work on the episodes by themselves. The program is designed to adapt to each child's success or need for more assistance. We understand a parent's urge to help out, but we suggest that you let Headsprout do the hard part of teaching. While there is no substitute for enthusiastic support from parents and friends, also give your child the opportunity and encouragement to succeed on his or her own.

Talking out loud

Encourage your child to speak to the computer as often as possible. Sometimes the program will ask your child to say answers out loud. Even though the computer cannot hear your child's responses, encourage him or her to answer loudly and clearly. Accurately producing sounds is a critical part of learning to read.

Keeping your child engaged while waiting

Sometimes between activities you will see a "loading screen" and an activity for your child to do. The loading screen indicates that we are downloading the next part of the episode. During this time your child can play a variety of fun games just by moving and clicking the mouse.

Pausing the program

Headsprout Early Reading episodes do not have a formal pause button. Instead, if your child leaves the computer during an episode (bathroom break, etc.), the program automatically stays at that point and repeats the last instruction until your child returns and makes a response. Temporary pauses do not impact the program.

Taking a break

Take a break during an episode if needed. You may take a break by (1) pressing your browser's back arrow twice quickly, (2) closing your browser, (3) not clicking for 30

minutes or more, or (4) losing your Internet connection during an episode. In all these cases, you may restart the episode where your child left off as long as you return within 60 hours (2 ½ days). If you stop in the middle of an interaction (or “episode segment”), when you return, you will start at the beginning of that segment. If more than 60 hours have elapsed, your child will restart the episode from the beginning—to ensure critical skills are not forgotten.

Completing multiple episodes in one sitting

Each episode is approximately 20-30 minutes long and typically involves over 180 interactions, or “clicks.” If your child has completed an episode and is eager to do another, gauge whether he or she will be successful in another episode. It is much better to end an episode wanting more than to attempt a second or third episode and quit while fatigued or frustrated. Always take a short break (moving around, stretching, getting a drink) between any consecutive episodes.

Repeating an episode

Headsprout Early Reading’s instruction is cumulative, with frequent practice opportunities, so it is generally not necessary for a child to repeat an episode. We don’t always expect a child to “learn” a particular sound/letter combination in a single episode, so we provide a number of chances to practice previously introduced sounds and words in future episodes. From your My Headsprout page, you have the option to repeat the last completed episode. In addition, from time to time, some learners may benefit from restarting from an earlier episode. Simply send an email to info@headsprout.com indicating the episode you’d like your child to restart from.

Some general guidelines on when to repeat or restart an episode:

1. If your child has not completed a Headsprout session in several days;
2. If your child’s oral responses (when the Speak Aloud icon is on screen) are not firm or are error-filled;
3. If your child makes frequent errors while reading a Headsprout Reader or other Sprout Story;
4. If your child has special needs or requires intensive intervention and may benefit from additional practice; or
5. If you observe that your child struggled continuously or doesn’t demonstrate what is expected from the episode.



Helpful Hints Between Lessons

The importance of using Headsprout regularly

Set a schedule, such as completing one episode every other day (ideally at the same general time), and stick to it. **Consistent use of the program produces the best results.** Reading is a skill that reinforces itself: The more you read, the more skillful you become, and the more enjoyable the reading becomes. Your ultimate goal for your child is the same as ours: to develop a love for reading and learning.

Marking the Headsprout Progress Map

Because learning to read is a long process, children need some way of knowing they are working towards achieving their goal. The Headsprout Progress Map visually indicates what they've done, where they are, and where they're going. It shows the “worlds” of Headsprout Early Reading and many of the characters and events your child will encounter.

After each episode is completed, place a sticker on the circle representing the episode. Some parents have found it helpful to write the date on the sticker. Having children place the sticker encourages them to see their accomplishment and celebrate their reading success. Remind your child that they will get a new Headsprout Reader of their very own each time they finish an episode with a book icon. Both the stickers and the books are great incentives to ensure that children will approach the online session eagerly.

Promoting learning between episodes

Between episodes, applaud your child's efforts and tell other people about his or her reading. Praise your child when he or she points out sounds and/or words outside of the program, and of course, keep reading to your child! Even when young children become readers themselves, they like to listen to stories. Remember that reading to your child is a great way to stimulate the imagination and to promote a lifelong interest in reading.

Some parents like to do additional activities outside of Headsprout online lessons—including printing the flashcards of the sounds and words and practicing them off-line. While these activities are not a required part of Headsprout's reading program, we encourage you to make enjoyable reading activities part of your daily routine.



Using the Sprout Stories

Please give your child a **Headsprout Reader** (story booklet) as soon as the corresponding episode is completed. Headsprout Readers occur after the following episodes:

Book 1 - **See!** - *after Episode 5*

Book 2 - **Fran and Lee** - *after Episode 11*

Book 3 - **Feel the Sand** - *after Episode 18*

Book 4 - **Clee and Pip** - *after Episode 23*

Book 5 - **Fling and Scout** - *after Episode 30*

Book 6 - **Sing!** - *after Episode 40*

Book 7 - **Blake and the Cake** - *after Episode 47*

Book 8 - **In the Lake** - *after Episode 52*

Book 9 - **Playing in the Sand** - *after Episode 55*

Book 10 - **Who Will Play in the Band?** - *after Episode 66*

Book 11 - **From San to Vee** - *after Episode 72*

Book 12 - **In Line at Zog's** - *after Episode 77*

The skills for reading these booklets are directly taught in the online episodes. They allow your child to better see the relationship between what he or she has learned on the computer and with printed books. Many parents have reported their children carry the Headsprout Readers wherever they go and proudly read them to friends and family.

Occasionally, your child may appear to forget a word. If that happens, please encourage him or her to try to remember the word, or after Episode 23, to try to sound it out and say it fast. You can model any particular sound or word if needed.

Increasing reading opportunities

In addition to the twelve primary **Headsprout Readers** we also provide additional **Read with Me Stories**, **Companion Stories**, **Episode Stories**, and **Chapter Stories** that your child can read, color, and share. These are downloadable after specific episodes from your My Headsprout page. You'll know your child is ready for an additional Sprout Story by the closed book icon on the Progress Map, the message provided on the launch episode bar, and by the small book icon on the right side of the screen during the episode. We strongly encourage you to use the additional Sprout Stories with your child, and to have your child share his or her newly developing reading abilities with others. Reading these stories is essential for obtaining the full benefit of Headsprout Early Reading.

Read with Me stories encourage you and your child to share the joy of reading aloud to each other. Each Read with Me Story has specific text for the adult or the child to read. Pictures follow the child's lines of text. Together the sentences and pictures tell a story. Talking about what is happening in the story helps broaden interest and understanding of the relationship between words, sentences, and pictures.

A **Companion** story may contain words both directly taught in Headsprout Early Reading, and "untaught" words your child should be able to sound out and read based upon the sounds taught in the program. These stories present children with an opportunity to apply their newly acquired sounding-out skills and reading strategies to novel stories.

Episode stories are read online. Beginning with Episode 56, almost every episode culminates in an Episode Story, which features words and sounds taught in the episode as well as novel words, increasing in difficulty and number as your child progresses. Following the reading of the story, your child will work on comprehension questions, and following those, he or she will be rewarded by seeing an animation of the story just read.

A **Chapter** story is a much longer story broken into chapters. While reading a Chapter Story, your child will encounter more complex plots, settings, and character development, including conflict and resolution, feelings, problem solving, and helping. There is more focus on concepts such as the passage of time and the sequential nature of events, an increase in vocabulary and novel words, and general reading endurance.



What to Expect From the Episodes

Episodes 1 to 40

<p>Episodes 1 – 5 Space World Book: See!</p>	<p>Introduces the basic concepts of reading: sounds make words, words make sentences, and sentences make stories.</p>
<p>Episodes 6 – 11 Dino World Book: Fran and Lee</p>	<p>Reinforces previously taught and introduces new sounds and words. Emphasizes hearing words sounded out and then blended, and firms word and story reading.</p>
<p>Episodes 12 – 18 Sea World Book: Feel the Sand!</p>	<p>Reinforces general concepts and basic skills of reading, and introduces sounding out strategies. In Episode 13, the setting switches to Sea World.</p>
<p>Episodes 19 – 23 Sea World Book: Clee and Pip</p>	<p>Continues the reading concepts of earlier episodes; increases complexity in language and content.</p>
<p>Episodes 24 – 30 Jungle World Book: Fling and Scout</p>	<p>Introduces new sounds and more complex words as children practice the basic concepts and strategies of reading.</p>
<p>Episodes 31 – 40 Jungle World Book: Sing!</p>	<p>Continues to practice the basic concepts and strategies of reading, but with new and more complex yet common words. Some of the common words children learn are abstract (words such as “should,” “could,” and “would”); includes longer stories.</p>

Episodes 41 to 80

<p>Episodes 41 – 56 Jungle and Dino Worlds Books: Blake and the Cake, In the Lake, Playing in the Sand</p>	<p>Quickens the pace and increases the sounds and vocabulary words learned. Children work with compound and nonsense words, and they experience a greater emphasis on comprehension.</p>
<p>Episodes 57 – 80 Sea and Space Worlds Books: Who Will Play in the Band? From San to Vee, In Line at Zog’s</p>	<p>Increases the sounds, words, and stories read; poetry and factual texts are introduced. Children experience more challenging comprehension and critical thinking activities, and their passage-</p>

Understanding Headsprout's Balanced Phonics Approach

Emphasis on the Alphabetic Principle

Research has shown that the systematic, explicit instruction in phonics is more effective than other approaches and significantly improves young children's word recognition and spelling skills, especially when introduced early. Headsprout's first 40 episodes present a carefully selected set of specific letter-sound relationships that are directly taught in a well thought out and clearly defined sequence meeting the standards of an effective systematic phonics program.

Only stable letter sounds taught

The English language uses the 26 letters of the alphabet to represent 44 sounds—sounds that can be written in over 400 different ways. To untangle this confusing web for the beginning reader, Headsprout begins not with the alphabet, but with very consistent letters and sounds, such as “ee,” “v,” “cl” and “an.” The sounds in Headsprout Early Reading are stable (read the same way) in over 85% of their occurrences, greatly increasing the likelihood of your child reading the word correctly. For example, a child who learns “ing” pronounced as it is in “sing” will be correct when using that pronunciation in 99% of other occurrences.

Another example: In the word “cake,” the letter “c” has over 5 possible sounds, which depend upon the over 7 possible sounds for “a,” which in turn depend on the various sounds for “k” and the endless number of sounds for “e,” one of which could be, as it is here, silent. How is a beginning reader to know what to do? In Episodes 1-40, we prepare children by teaching highly stable sounds and then having the children become familiar with the decoding process. In Episodes 41-80, we build on this foundation and transition into less stable sounds. For example, in Episode 41, we teach “ake,” itself a highly stable unit, which then increases the accuracy of reading “c” correctly and producing the word “cake.” The latter 40 episodes also cover the long and short vowels, word families, and other frequently confused letter combinations.

Long and short vowels taught in context

English vowels (a, e, i, o, u, and sometimes y) do not correspond predictably to speech sounds. A vowel sound can be spelled in many different ways, and a vowel itself can make many different sounds! (Think of the “o” in these words: “do,” “does,” “goat,” “foot,” “shout,” “comma,” and “toy.”) The short vowel “a” presented as “at” and taught in so many typical phonics programs (as in “cat,” “mat,” “sat,” “fat”), is pronounced that way in only 13% of the words in which it occurs. In such instances, we're teaching our early readers to be wrong over 85% of the time! A reader only knows what sound a vowel is making by the context of the rest of the word, or the sentence. That's why all of the vowels in Episodes 1-40 are taught in highly stable contexts, with other letters around

them—reducing guessing and errors, and increasing the probability they will be read right. In Episodes 41-80, the focus on vowels taught in context continues.

Letters have sounds and names

When learning to read, the child learns that spoken words are made up of smaller sounds, that written letters represent these sounds, and that when you put these written sounds together they form words, sentences, and meaning. This sequence is essential to reading. Because of the general lack of correspondence between our 26 letters and the 44 sounds different letter combinations make, Headsprout does not add to the confusion by simultaneously teaching another 26 letter names. However, children will encounter and need to learn letter names in other situations, and on these occasions we suggest you emphasize the difference between a letter name and the sound it makes when read.

Phonics without the rules

Learning to read should be an enjoyable process of discovery, of new worlds revealed through books and literature. It should not be one laden with the rote memorization of scores of rules developed to handle our hundreds of language inconsistencies. And unfortunately, many of the rules have their own exceptions-or just aren't all that helpful.

For example, the common rule “When two vowels go walking, the first does the talking” works for words such as “each,” “boat,” or “cried.” However, this rule is correct only 24% of the time. A child using this rule would read the word incorrectly 76 times out of 100! This happens in words as common as “early,” “does,” and “you.” Headsprout’s first 40 episodes’ systematic, contextually-based teaching of highly stable phonetic elements avoids the need for young learners to memorize a system of rules, nor is such a need necessary in the latter half of Headsprout Early Reading.

Individualized instruction

Headsprout’s instruction is truly individualized, with the computer tracking your child’s performance and immediately adjusting the instruction. It adapts to your child’s strengths and weaknesses by reinforcing success, moving quickly to the next skill, providing educational correction of errors by re-teaching the skill (not just having a child do it again), and presenting extra practice on skills that are not yet firmly established or fluent.

We have designed the program to accommodate a truly beginning reader. Children who have acquired some reading skills before beginning the program occasionally find the program easy at first, but soon find it fun and challenging as new skills are introduced. They move quickly through the easy parts while learning how the program works; when Headsprout reaches skills they need to learn, they’re ready.

Timed practice and fluency

Over the last few years, educational and learning science research has confirmed that deliberate practice is a critical part of building essential skills, and we’ve seen the positive outcomes in our program. Early skills learned to high accuracy, even at 100%, begin to fade rapidly unless they are followed by focused practice on those skills. Children often have to sit through teaching and re-teaching of essential skills, year after year, because enough practice was not provided from the outset. Schoolwork becomes “harder” because essential skills assumed to be in place are absent or weak.

The timed activities, or “fluency” games, in Headsprout’s reading program helps children learn to apply their new reading skills accurately and quickly. Children who apply reading skills accurately and without hesitation are more likely to retain what they have been taught, learn new skills more easily, and form and decipher complex words—even words that have not been directly taught.

Each of the fluency games in the program adapts to your child’s performance. Your child’s first time through establishes a “baseline.” In each additional timing, he or she needs to get just a few more correct to help a character reach a visible goal. The program tells you and your child how many are needed. You may want to remind your child that practicing will help him or her remember the new sounds and words.

From reading on the screen to reading from books

Headsprout learners have been very successful learning to read via the computer. However, sometimes children appear to get answers right, then later make errors on things they have just learned. Others may read words correctly on screen, but seem to have difficulty away from the computer. Getting a “right” answer in one context does not mean the child will be “right” in all contexts.

Headsprout presents the same sounds or words in various contexts throughout the program. At first, each new context is actually a new learning experience. As the program progresses, learners tend to sharpen their ability to adapt to new contexts. In addition, stories displayed on screen are presented as though they are part of a book. Sprout Stories further ensure the transfer from screen to printed material. After reading the story a few times from the book, it becomes very likely that these words will be recognized in other print contexts. Once a child has learned the full sounding out strategy (about Episode 23), stories begin to include words not presented at all during instruction. This encourages learners to decode words not before encountered in a controlled and familiar setting.

Learning to read and knowing the letters of the alphabet

Knowing the names of letters is very important in many areas of academics and verbal skill development; spelling and writing are good examples. Knowing the order in which letters appear in the alphabet is very important to other areas, such as dictionary and other reference skills, or filing and other organizational skills. However, learning the names of letters and the order in which they appear in the alphabet are not particularly useful in learning to read, since sounding out words does not involve saying the names of letters (except the letter “a” and the capital I).

Reading involves saying the sounds that letters make. Sounding out words is the main focus of the first 40 episodes, and continues to be important in the latter 40, and we do not refer to the letters by their names. If your child already knows letter names, remind him or her that letters have names AND they make sounds; in reading we say the sounds. Don’t be surprised by some initial confusion: through instruction and application children readily learn when to use letter names and when to use letter sounds.

Handling Mistakes when Reading Aloud

You should expect that your child will make some errors—this is an expected part of learning. Children who work through those errors will end the episode meeting the learning objectives. Also don't be alarmed if your child makes errors on purpose: playing the program and a curiosity of what will happen comes naturally to kids.

If your child...

Mispronounces a sound or word	Model the sound, then ask him or her to repeat it correctly. Praise the effort.
Doesn't sound out words correctly	Model sounding out. Put your index finger on the starting point and move it as you say each sound and then say the word fast. Next, say something like, "Now you do it. Sound it out—first this sound, then this sound, and then this sound. Now put all those sounds together and say the whole word fast."
Doesn't recognize a new word	Encourage your child to sound it out. EXAMPLE: "Say the first sound, then the next sound; now put them together."
Forgets a learned word	Point to the first sound and say, "Here's a sound you know. What is this sound?" Point to the next sound and say, "And here's the other sound. You know this one, too. Do you remember what it is?"
Incorrectly guesses at a word in a sentence	Say, "Try sounding out the word and see if it fits in the story [or sentence]."
Needs to work on several skills	Find one skill to praise. Work on the problems one at a time. Pick the most critical skill that needs correction. Work on that first. When that skill is improved, tackle another skill.

Keeping Track of Progress

Email updates

You'll receive a personalized email at the end of each episode. Each one contains useful summaries of your child's progress, including what the target skills were, and what to expect in the next episode.

Web-based progress report

Access your child's "Progress Report" from the My Headsprout page. View it periodically to get more information on performance and the program. The Progress Report lists sounds and words, displays your child's overall percent correct and other data, and shows where your child is on the Headsprout Progress Map.

Feedback to Headsprout

We love hearing from parents as their child progresses through Headsprout Early Reading. Please give us feedback at any time. The survey form available on the Progress Report page is a very quick way to reach us, or send email to feedback@headsprout.com.

