Department for Education

Learning to read through phonics

Information for parents

What is phonics?

Phonics is a way of teaching children to read quickly and skilfully. They are taught how to:

- recognise the sounds that each individual letter makes;
- identify the sounds that different combinations of letters make - such as '*sh'* or '*oo';* and
- blend these sounds together from left to right to make a word.

Children can then use this knowledge to 'de-code' new words that they hear or see. This is the first important step in learning to read.

Why phonics?

Research shows that when phonics is taught in a structured way – starting with the easiest sounds and progressing through to the most complex – it is the most effective way of teaching young children to read. It is particularly helpful for children aged 5 to 7.

Almost all children who receive good teaching of phonics will learn the skills they need to tackle new words. They can then go on to read any kind of text fluently and confidently, and to read for enjoyment.

Children who have been taught phonics also tend to read more accurately than those taught using other methods, such as 'look and say'. This includes children who find learning to read difficult, for example those who have dyslexia.

If you would like to find out more about phonics, visit the phonics section of the Department for Education website.

What is the phonics screening check?

The phonics screening check is a quick and easy check of your child's phonics knowledge. It helps your school confirm whether your child has made the expected progress.

In 2013 the check will take place during the week commencing Monday 17 June.

How does the check work?

- Your child will sit with a teacher he or she knows and be asked to read 40 words aloud.
- Your child may have read some of the words before, while others will be completely new.
- The check normally takes just a few minutes to complete and there is no time limit. If your child is struggling, the teacher will stop the check. The check is carefully designed not to be stressful for your child.

What are 'non-words'?

The check will contain a mix of real words and 'non-words' (or 'nonsense words'). Your child will be told before the check that there will be non-words that he or she will not have seen before. Many children will be familiar with this because many schools already use 'non-words' when they teach phonics.

Non-words are important to include because words such as 'vap' or 'jound' are new to all children. Children cannot read the non-words by using their memory or vocabulary; they have to use their decoding skills. This is a fair way to assess their ability to decode.

After the check

Your school should tell you about your child's progress in phonics and how he or she has done in the screening check in the last half-term of year 1. If your child has found the check difficult, your child's school should also tell you what support they have put in place to help him or her improve. You might like to ask how you can support your child to take the next step in reading. Children who have not met the standard in year 1 will retake the check in year 2.

All children are individuals and develop at different rates. The screening check ensures that teachers understand which children need extra help with phonic decoding.

Helping your child with phonics

Phonics works best when children are given plenty of encouragement and learn to enjoy reading and books. Parents play a very important part in helping with this.

Some simple steps to help your child learn to read through phonics:

- Ask your child's class teacher about the school's approach to phonics and how you can reinforce this at home. For example, the teacher will be able to tell you which letters and sounds the class is covering in lessons each week.
- You can then highlight these sounds when you read with your child. Teaching how sounds match with letters is likely to start with individual letters such as 's', 'a' and 't' and then will move on to two-letter sounds such as 'ee', 'ch' and 'ck'.
- With all books, encourage your child to 'sound out' unfamiliar words and then blend the sounds together from left to right rather than looking at the pictures to guess. Once your child has read an unfamiliar word you can talk about what it means and help him or her to follow the story.
- Your child's teacher will also be able to suggest books with the right level of phonics for your child. These books are often called 'decodable readers' because the story is written with words made up of the letters your child has learnt. Your child will be able to work out new words from their letters and sounds, rather than just guessing.
- Try to make time to read with your child every day. Grandparents and older brothers or sisters can help, too. Encourage your child to blend the sounds all the way through a word.
- Word games like 'I-spy' can also be an enjoyable way of teaching children about sounds and letters. You can also encourage your child to read words from your shopping list or road signs to practise phonics.
- Most schools use 'book bags' and a reading record, which is a great way for teachers and parents to communicate about what children have read. The reading record can tell you whether your child has enjoyed a particular book and shows problems or successes he or she has had, either at home or at school.

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