A 5-step method for helping students read CVC words - with Pryor Rayburn

Triple R Teaching Podcast #225

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. Today I'm welcoming back to the podcast Pryor Rayburn from Orton Gillingham Mama. She's here to share a very practical episode all about helping students who struggle with reading CVC words. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome back, Pryor!

Pryor Rayburn:

Hi! Thanks so much for having me back.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you for being here to talk to us about helping kids correct errors in CVC words. You're going to share a five-step process with us, but before we do that, could you reintroduce yourself and remind us who you are and what you do?

Pryor Rayburn:

Sure, yes. I'm Pryor Rayburn. I'm also known as Orton Gillingham Mama on Instagram and my website, and I teach courses and create resources for teachers to use in the classroom. Then the other hat that I wear is I'm a Fellow-in-Training with the Orton-Gillingham Academy. I help train educators in the Orton-Gillingham approach at the associate and certified level through the Orton-Gillingham Academy.

Anna Geiger:

So CVC words are typically students' first journey into reading words, and when students have challenges with those teachers are sometimes stuck because it feels pretty obvious about what you have to do, but of course it's not for new readers.

Can you maybe give us some examples of errors kids would make and then tell us how do you help them with those?

Pryor Rayburn:

Sure, great question. When I think about decoding errors, there are really many different factors that can play a part.

First of all, there's working memory, attention, just not knowing the letter-sound correspondences, and phonemic awareness, just being able to blend those sounds together. That's just a few.

I do just want to caution teachers or parents before jumping into decoding CVC words to just make sure that your student is ready.

I'm going to walk you through a five-step process for increasing levels of support that you can give your students if they are, for example, guessing at the first letter, or substituting the vowel sound, or they're still reading CVC words robotically, and they just can't fluently blend it together. This will hopefully help any parent or educator that's trying to get their students beyond just sounding out a CVC word every time they come to it.

Anna Geiger:

Exactly. I'm glad because that's a question I get a lot. I'm ready, what are they?

Pryor Rayburn:

Jumping in, I've got to say the first one, if you're struggling with CVC words, is just to make sure you're modeling this first, but also make sure that your student is touching each grapheme as he blends the sounds together orally.

If you were looking at me, I would have my finger out because I always tell my students, you always have your finger with you, but you can also be using the pencil eraser. This simultaneous multi-sensory approach really brings your students' attention to each grapheme on the page, and blending it together physically with the pencil or your finger and tracking underneath. By tracking, again, it's just that finger or pencil underneath the graphemes to blend the sounds together.

If your student is not doing that, that would be the first level of support I would provide. I encourage all my students to track underneath and physically blend those sounds together.

The second thing, if your student is tracking but still something's not clicking, is to first work with continuous sounds in the beginning position of CVC words, again that's consonant-vowel-consonant. That first consonant in the beginning position, make sure it's a sound that is one that can be held out without stopping the sound.

For instance, the sound of M or the grapheme /s/ are going to be easier to blend because you don't have to stop the sound either with air or an obstruction with your tongue or lips. That's just literally easier to blend for most students, so it makes the process of blending easier.

In contrast, if you use stop sounds in the beginning, /j/ or /d/, it's just that little pause that your mouth makes with the air or the obstruction of the tongue that just makes the process of blending a little bit more difficult.

You could practice with words like "fin," so you go "fffffffffin." Or the word "mmmmmmmmat," because the consonant just opens up straight into the vowel sound.

That's the first and the second.

I would say if the first and second are still too hard, instead of continuing with CVC words and honestly beating your head against the wall, and your students getting to the level of frustration, I would take away the beginning consonant and ask your student to work on blending only vowel-consonant. This is VC syllables like "at" or "in." Your student could be working on nonsense syllables too like "ig" or "op."

This is a great step for those students who perhaps their working memory makes it difficult for them to hold all three sounds in their brain and accurately blend all sounds together.

I hope you're seeing how this is just increasing the levels of support that we're giving our students because we don't want to jump too far ahead and give them something that they don't need. This would be great practice.

Then once they solidify being able to blend at that VC level, then you can go back and add that beginning consonant again.

Then number four in my blending scaffolding ladder would be if they're decoding VC syllables and that's too hard, I would just take the letters out completely.

This is where that phonemic awareness comes in and people say, "Oh, I'm doing so well at phonemic awareness." But this is where if they haven't solidified the phonemic awareness piece yet, it's going to start affecting their decoding.

If they're not ready, then just throw out the letters and have some fun with them just orally blending sounds together.

That might look like me telling my student, "Blend the sounds together, /ŏ/-/d/." And hopefully the student would say, "Odd." That was a real word, but you could use nonsense syllables as well.

Then finally, if that's too hard, the extra level of scaffolding would be to blend vowel-consonant syllables together orally, and then give your student manipulatives. This is the step with the greatest level of support. I like using little different puff balls or translucent disks, but there's no magic to really anything. I'm a big proponent of not having to buy something, so you can use little erasers that you have, pennies, or anything where they can physically move a manipulative as they isolate each sound and then physically blend those together.

Again, you might be saying, "/ă/-/b/," and as they echo those, "/ă/-/b/," they would be touching a puff ball or a disc and blending "aaaaaaaaaab" together.

With all of those together, one step along the way, you'll start to figure out, "Oh this is where my student is struggling. I found it!" Then you're not guessing.

I hope that this gives a clearer guide for teachers so that they're not just throwing things against the wall or having their student continue to make the same errors all month or throughout the school year, because that can be just devastating for a child. As I'm sure when we've talked about, what does that result in? They're just going to start guessing. That's when they see that first letter and they start guessing because that's much easier when they don't know how to do this or one of these levels is getting in their way.

Anna Geiger:

That was super helpful for kids who are struggling to get reading off the ground, like they're barely even reading a word.

What about when they get to the point where they're sounding out the CVC words, but, like you said, even though they know all the sounds, they're not reading the words automatically. They're sounding out every single time. Do you have any tips for helping them break that habit?

Pryor Rayburn:

Yes. One of my favorites, and I just sort of invented it, is rope blending. Imagine a rope, I just use one from a gift bag from holidays or that you get from a store, and you just take it off and you tie three knots in it. When the student touches the first knot, they'll say the sound and then they pull their finger down

the rope until they get to the next knot. When they get to the next knot, they say the vowel sound. Then they continue on holding that out until they get to the final knot, and it's the final CVC.

I have seen wonders with my students with just that simple multi-sensory piece. It's literally the visual for what their brain is trying to do. Like you said, they know those sounds individually, but for getting them to say them all in a fluid manner, the rope blending has been a huge game changer for my students.

Anna Geiger:

That's super interesting. I've never heard of that. Why do think that is? Why do you think that's so useful?

Pryor Rayburn:

I had one colleague say, "We worked so hard on the letter-sound correspondences and phonemic awareness. I just never thought to give my students the permission to say them all together." The students were so used to saying the letter A says /ă/ and B says /b/, and they're so individual. So she said, "Yes, I need to do more modeling, but also just giving them permission and this visual and tactile so that their brain, their fingers, and their eyes can actually see what blending sounds together in a fluent manner looks and feels like."

For those young students, there's great research on how that multi-sensory piece can add so much for engagement and attention. I've worked with lots of young kids and sometimes being able to hold the attention of a five-year-old or six-year-old just to get from the beginning sound of a vowel to the end can take a lot of attention and working memory. This piece makes it super engaging.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you for sharing that and your five-step method. Where can people find you?

Pryor Rayburn:

You can find me on my website, ortongillinghammama.com, and on Instagram. I love to share little tips like that. I've got an online course. This is just one example of 25 of the most common decoding errors that I go through in the course. If you want to learn more, I'm happy to share information on that that you can share in the show notes.

I love what I do. I love working with educators who are so passionate about helping their students. This has been such a pleasure.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you so much!

Pryor Rayburn:

Thank you so much for having me.

Anna Geiger:

You can find the show notes for today's episode at Reach All Readers.com/episode225. Talk to you next time!