Reading/decoding involves making sense out of printed letters and words and includes understanding the sounds that letters represent and how letters work together to make sounds. Knowing what order letters, letter sounds, and words must be in to make sense requires careful examination of the successive series or order of the sounds. A strategy that encourages the comparison of known words to new words with similar spelling patterns may be helpful for the student having trouble with decoding a word or text for the first time. Using a strategy for decoding also provides plans needed for recognition of details such as letter orders (ie or ei), punctuation, focus on the story line, and so forth. Word families is such a strategy.

Word Families

Using word families for reading/decoding, students are taught to compare and contrast words they do not know to words they do know that are similar in order to help pronounce them. Words that sound the same often are spelled similarly, and children who know how to pronounce a word such as tank could make a reasonable guess at rank. The same student might also have a good chance at pronouncing bank, Frank, and thank if he or she were to recognize that these words are similar to tank. This helps the student read a word without relying on the successive nature or order of the letters in the word.

How to Teach Word Families for Reading/Decoding

One way to present this strategy is to explicitly teach it and then introduce known target words along with five to six new words that can be related to the words the students already know. Students are encouraged to learn the new words by analogy and are asked why and how the strategy helps them.

Teachers can present each word on a sheet of paper and have the students write two or three other words that share the same spelling pattern. (This also helps children with spelling problems). After this stage, the students should be asked to read passages containing the new words and to use analogies to decode them. The teacher should always model the use of analogies while reading and provide feedback for each student independently using the strategy. It is important to consider that this reading method need not be confined to simple words or comparisons, such as bug, hug, and rug. More complex words and analogies can be made; for example, the words at, ten, and the suffix -tion may be put together or analogized to form attention. Although not a direct combination, this analogy can serve to help the student approach the word thoughtfully and independently.

For more advanced levels of reading, the teacher should help students to automatically use the compare and contrast strategy. They may be allowed to work together, discussing how to figure
out new words. Students should be encouraged to explore additional words that do not match. For example, the words pull and gull look quite similar but sound different. In this stage, the teacher may begin to present words that look similar yet sound different along with the list of more difficult target words. Also, teachers may begin to explore word meanings (e.g., the words read and read), how words can be put together to form bigger words (e.g., classroom), and prefixes and suffixes. This focus on the structure of words helps children to recognize the patterns, inconsistencies, and the general makeup of words.

Once the strategy is introduced, the teacher has modeled it, and the students have practiced it, students may be simply encouraged to use the strategy whenever they encounter new words. It may be helpful for the teacher to continue to post a list of words the students know by sight that they may refer to when they encounter a new word. Throughout these stages of instruction, the teacher's role is to

- Discuss the rationale or helpfulness of the strategy.
- Use and model the strategy.
- Provide ample opportunity for practice and feedback.
- Encourage the use of the strategy.

**Who Should Learn Word Families for Reading/Decoding?**

Children who have poor reading/decoding skills may benefit from using word families for reading/decoding. Children who need help with Successive processing skills are likely to have decoding problems (see Naglieri, 1999), and those with a Planning weakness often have few plans to help them learn how to decode. This strategy for reading/decoding should be applied when the child has a Successive and/or Planning weakness along with reading/decoding problems.

**Resources**