

What Is Direct Instruction?

The teaching method that won the largest study of teaching ever done

Direct Instruction (DI) is a way of teaching that Siegfried Engelmann and his team began building in the 1960s. Every lesson is planned in small steps, explained so clearly that it can only be understood one way, and practiced until the student has mastered it. (Lowercase “direct instruction” means any clear, teacher-led teaching.) Emily Hanford, who made the **Sold a Story** podcast, has a new series, **Sold a Story 2: What Happened to Teaching**, that features DI.

Project Follow Through: the proof

From 1968 to 1977, the U.S. government tested ways of teaching at-risk children in kindergarten through 3rd grade. More than 200,000 children in 178 communities took part. DI came out first in **basic skills** (reading, spelling, math, and language), first in **problem solving**, and even first in **self-esteem**. Children who succeed feel good about themselves. DI was the only method that brought low-income children close to grade level. Even so, most schools ignored the results. Graph: thephonicspage.org/historyofreading.html

The basic ideas

- **Every child can learn.** If a student hasn’t learned, the lesson needs to change, not the child.
- **Start where the child is.** A short placement test decides where to start, not the child’s grade or age.
- **Small steps, lots of review.** Each lesson is mostly review, with only a little that is new.
- **Mastery before moving on.** A skill is practiced until it is easy, because later lessons build on it.
- **“My turn, together, your turn.”** The teacher shows how, does it with the student, then the student tries alone.
- **Many answers, quick pace.** Students answer many times a minute, often together on a signal.
- **Calm, quick corrections.** When a child makes a mistake, the teacher shows the right answer, has the child do it, and comes back to it later. No scolding and no “No!”, just the right answer and another try.
- **Tested lessons.** Scripts are tried with real students and fixed wherever children get confused.

DI in reading

- **Sounds first.** Letter sounds, then blending: say it slowly (mmm-aaa-nnn), then say it fast (man).
- **Every word is sounded out from left to right.** No guessing from pictures or the first letter. In *Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons*, the picture is shown only after the story is read.
- **Helper marks for beginners.** In *100 Easy Lessons*, long vowels have a line over them, silent letters are printed small, and letter teams like th are joined. The marks fade out as the child gets stronger, much like 40L’s marked print.
- **Stories use only what has been taught.** Programs: *Reading Mastery*, *Corrective Reading* (older students), and *100 Easy Lessons* (for parents).

DI in math

- **Facts in small sets.** A few new facts at a time, practiced daily until quick. Free practice: thephonicspage.org/math.html
- **One clear method for each kind of problem,** shown step by step with worked examples, not discovered.
- **Skills in order.** Students learn the skills a topic needs before the topic: multiplication facts come before fractions, and fractions before percents.
- **Word problems are taught too,** with clear steps for deciding what to do, instead of “figure it out.”
- **Mixed review every day,** so old skills don’t fade. Programs: *Connecting Math Concepts*, *Corrective Mathematics*.

What it sounds like at home

Point to the word and wait. If your child needs a reminder, try “Sound it out” or “Remember to sound everything out from left to right.” If a word comes out wrong, say “My turn: c-a-t, cat. Your turn,” and then praise the right answer. Nonsense words (like *vab* or *teg*) show that your child is sounding out, not guessing or remembering.

Reading teacher Don Potter says teaching Engelmann’s 100 Easy Lessons “helped establish the positive teaching techniques that I use with every program.” He adds, “I virtually NEVER say, ‘No!’”

Learn more: National Institute for Direct Instruction, nifdi.org · *Sold a Story*, Emily Hanford, APM Reports