

Helping Children Spell

by Helen and Martin Weiss

Why can't our kids spell? You can rarely read an article in a current newspaper or magazine without noticing spelling errors. Signs in store windows may have errors as well. One look at the average child's handwritten paper will show you that spelling skills have certainly declined over the past years. Many of us have even received notes from schools or businesses that have a number of noticeable misspellings. On January 4, 2000, the Denver Post reported that a middle-school child received a note originating in the governor's office that contained a number of spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors. She took it to her English teacher, who verified the errors, and the governor's office was notified.

Recently a parent called us for advice about helping her child improve her spelling. We suggested that she ask her daughter's teacher whether her child has great difficulty recalling the words given to her on the weekly spelling list. It turned out that her child, like many others, has difficulty recalling the weekly spelling words because she has trouble memorizing a sequence of letters. She has poor phonic recall skills and has often forgotten the words from Monday's pretest by the time she takes Friday's spelling test. This occurs even though she has repeatedly reviewed the words with her mother. Problems of this nature suggest that this student has difficulty with visual sequential memory for letters. The English language is derived from more than twenty different languages. Each of these languages enhances English, making it more descriptive and eloquent, but also more difficult. However, each spelling and phonetic system also adds a measure of confusion because of the mixing of various nonphonetic patterns.

For example, look at the different spellings of the sound called "long a":

ay	(say)
ai	(stain)
aigh	(straight)

a-e	(bake)
ei	(rein)
eig	(reign)
e-e	(crepe)
a	(apron)
eigh	(eight)
ea	(steak)
ey	(obey)

Confusing, eh? Students with poor visual sequential memory can have difficulty learning to spell correctly when their lists of spelling words incorporate many different ways to spell a single sound. They may easily confuse words that have nonphonetic patterns.

Poor spelling is one of the most common academic difficulties students experience today. Many middle- and upper-grade students who can read and write adequately may still experience serious difficulties in spelling. People just don't seem to grow out of spelling problems.

For some children, the introduction of "invented spelling", which became the instructional rule with the whole language approach, has had a negative effect. When writing in the early grades, students are often encouraged to spell the words the best they can. This is done to prevent children from rejecting writing because of a fear of misspelling words. Although writing fluency is a positive outcome, the use of invented spelling can cause problems for students with poor sequential memory who continue to spell words this way long after it is considered appropriate. These students need to study, in the same lesson, word families that reinforce similar patterns until these patterns are mastered.

Parents can use a phonic/linguistic approach to help their children learn spelling patterns. The following rules may be helpful:

All spelling review should be practiced to a level of automatic response.

All words to be spelled should be presented in related families or clusters:

night
sight
right
flight
fight
slight
tight
bright

Instruction should focus on the specific letter combinations that give a student the greatest difficulties.

Students must learn some of the rules that guide spelling, such as:

- ◆ To form the past tense of some verbs, change the “y” to “i” and add “ed.”
- ◆ Drop the silent “e” when adding an ending that starts with a vowel.

Games such as Concentration can also be used for spelling reinforcement. For this game, you’ll need several blank index cards. On one card, write a complete word. On another card, write the same word with a few of its letters missing. Shuffle the cards and place them face down on a flat surface. To play, the child must find correct word pairs by matching a complete word with its missing letters. For example, if the child turns over a card labeled “c _ a _ k,” he or she must find the card labeled “chalk” to obtain a match. If the child does not find a match, he or she turns the cards face down and tries again. A spelling game such as this will encourage players to recognize sound patterns and to spell words from memory.

By grouping word lists according to the recognizable spelling patterns of the English language, teachers and parents can help children become more fluent spellers.