

Preparing the environment for reading

What criteria should we use to select decodable readers?



BY **SARA COTNER**

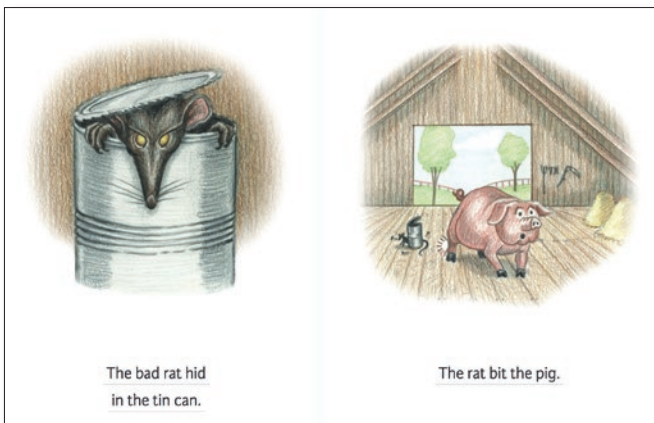
As Montessorians, we know how important the prepared environment is. We carefully prepare our environments to support independence and exploration. We put the materials on our shelves in a very specific order and find just the right containers to entice children toward productive work.

Therefore, when we think about how to help children grow into confident, joyful, lifelong readers, we must also think about how to prepare the environment. Selecting the right decodable readers is an immensely important part of that process.

What are decodable readers?

Books for emergent readers typically fall into one of two categories: Decodable Books or Pattern Books.

Here is an excerpt from a Decodable book:



This story is intentionally written to support children's practice with

decoding. It supports children to look at each letter, sound letters out, and blend them back together into whole words.

Children can read decodable books like *The Bad Rat* once they:

- Master their letter sounds
- Memorize the sight word "the"

This book supports emergent readers with the decoding process by including several easily decodable CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words such as "bad," "rat," "hid," "tin," "can," "bit," and "pig."

On the other hand, here is an example of a Pattern book:



Like the Decodable book, this Pattern book is geared toward an emergent reader. However, the approach is entirely different.

In Pattern books, there is a recurring sentence stem that the child memorizes

and applies to every page. In this example, the sentence stem is "I put the XXX here." Even though "put" is a CVC word, it is not easily decoded by emergent readers. Further, the word "here" includes the advanced phonetic concept of silent E.

Additionally, the word "fork" includes

the advanced phonetic concept of an r-controlled vowel ("or"). Finally, the

word "plate" includes the advanced phonetic concept of silent E.

In Pattern books, children are not set up to focus on decoding skills. Instead, they are set up to try and memorize words and to figure out new words by asking themselves "What would make sense?" and by looking at the picture.

Putting pattern books in front of emergent readers reinforces negative reading skills, such as looking at the picture to make a guess. When children are learning to read, we want them to attend to the specific letters and sound them out as their default approach.

The Science of Reading is clear: the majority of children need to learn phonics in a sequenced and scaffolded way. This means they should work on decoding CVC words before they are introduced to words

that follow the silent E rule or include r-controlled vowels. This means the books they practice reading should also follow a progression of including increasingly difficult phonics skills.

Decodable books in Montessori classrooms

Fortunately, most Montessorians already gravitate toward Decodable readers over Pattern readers. The way we teach reading in our primary classrooms aligns with the science of reading. We follow a progression of increasingly difficult phonetic skills, including letter sounds, CVC words, blends, and then phonograms.

At our lab school in Austin, Texas (called Magnolia Montessori For All serving ~475 children, infants through

continues >

Upper Elementary), we use five criteria to evaluate the decodable readers we bring into our communities.

Phonetically controlled: We ask ourselves: Do the decodable readers isolate the difficulty for children? Do they include phonograms and puzzle words that children are familiar with? So many books seem to get too hard, too fast. They either include advanced phonics skills that children haven't learned yet, or they include so many sight words that children haven't yet memorized. Or, conversely, they don't introduce the Montessori phonograms early enough!

Rich in meaning and interesting: As soon as you phonetically control text to scaffold reading for emergent readers, you can start to lose meaning. It's important for beginning decodable books to make sense in order to support the development of reading comprehension right from the start. Many early readers use esoteric words such as "jig." Books need to make sense so that children can actively build their ability to make sense of what they are reading as they read.

Realistic: As Montessorians, we know that children with "absorbent minds" are trying to take in and understand the world around them, so we want to present them with realistic storylines and images.

Beautiful: The youngest children are absorbing the world around them while they construct their own personalities. The quality of the materials we put in their hands matters.

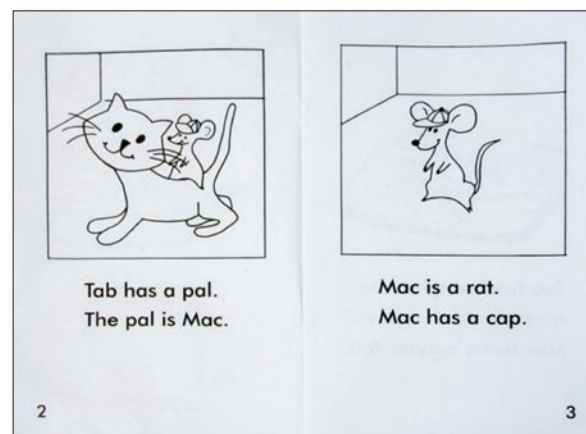
Culturally Sustaining: Books serve as "mirrors, windows, and sliding doors" for children, as Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop said. Books help them see themselves reflected in the world. Books help them see people who are different from themselves. And they help children see what's possible for them out in the world. When children see themselves in books, they affirm their identities and see that their stories

and families matter.

Along these lines, we seek out books that support the work we do in our classrooms to help children internalize important concepts, such as respect and conflict resolution.

It is so challenging to find decodable readers that check all these boxes! Here is an excerpt from *Mac and Tab*, a series that is commonly used by Montessorians:

At Magnolia Montessori for All, we looked at a range of commercially



available readers. We found decodable readers that do a great job of being phonetically controlled but they aren't rich in meaning, realistic, beautiful or culturally sustaining.

We found other decodable readers that are rich in meaning, beautiful, and culturally sustaining but not phonetically controlled enough or realistic.

The closest set of readers we found checked off four of five boxes. It was everything except culturally sustaining.

In the end, we decided to use Miss Rhonda's Readers, FlyLeaf, The Peacekeepers Series, BOB Books, and All About Reading. Additionally, we decided to create our own set—Monarch Readers—to increase the number of options we have available for children.

Monarch Readers were developed by two of our teachers (Yolanda Romanelli and Stacie Scheller) and a

local illustrator. We created our own sequence for introducing phonetic elements, added frequently used sight words, and chose story lines that emerged from our classrooms and our children's home lives—anticipating a birthday walk at school, having a disagreement in the sandbox, planting a seed and watching it grow. Children at Magnolia gave us feedback on drafts of our work. One child said, "If you find eggs in a tree, that's going to be an exclamation mark, not a period!"

Now that sentence reads, "I spotted five speckled eggs!" MontessoriPublic readers can learn more about the Monarch series at monarchreaders.com.

What criteria do you use to determine whether or not to bring certain decodable readers into your prepared environment?

Please feel free to reach out with your ideas so we can continue to collaborate with and learn from each

other: hello@montessoriforall.org.

Sara Cotner is the Executive Director at Magnolia Montessori for All.

MontessoriPublic

MontessoriPublic, the communications and advocacy platform for public Montessori is a publication of

NATIONAL CENTER for MONTESSORI in the PUBLIC SECTOR

Subscribe at montessoripublic.org

Noncommercial reproduction of this material is permitted and encouraged. Consult authors for rights to copyrighted articles.

Copyright 2022 National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector