

How to teach your child phonics / tips and tricks for parents

Flummoxed by phonics? Here's the what, why and how of phonics to help guide you and your child.

From making friends to confidence with letters and numbers, there's a lot to learn when starting school. Children learn a lot through play - but these days, reading skills are also taught systematically, from the earliest days in nursery or reception class right through their first years in primary school.

It can be a bit of a puzzle to work out how best to support your child through the early stages of reading, especially since teaching methods may have changed quite a bit since you were at school! Read on if you'd like to find out what to expect as your child builds their reading skills, how to help them - and how you can both have fun while you do so!

*Phonics buzz-words -
decoded!*

***Phonics:** using the sounds made by individual letters and groups of letters to read words.*

***Decoding:** using your phonic knowledge to sound out and read words.*

***Grapheme:** a written letter or group of letters, like 's', 'a', 'she' or 'air'. Some graphemes are single letters like 'a'; others are digraphs like 'ai'.*

***Digraph:** two letters that make one sound together, like 'sh', 'ai', 'oo'.*

***Phoneme:** the sound a letter or group of letters makes - e.g. the word 'mat' has three phonemes, 'm', 'a' and 't'. The word 'through' is longer, but it also has three phonemes, 'th', 'r' and the 'oo' sound in 'ough'.*

***Sounding out:** using your phonic knowledge to help you say each sound within a word, e.g. 'r-e-d' or 's-au-ce-p-a-n'.*

***Blending:** running the sounds in the word together to read the whole word, e.g. 'r-e-d, red', 's-au-ce-p-a-n, saucepan'.*

***High frequency words** (also known as 'common exception words'): the very important, very common words which we use a lot, but which aren't always decodable using phonics. This includes crucial words like 'the', 'one', 'where', etc. Children are taught to recognise these words on sight - a few of these words are introduced and learnt at a time.*



So what is phonics, and why is it so important?

Phonics means using letter sounds to help you read words.

Most schools in the UK now teach reading through phonics. The reason phonics is so widely used is that research shows it works! That's why the official school curriculum says that children need to be taught to read using a systematic phonics system.

In pre-school or nursery, before they even start learning letter names and sounds, children begin developing their listening skills so that they are tuned into the different sounds in words.

Then, usually in reception or primary 1, the letters of the alphabet are introduced in a set order, and children learn one sound for each letter. At that point, they can sound out and read simple, short words like 'c-a-t, cat' and 's-u-n, sun'. Next, children learn that some letters make different sounds when you put them together, like 'sh', 'ee' and 'ai'.

Once they've learned to read words with the most common letter-sound combinations, in year or primary 1 children move on to learn lots alternative combinations. They practise reading increasingly complex words. By the time they finish their first year, most children will be well on the way to reading pretty much any familiar word in English! In their second year, children develop their skills still further, practising using phonics to read and spell words that are less familiar and more challenging.

Of course, while all this is going on, children are also learning to understand and enjoy what they read! From nursery and beyond, teachers share wonderful stories and non-fiction books with children, and encourage them to think about, talk about and enjoy their reading.



What will your child be learning, and how can you help?

These sections below will offer advice and guide on what children typically learn in each year of school, with some ideas for helping them if they get stuck.

Keeping it easy and fun

Remember the aim of phonics is to get your child reading as quickly and easily as possible, so that they are free to read whatever they like! It's meant to be fun - and no one wants reading to turn into a chore. So, whatever stage of their school life your child is at, don't forget:

- Keep phonics sessions short and focused. Aim to stop before your child gets bored! Ten minutes is often long enough.*
- Make it as fun as possible - see below for some ideas for phonic games you could play together.*
- Pick a time when your child's not too tired, and find a quiet place where they won't be distracted by screens (or by noisy brothers or sisters!).*
- Even when your child is becoming a good independent reader, keep on reading to them! Stories and high-quality non-fiction are important - and so is the cuddly quiet time you spend together sharing them!*
- If you're ever concerned about your child's reading, talk to their teacher. Tell the teacher what you've noticed and ask for their advice. This is often very reassuring and it can be a great source of new ideas for supporting your child!*



Preschool and nursery

This is one of the most important times for children's learning! They'll be soaking up ideas and information like sponges - so it's a great time to start them off on their reading journey!

In preschool and nursery classes, teachers help children to develop the listening skills they'll need to become successful readers later. Children will be using songs, nursery rhymes and play to discover lots of sounds and get used to hearing and repeating them. This stage is often called Phase 1 of phonics.

At this point, children will be:

- Listening to sounds in the world around them, and copying the sounds (e.g. 'can you make a car sound? What sound does a dog make?')*
- Using instruments and their own bodies and voices to make and copy sounds*
- Listening out for rhythm and rhyme (e.g. spotting the rhyming words in a nursery rhyme)*
- Listening to the sounds in spoken words and splitting a word into its separate sounds (e.g. 'd-o-g' makes 'dog').*

It might not seem very much like reading, because they're not focusing on written letters and words - but it's a crucial preparation for the next stage!

Phonic fun with nursery children

- Use their hobbies and interests! If they're into animals, see how many different animal noises they can make. Can they copy a sound you make, and tell you what the animal is? Or if they love trucks, cars and diggers, encourage them to make the appropriate noises when they are playing.*
- When you're out and about, listen out for sounds - birdsong, traffic noises, etc. Can your child tell you what made the sound? Can they copy it?*
- Sing songs and say rhymes together. Can your child clap when they hear a rhyming word?*

- *Clap or tap a rhythm. Can your child copy it? Can they clap their own rhythm for you to copy?*

Reception or primary one

Your child's reception year is the time when they will learn a lot of phonics fast! Schools use lots of different phonics programmes and systems - some common ones are Jolly Phonics, Read Write Inc, Big Cat, Bug Club and Oxford Reading Tree. So the exact order in which different letter sounds are introduced may vary depending on the scheme your child's school is using. But most of the phonic schemes used in school are based on the Government's own guidance, which is called Letters and Sounds.

Letters and Sounds is broken up into five Phases. Phase 1 is the nursery stage, where children learn to listen out for sounds and patterns, and copy them.

Children normally start on Phase 2 near the start of their first year at school. This is when most of the letters of the alphabet are introduced. Children learn the letters' names, and they also learn one common sound for each letter of the alphabet. So for instance, the letter 'c' is introduced with a hard 'c' sound as in 'cup', not the soft sound it has in 'ice'. And children learn a short sound for each vowel (a, e, i, o and u) - as in 'hat', 'pet', 'dip', 'pot' and 'mug'.



Letter sounds

At school, children are taught to pronounce each letter with a very 'pure' sound - so the letter 'p', for instance, is pronounced with a popping sound, as just 'p', not 'puh', and 's' is pronounced like a hiss, not 'suh'.

It's worth learning how to pronounce the letters in the way children are taught them at school. Your child's teacher will be able to help you with this, or there are lots of guides online.

Phase 3 introduces the last of the letters - less common ones like 'x' and 'j' - and also some digraphs - letter pairs that make one sound together, like 'sh', 'th', 'ai', 'ee', 'igh' 'oa' and 'oo'.

It takes about 12 weeks to work through Phase 3. In Phase 4 (still usually in the first year of school) children learn about words where there are two or more consonants together - like 'stop', 'dust', 'stamp', 'splash', etc.

Phonic fun in reception/primary 1

- Keep going with the games and ideas suggested for Nursery children!*
- If your child brings books home from school, encourage them to read to you, and help them with sounding out the words if they struggle.*
- Sometimes pause when you're reading a storybook together, and see if your child can tell you what letter or sound the next word starts with. If the word uses phonics that they already know, encourage them to have a go at reading it. Give them lots of praise for trying, as well as for getting it right!*
- Play 'hunt the word', using words and sounds that they know from school. Say 'Can you find the word 'mum' on this page? Can you find a word that starts with 's'?*
- Encourage your child to look for words in the world around them, such as on street signs, shop signs, posters etc. Praise them for having a go at reading these words, and help them if necessary.*

Year/primary 1

By the time your child leaves nursery or reception, they will probably know quite a lot of phonics. They may be able to read simple words, straight forward short sentences and even a whole simple book! During year 1, they build on this knowledge and become more and more skillful and fluent at reading.

Phase 5 of phonics usually takes the whole of year 1. This is because it includes a very large number of different sounds and letter patterns. There is a lot for children to learn at this stage – but with good teaching and your support, it needn't be confusing!

In earlier phases, children learnt one sound for each letter pattern. They found out that 'ai' makes the sound 'ay', and 'oa' makes the sound 'oh'. In Phase 5, they learn that there are other ways of making an 'ay' sound – for example, the letters 'ay' as in 'day', or 'ey' as in 'they', or 'a-e' as in 'game'.

Children also learn different pronunciations for some letters or groups of letters that they've learnt before. So this is when they find out that 'c' can sound soft in a word like 'ice' or 'city', or 'g' sounds soft in a word like 'giant'. They also learn that the letters 'ea' sound like 'ee' in 'bead', but like 'eh' in 'head'.

By the end of year 1, most children know enough phonics to be able to read most common words in English.



Phonic fun in their first year

- Keep on encouraging your child to read books they bring home, and prompt them if they get stuck on a word. Talk to your child's teacher to find out what they're learning at the moment and which letter sounds the teacher would like you to focus on with your child.*
- When you're reading a story or a non-fiction book together, encourage your child to join in with the reading as much as they want to. Praise them if they try to tackle a tricky word using their phonics! If they don't quite get it right, tell them the word.*
- You could use a set of fun flashcards like to play games and do activities with your child, focusing on the sounds and letter patterns they are learning.*

Year/primary 2

For lots of children, their second year is the time when they really put all the phonics they know into practice, and learn to read longer and slightly more complex stories and non-fiction books. The focus in year 2 is not so much on using phonics for reading, as by now many children know most of the phonics they need. There's more of a shift to using phonics for spelling, so that children use the phonics they know to help them work out how to spell a wider range of words.

However, it's not uncommon for year 2 children to need to revisit phonics they've learnt in year 1, so don't worry if your child isn't completely confident yet. It's a good idea to talk to their teacher to find out if there's a particular way you could support your child and give them practice with the aspect of phonics they're finding difficult. The key thing is not to let your child get stressed or upset - keep reading and phonic sessions short and fun, and don't forget to praise them for having a go, as well as when they get things right!

If your second year child is struggling with phonics...

- Keep reading to them - it's especially important to do this if they're struggling a bit with their own reading! By picking stories and non-fiction books that appeal to their interests, you'll be continuing to show them that reading can be fun and worthwhile.*
- As ever, keep reading sessions short and focused, and stop if your child is tired or fed up. A short, happy reading session is so much better than a long, difficult one!*
- Go with your child's own interests. Look for books on topics that really excite them, and don't be afraid to let them read a book that looks 'too easy' or 'too difficult' for them. Any reading practice is good reading practice - and if your child is enjoying the book, they will want to put their skills into action.*
- Let your child see you reading and enjoying books too!*
- Gently encourage your child to practise their reading skills in real-life situations. If they enjoy cooking, let them help you read the recipe. With your help, they could do some internet research to find out more about their favourite footballer, or get tips on how to look after a pet.*
- Always talk to your child's teacher if you have any concerns about their learning.*