



www.phonicsplay.co.uk



What is phonics?

There has been a huge shift in the past few years in how we teach reading in UK schools. This is having a big impact and helping many children learn to read and spell. Phonics is recommended as the first strategy that children should be taught in helping them learn to read. It runs alongside other teaching methods such as Guided Reading and Shared Reading to help children develop all the other vital reading skills and hopefully give them a real love of reading.

So, what exactly is phonics?

Words are made up from small units of sound called phonemes. Phonics teaches children to be able to listen carefully and identify the phonemes that make up each word. This helps children to learn to read words and to spell words

In phonics lessons children are taught three main things:

GPCs

They are taught GPCs. This stands for grapheme phoneme correspondences. This simply means that they are taught all the phonemes in the English language and ways of writing them down. These sounds are taught in a particular order. The first sounds to be taught are **s, a, t, p**.

Blending

Children are taught to be able to blend. This is when children say the sounds that make up a word and are able to merge the sounds together until they can hear what the word is. This skill is vital in learning to read.

Segmenting

Children are also taught to segment. This is the opposite of blending. Children are able to say a word and then break it up into the phonemes that make it up. This skill is vital in being able to spell words.

What makes phonics tricky?

In some languages learning phonics is easy because each phoneme has just one grapheme to represent it. The English language is a bit more complicated than this. This is largely because England has been invaded so many times throughout its history. Each set of invaders brought new words and new sounds with them. As a result, English only has around 44 phonemes but there are around 120 graphemes or ways of writing down those 44 phonemes. Obviously we only have 26 letters in the alphabet so some graphemes are made up from more than one letter.

ch th oo ay (these are all digraphs - graphemes with two letters)

There are other graphemes that are trigraphs (made up of 3 letters) and even a few made from 4 letters.

Another slightly sticky problem is that some graphemes can represent more than one phoneme. For example **ch** makes very different sounds in these three words: **chip, school, chef.**

So why bother learning phonics?

In the past people argued that because the English language is so tricky, there was no point teaching children phonics. Now, most people agree that these tricky bits mean that it is even more important that we teach phonics and children learn it clearly and systematically. A written language is basically a kind of a code. Teaching phonics is just teaching children to crack that code. Children learn the simple bits first and then easily progress to get the hang of the trickier bits.

How is phonics taught?

Some people worry that phonics is taught to children when they are too young. However, those people might be surprised if they stepped into a phonics lesson. Phonics sessions are entirely made up from games, songs and actions and these sessions only last for 15-20 minutes per day. In my experience, (when phonics is taught well) children generally enjoy phonics so much that they beg their teachers to play phonics games with them at other times of the day.

Reading with your child

One of the greatest gifts that you can give to your child is a love of reading. Research has shown that one of the biggest indicators of success in a child's life is whether or not they have books in the home. As a parent, try to focus on making reading fun and enjoyable rather than getting bogged down in trying to teach nitty gritty skills. There are many, many different things that you can do. Here are just a few:

Let your child see you reading - This can be a newspaper, magazine, anything you like. This is a powerful message to send to your child so go on, put your feet up for 10 minutes and have a read.

Reading to your child - Bedtime is great but any other time is fine too. Even when children are old enough to read by themselves they will still love to hear you read to them.

Read something with your child - It doesn't need to be a book. The secret is to find something that your child is desperate to read - comics, magazines, football programmes, newspapers, internet pages, texts, e-mails, catalogues etc. If you are reading books together you could ask your child's school what Book Band your child is reading at (this will be a colour) and choose a book from this band. However, never underestimate that power of a book that a child really, really wants to read, even if it is too hard for them. If they are very keen to read a particular tricky book then go for it and just help them out when they need it.

Talk about what they are reading - Talk before you start. Talk whilst you are reading. Talk after you have finished. You can still talk about what your child is reading even if they don't want to actually read with you any more.

Praise your child - Studies show that children who are given specific support with their reading make much greater progress if they are given lots of praise than if they are given the support alone. It can be tough to think up lots of new ways to praise your child. It can be also be hard to stay positive if you are particularly worried about your child's reading skills. Try to praise your child's accuracy, understanding and attitude.

One really effective technique is Paired Reading. To do this you will read a book out loud at the same time as your child. When the child is ready they will give you a subtle signal agreed in advance (tap the book, nudge you - it can be anything but mustn't disturb the reading). On this signal, you stop reading and the child carries on independently. If they make a mistake or get stuck, give them a moment to correct themselves. If they do, let them carry on. If they don't then you join back in with them until they next give you the signal. This is a system that has been used since the 1970's and has been proven in many studies to make a huge difference to children's reading skills.

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