

Play 'n Talk Deluxe

Spotlight Review

by Mary Pride



Grades K–4. Deluxe Play 'n Talk, \$299. Classic Play 'n Talk, \$129. To Grow By Storybook Readers, \$45.

Play 'n Talk, CA, (800) 472-7525, www.playntalk.com.

Three years ago I wrote about how **Play 'n Talk** (PNT for short), a homeschool classic that has been around for over 40 years, had leapfrogged into the 21st century. So what can I say now about the brand-new revision of this program?

First, a word of explanation.

“Classic” Play 'n Talk is still available. That was actually the “new” version of three years ago.

What I'm about to describe is the completely up-to-date, mouth-watering new **Deluxe** edition—the one in the fancy plastic suitcase, with everything so neatly organized it will make those of us who used the original PNT drool with desire.

In their advertising, Play 'n Talk claims, “Most of our students, after graduating from our program, read and spell at a college level.” I have to tell you this is the sober truth. I remember bringing our oldest daughter, Sarah, to the podium at a homeschool conference when she was four years old and having her read to the audience from the *World Book Encyclopedia*. Although naturally she couldn't *understand* every single thing she was read-

ing, having not even begun her elementary homeschool education yet, she could read it all aloud at normal adult speed. (Giving credit where credit is due, I used a combination of Play 'n Talk, Sing Spell Read & Write, Sam Blumenfeld's *Alpha-Phonics*, and Ball-Stick-Bird for Sarah's phonics instruction. It comes from having to review all of them, so I had all the best phonics programs in the world at that time right in my living room!)

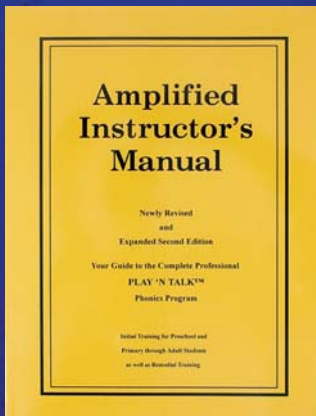
Sarah went on to become a National Merit Finalist, offered totally free college educations at a variety of top universities, so I can't say that it hurts to spend as much as it takes to get a great phonics background. Hold that thought as you consider your phonics purchases!

It's not just phonics, either. PNT is a complete and comprehensive phonics-based language-arts program. It teaches reading and spelling right up to the college level, as I mentioned, plus suffixes and prefixes (as opposed to most phonics programs, which only teach children how to read). You can use the manuals c r i p t

handwriting taught in the program, or substitute another method of your choice. The included Ring 'n Key module also teaches touch typing.

Those of you who have not seen Play 'n Talk for a long time might remember it as a huge set of colorful materials that you had trouble organizing into a coherent program. This changed seven years ago with the introduction of the Amplified Instructor's Manual. The heart of the manual, of course, is the 66 pages of day-by-day lesson plans you need to tie the course together. After the introductory program outline and teaching tips for different types of learners, the manual is broken into 12 units and further divided into enough lessons to fill up a school year, with plenty of review and break time built in. Unit 1 starts with basic readiness and alphabet learning, including lots of suggested activities you may not have thought of unless you have taught phonics before. Units 2–12 go through the entire course and tell you exactly when to use each program component.

In the “classic” PNT program, you don't get flash cards. Instead, you get a 96-page Flash Card Pattern Book. Every time you need a new set of flash cards (old cards do get worn if you use the program with several children), you photocopy up a new set of cards. The pattern book itself remains untouched. The flash cards contain vocabulary words all the way up to



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college level. Photocopying and cutting out all these cards can be a pain, which is why the new

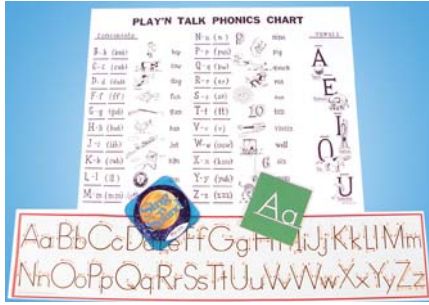
Deluxe PNT comes with pre-printed, laminated flashcards, rubber-banded in groups corresponding to the lessons for your convenience. These include: alphabet cards (uppercase and lowercase), phonograms, prefixes/suffixes, plus five more bundles for the various parts of Unit 11 lessons, and two bundles that cover all the Unit 12 lessons. There are over 700 flashcards in all!

The heart of Play 'n Talk remains the same as ever. In the 1960s, the audio portion came on LP records. Later this was updated to audiocassettes, and now CDs. The new Deluxe kit in its very organized package also includes a set of Rainbow Presto Felt Letters (great for kinesthetic-tactile learners), a foam star mounted on a wand for introducing "Magic E" (the silent *e* at the end of long-vowel words), and light-up "Special E" Space Wand (pictured below on the left hand side). You still get a whopping amount of teaching aids, more than any other phonics program.



The Basic Phonics Materials

Start with the Reading Readiness materials. These include **Sing 'n Sound**, which teaches PNT's own unique alphabet song and 10 singing lessons on phonics sounds; a musical score for the



songs for both piano and guitar; 26 large double-sided alphabet flash cards; a giant phonics chart; and a colorful manuscript handwriting chart with directional arrows.

The original Play 'n Talk program was divided into four "series." The first two of these series made up the "Basic Course" and the next two were the "Advanced Course," which could be purchased separately. All these materials are included in both the current Classic and Deluxe editions.



Series I has 32 recorded lessons, plus an 86-page large print text. **Series II** has 60 lessons and a 66-page text. Between them, these cover all the basic phonics skills taught in most courses.

Series III comes with a 48-page book and **Series IV** comes with a 68-page book.

The texts are softbound, and include some of the audio instruction, plus all the word families (and more) on the CDs. The Deluxe editions of the texts have modern covers, but still the same adorable art and text inside as the originals.

The 125 recorded phonics and spelling lessons in Series I-IV include all the rules your child needs to become an advanced speller, right up to college level.

Reinforcement Materials

Play 'n Talk has always been especially rich in materials to reinforce the lessons: auditory and hands-on games, a hands-on word construction gadget, and even a touch-typing component. These are very helpful for kids who are not primarily visual learners, and provide extra fun even for kids who are visually oriented.

Each of the following kit portions now comes in its own mini plastic case that fits in a slot in the larger Play 'n Talk suitcase.



Ring 'n Key, a simple touch-typing course, is one of Play 'n Talk's most unique features. I am not aware of any other non-software-based phonics program that starts children with typing, yet in our computer-literate age this makes perfect sense. Typing or keyboarding is also easier for young children than handwriting. You get three sets of color-coded rings (small, medium, and large) and two sets of color-coded dots with the keyboard letters printed on them. The finger with red belongs on the red row, and so on. The accompanying lesson book begins immediately with simple short-vowel-family words, and a second book takes you into short sentences. There are 44 typing lessons in all. A very motivational method, especially good for older learners and those with dyslexic tendencies. I suggest purchasing a used manual typewriter (they are readily available for \$10 or so from various online sources) just to use with this component, if your child has extreme problems with handwriting or reversals, since the additional tactile feedback is a real help to such children.

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Slide 'n Sound is a clever word-making kit for practicing phonics skills. You get a plastic-coated picture of a bay, including dock and lighthouse. Using plastic-coated slide rules that fit into slots in the picture, young learners are able to construct a large variety of words. Example: using the beginning consonants and the family “at,” how many words can you construct? *At, bat, cat, fat* . . . The maximum totals for each combination are given in the accompanying book. You can build over 1,800 one-syllable words twiddling the 43 included little slides! This kind of hands-on word construction is great for preventing or curing letter reversals and other learning problems. Instructions for use are found both in the Instructor’s Manual and on the Slide 'n Sound CD.



Spell Lingo is a set of 24 Bingo spelling games that covers all the phonograms taught in the program. By using the game cards, you can pinpoint your learner’s spelling problems as well as provide practice in overcoming them. The Deluxe kit includes magnetic see-through bingo chips and a clever magnetic wand that lets you quickly scoop them up after each round. This is the best set of phonics Bingo games we’ve seen.

Riddles 'n Rhyme, a set of recorded phonics riddles with three accompanying 28-page booklets, is cute but not es-



sential, in my opinion. Listening to the clues and answering the riddles is meant to improve both listening and deductive skills. However, the program itself contains plenty of that. Consider the riddles an optional motivational goodie.

How Does It Work?

How does Play 'n Talk work? You put the CD on and turn to the correct place in the accompanying book, illustrated by a Disney artist. The teacher on the CD takes it from there. All instructions are on CDs in the Deluxe kit. In the Classic kit, instructions for the phonics lessons are on the CDs or cassettes, but not instructions on when to use the accessory items, which you’ll now find in the Amplified Instructor’s Manual. A group of children do all the lessons right on the recording, and your child is supposed to chorus along with them, reading his or her part out of the appropriate book.

In Play 'n Talk, your children meet the alphabet family and different word families. All the phonics groups are portrayed as people. For example: “Here are Mr. and Mrs. Digraph, and their children. WH is a fat one. He puffs out his name!” “Long Vowels wear straight hats. Short Vowels wear laughing hats. They turn up like the corners of our mouths do when we laugh.” Very sweet and innocent.

A perfectly delightful young lady with just a slight upper-class English accent did the narration of the first records, and Marie LeDoux, the producer of Play 'n Talk, did the rest. The only songs are the alphabetic songs in the Readiness portion. This is because Mrs. LeDoux (inventor of the chaise lounge, and once hailed as the “youngest woman tycoon in America”) believed background music may distract the student.

Genteel mood music written by the son of Harpo Marx sets the stage at the beginning of each lesson, and each lesson comes to a definite musical close. No frenetic “rap” or “rock” here!

Play 'n Talk takes the “word family” approach. Children are taught to blend the sounds at, and then practice reading words from that “family,” such as *bat, cat, and fat*. Short vowel words are taught first. Play 'n Talk presents long vowel words ending in “E” as “Magic E” words, and drills children in seeing the difference between rows of words with and without the final “E.” Since this is one of the common “sticking” points for learning to read, we appreciate the detailed presentation and drill. (By the way, the “magic” reference has nothing to do with the occult—it was written back in the Fifties. The program author was an evangelical Christian. Also, the newest sets now include a light-up Special “E” Space Wand, with flickering lights you can summon via a switch on the side, so I’m guessing “magic E” is on the way out and “special E” is on the way in.) Other long-vowel blends, consonant blends, and other phonograms are then introduced in a logical sequence. Finally, the program takes children through a complete phonetic spelling course.

Play 'n Talk’s most special ingredient is love. It was not created to fill a “market niche.” The program author truly loved and cherished children, and wanted them to succeed. This gives Play 'n Talk a timeless, gentle charm, and makes it a treasured experience for many users.

Play 'n Talk covers everything and is very motivational. The games are lots of fun and involve all learning styles. It’s a nonconsumable program you can use again and again with additional children without needing to purchase anything more. (If you should lose or break any of the items, replacements are available.)

Play 'n Talk has been used in tens of thousands of homes and thousands of schools over the past 40 years. You can request a free sample online. And they offer a 30-day guarantee. If not fully satisfied, they say, “We will refund your purchase price minus the shipping.” What could be fairer than that?