



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

READING MILESTONES

What your child should know and be able to do

The process of learning to read and write starts at birth — as babies and toddlers, children are developing the speech and language skills that will help them become successful readers in the future. The milestones listed here describe what your child should be learning during each of their first few years of school, along with common warning signs of future difficulty or disability.* It's important to remember that these are general guidelines, not hard and fast rules. Children don't all develop at exactly the same speed, and students may start working on a skill one school year but not master it until the next. And although this list ends with second grade, literacy instruction doesn't! Throughout late elementary, middle, and high school, students continue to build their vocabulary and learn new strategies for making sense of what they read.

Pre-K

MILESTONES

- ✓ Recognizes specific books by their covers.
- ✓ Knows how books are held and handled, like how to turn the page.
- ✓ Pretends to read and may have some books partly memorized.
- ✓ Looks at a book's pictures and pays attention when being read to.
- ✓ Asks questions or makes comments that show they understand what's happening in a book being read aloud. Makes connections between stories and things that have happened in real life.
- ✓ Understands that print has meaning and is different from pictures.
- ✓ Recognizes print around them, like on signs, boxes, and labels.
- ✓ Knows the names and sounds of at least 10 letters.
- ✓ Speaks in complete sentences of at least four words.
- ✓ Scribbles as a way of "writing."

TIP:

The website *Get Ready to Read!* has a free 20-question screening tool that you can use with your 4-year-old to see if they are on the right track: www.getreadytoread.org/screening-tools/grtr-screening-tool.

* SOURCE: *Overcoming Dyslexia* by Sally Shaywitz, MD (<http://dyslexia.yale.edu/research-science/overcoming-dyslexia/>); the National Resource Council's report *Preventing reading difficulties in young children* (<https://doi.org/10.17226/6023>); and Reading Rockets (www.readingrockets.org).

POSSIBLE WARNING SIGNS

- × Can't recognize their own name in print.
- × Doesn't know any letters or often confuses letters and numbers.
- × Can't identify or understand the meaning of signs and symbols they've seen many times (for example, that the McDonald's golden *M* stands for the place where you eat French fries).
- × Continues to use "baby talk" more than other kids their age.
- × Has a hard time learning new words.
- × Has trouble learning nursery rhymes (like "Humpty Dumpty") or singing rhyming songs.
- × Doesn't attempt to scribble.

LITERACY LINGO

A **phoneme** is the smallest unit of sound in a spoken word that makes a difference to the word's meaning. English has 44 phonemes, which combine to form syllables and words. For instance, the word *bat* is made up of three phonemes (three sounds): /b/, /a/, and /t/, and the /t/ sound is what makes it different from the word *bag* or *ban*. The slash marks mean that we're talking about the sound a letter makes, not the name of the letter itself.

In order to read, children have to be taught how letters represent speech sounds — this is called **phonics**. For example, there are several spelling patterns that represent the sound /k/: K (as in *kite*), C (as in *cat*), CK (as in *duck*), CH (as in *school*), and CC (as in *account*).

Kindergarten

MILESTONES

- ✓ Follows print from left to right and from the top of the page to the bottom when read to by an adult.
- ✓ Knows the names and sounds of all 26 letters.
- ✓ Able to identify all letters in both upper- and lower-case.
- ✓ Recognizes some common words, such as *the* and *you*, by sight.
- ✓ Able to count the number of syllables in a word.
- ✓ Given a spoken word, can come up with another word that rhymes.
- ✓ Can blend two sounds together into a simple word (like *me* and *up*).
- ✓ Correctly identifies words that share the same beginning sound (for example, that *book* and *ball* both start with /b/).
- ✓ Understands that the order of letters in a written word matches up with the sounds of that word said out loud.
- ✓ Can write their own name and most letters.
- ✓ Writes words using made-up spelling (this shows that they're thinking about the sounds of words and how sounds relate to letters).
- ✓ Can answer questions, make predictions, and talk about stories they hear read aloud.
- ✓ Makes up and tells their own stories.

POSSIBLE WARNING SIGNS

- × Has a lot of trouble learning the names and sounds of letters (for example, making the connection between the letter S and the /s/ sound).
- × Can't sing the alphabet song in the right order.
- × Frequently mispronounces words that they already know (more than other kindergarteners do).
- × Can't tell if two words rhyme or make up their own rhymes.
- × Struggles to identify the first sound in a word.
- × Unable to talk about a book they've heard read aloud or retell a favorite story in their own words.



First Grade

MILESTONES

- ✓ Can count the number of individual sounds (phonemes) within a simple word like *cat* or *man*.
- ✓ Able to add or change individual phonemes in words in order to create new words (for example, will say the word *mice* when prompted to add /m/ to *ice*).
- ✓ Correctly decodes one-syllable words (like *pig* and *hot*) and nonsense words (like *hig* and *zot*) using what they know about phonics (mapping sounds onto letters).
- ✓ Recognizes some common, irregularly spelled words, such as *said* and *have*, by sight.
- ✓ Notices when they're having trouble understanding what they're reading or have made a mistake (for example, when an incorrectly decoded word doesn't make sense in context) and will try to self-correct.
- ✓ Can ask and answer questions about texts and make connections between what they read and what they already know.
- ✓ Writes things for other people to read.
- ✓ Knows that there is a correct way to spell words and tries to spell words based on how they sound.
- ✓ Uses basic punctuation and capitalization when writing.

POSSIBLE WARNING SIGNS

- × Unable to break a compound word into its parts (for example, identifying that the word *cowboy* is made up of *cow* and *boy*).
- × Frequently mixes up words that sound alike (such as *volcano* and *tornado*) when talking.
- × Can't identify the first and last sound of a word (like that *map* starts with /m/ and ends with /p/).
- × Has a hard time remembering letter-sound relationships.
- × Unable to decode a simple, one-syllable nonsense word.
- × Reads words that have no connection to the letters on the page but have similar meanings in context (for example, substituting *a* for *the*, or saying *puppy* instead of *dog*).
- × When listening to a book read aloud by someone else, unable to follow along by tracking words with their finger.
- × Can't remember or answer questions about what they've read.

Second Grade

MILESTONES

- ✓ Correctly sounds out unfamiliar words, including some words with multiple syllables, using what they know about phonics.
- ✓ Reads second-grade level texts independently.
- ✓ Can read and re-read grade-level text aloud with appropriate speed and expression.
- ✓ Begins to use knowledge of the parts of words, like prefixes, suffixes, and root words, to figure out what new words mean and how to pronounce them.
- ✓ Correctly spells words that have been studied, and spells words the way they sound when unsure of correct spelling.
- ✓ Uses punctuation, capitalization, and different parts of speech correctly when writing.
- ✓ Understands and can talk about what is read, like identifying a book's main idea, making connections between books, and answering "why," "how," and "what-if" questions.

POSSIBLE WARNING SIGNS

- × Continues to struggle to manipulate individual sounds within words (like identifying that the word *frog* without /r/ is *fog*).
- × Makes wild guesses at words based on the initial letter sound or on the first and last letters, ignoring the rest of the word.
- × Has difficulty recognizing common, frequently-used words by sight (it seems like they're always seeing the word for the first time).
- × Frequently skips over words when reading.
- × Has trouble remembering words and often uses vague, general terms like "stuff" and "things" rather than the specific names of objects.
- × Reads aloud slowly and awkwardly, with lots of stopping and starting and mispronunciations.
- × Avoids reading or finds reading exhausting.

What if my child isn't meeting these milestones?

If your child seems to be struggling more than their classmates, talk to their teacher about getting them extra help. After third grade, students move from "learning to read" to "reading to learn," and those who haven't mastered foundational skills will quickly start to fall behind academically. While effective reading remediation is possible at any age, it gets more difficult and takes longer the more time passes. Check out Advocates for Children's fact sheet on literacy and parent-teacher conferences, available in English and Spanish at https://www.advocatesforchildren.org/get_help/guides_and_resources/general_rights, for suggestions of questions to ask to get the conversation started. And if you feel like you aren't getting the help you need at the school, don't give up! Reach out to your Superintendent's Office or Borough Field Support Center or call our Education Helpline (866-427-6033, Monday through Thursday, 10 am to 4 pm).

This fact sheet does not constitute legal advice. If you have a legal problem, please contact an attorney or advocate.

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