

# Reading Sparkers® Motivational Reading Program

(Makers of *Reading Sparkers*® 48 Phonic Gameboards and *Reading Sparkers*® Online)

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## The Roots of *Reading Sparkers*®

As a young reading specialist, it occurred to me why **Phonics** kept going out of style, despite the research which supported its methodology. Book publishers tended to make it boring. Drudgery is one thing we don't need more of in the field of education. My point of view was to make **Phonics** enjoyable for the student. Thus was born the idea of developing a sequential set of *gameboards* which would insure student learning of the most important phonic skills.

## The Methodology of *Reading Sparkers*®

The original *Reading Sparkers* program (as field-tested below) utilized motivational gameboards as the primary instructional tool. This methodology was based on much research, extending back to 1897. The famous educator, John Dewey, said:

“Over the years, early childhood education has stressed the importance of cooperative play and learning for the young child's development and learning.”

In their book, Cooperative Problem-Solving in the Classroom, Tudge and Curuso (1989) commented:

“Young children are likely to pursue a goal only if they find it interesting. Quite often, when teachers present problems that *they* see as important, they inadvertently fail to consider the children's degree of interest in solving the problem.”

In his book, The Nature of Children's Play (1988), David Fernie made a number of points relative to the value of games in the educational process:

- Children become interested in formal games with peers by age five or younger.
- Older children's more logical and socialized ways of thinking make it possible for them to play games together.
- Games with rules are the most prominent form of play during middle childhood. (Piaget, 1962)
- The main organizing element in game play consists of explicit rules which guide children's group behavior.
- Children use games flexibly to meet social and intellectual needs.
- Such games can be intellectually motivating parts of pre and primary school curriculum. (Kamii and DeVries, 1980)

With a solid foundation in game/play theory, *Reading Sparkers* gameboards have now entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century, by adding an *Online Game* version. The scope and sequence of skills is the same, the enjoyment level is the same, and the interest and motivational levels are the same. The only difference is that now the child competes, not with other

children, but with himself or herself. Success at the online game becomes a personal goal rather than a group goal. Playing the original printed *Phonic Gameboards* in the group setting prepares each student for the *Online* version, so that success can be practically guaranteed.

To further retention of the phonic generalizations, *Reading Sparkers* places the same keywords learned in the games, into multiple comprehension contexts. The two sets of materials which enable this are the *Comprehension Activities* and the *Motivational Readers*. The Activities are a series of work-text type exercises which enable the students to experience the keywords in various comprehension contexts. The *Motivational Readers* take the same keywords in the games and activities, and place them in story context. These decodable texts are readability controlled and include pictures for coloring which further motivate the young readers.

## Controlled Field Study in Monroe Township, New Jersey

### **RATIONALE:**

The original field-study which resulted from the development of the *Reading Sparkers* materials, was implemented by the authors of the program to determine the extent of progress possible when using *Reading Sparkers*®. It had been found that many students were not able to read by the traditional “non-phonics based” basal method most commonly found in elementary schools. (Note: Basals are a series of reading textbooks published at each grade level, primarily by the major book publishers.) This problem with learning to read was determined to be caused by a number of factors, including:

- Insufficient stress on the importance of phonics
- Ineffective use of phonics by traditional basals, when phonics *was* employed
- Lack of coordination between the workbooks and textbooks
- Inclusion of too many skills not directly related to the teaching of reading, causing a clouding of understanding among students and their teachers
- The inability of traditional basals to motivate students.

### **THE STUDY:**

Twenty-nine students completed the program out of an original thirty-four. Children were selected for remediation based on one or more of the following factors:

- Academic under-achievement in reading
- Poor motivation
- Below average intelligence quotient
- Visual, auditory, or oral impairments
- Emotional or social maladjustments
- Neurological impairments
- Learning disabilities of an unspecified nature.

All students had one common denominator: inability to read. Students were placed in small groups of four to six individuals, with one reading specialist. They met for one-half hour periods, five times per week. The instructional period of the study lasted six months.

**THE RESULTS:**

Students were pre and post tested using the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Survey Test. Since the instructional period of the study was six months, maximum expected progress would also be six months. Progress noted below was based on comparison of grade equivalent scores:

**TOTAL READING INCREASE:**

- Grade 2 students made 9 months progress (50% beyond expected progress)
- Grade 3 students made 10 months progress (67% beyond expected progress)
- Grade 4 students made 15 months progress (150% beyond expected progress)
- Grade 5 students made 16 months progress (167% beyond expected progress)

**IMPLICATIONS:**

The field-testing results seemed to indicate that through the use of a coordinated, phonic-based, motivating system of reading instruction, students in grades 2 through 5 could make “exceptional” progress. As a result of the positive findings in this study, the *Reading Sparkers*® program was extended and refined so that it could be used successfully with all types of children (especially those K-6 students experiencing reading problems of various types).

## OTHER RESEARCH ON PHONICS-FIRST PROGRAMS and COMPUTER ASSISTED INSTRUCTION

The research on decoding is extensive and longitudinally consistent. During the period spanning the 1960’s, 1970’s and early 1980’s, research supporting the teaching of decoding (phonic) skills made it indefensible to teach beginning reading using the whole word (sight) method. A good 20 years elapsed after that period of phonic emphasis where decoding was placed on the back burner in favor of the sight method which became popularized as “whole language.” It is only during the last 5 years or so that phonics has gradually moved up in emphasis, both in research studies, college training programs, and in the school setting.

**LOOKING BACK:** Support for the phonic methodology used in *Reading Sparkers*®

1. In Learning to Read: The Great Debate, Jeanne Chall examined 54 years of reading research and found unequivocally, that teaching children to decode first, allow them to become better readers than children who learn by sight. Studies by other researchers have supported Chall’s findings: (D. H. Stoot, 1973), (M. Dehn, 1979), (T. R. Vandever and D. D. Neville, 1976), (A. J. Mazurkiewicz, 1977), and (P. Weaver, 1978).
2. Report of the National Reading Panel (Teaching Children to Read) Published December 2000, this report was an evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction.
  - a. Finding regarding Computer Assisted Instruction  
 “Computer technology can be used to deliver a variety of types of reading instruction successfully... The rapid development of capabilities of

computer technology, particularly in speech recognition and multimedia presentations, promises even more successful applications in literacy for the future.”

b. Findings regarding Phonic Instruction

- “Systematic phonics instruction makes a more significant contribution to children’s growth in reading than do alternative programs providing unsystematic or no phonics instruction.”
- “Specific systematic phonics programs are all more effective than non-phonics programs.”
- “Systematic phonics instruction is significantly more effective than non-phonics instruction in helping to prevent reading difficulties among at-risk students and in helping to remediate reading difficulties in disabled readers.”
- “Growth in comprehension is also boosted by systematic phonics instruction for younger students and reading disabled students.”
- “Systematic phonics helped students at all Socio Economic (SES) levels make gains in reading than did non-phonics instruction.”

Many studies since 2000 have come up with conclusions similar to the National Reading Panel, all supportive of the efficacy of phonic-based programs. Now, the firmly based methodology of phonics-first instruction as joined forces with state of the art web-based technology, to produce *Reading Sparkers*® *Online*. We feel that this is an unbeatable combination for reading success, for every girl and boy at the early elementary school level. The research is there; the technology is there. Will *you* be there to help your student or child learn to read as hundreds of thousands have already done during the past two decades using *Reading Sparkers*®?

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