

Letters and Sounds: A Guide to Phonics

Introduction

Starting in Early Years, children are taught phonics; the journey of learning to read, write and spell. These vital skills are the beginning of a lifelong literacy journey. Phonics, which may also be referred to as 'Letters and Sounds', is the process of children learning to read.

The process of learning to read and write begins from an early age, where children can learn and practise many skills. This can be done in a range of ways and settings, including home. Exposing children to conversation and books is essential.

Spoken Language

Listening and talking to your child is essential. As part of everyday activities, talk to your child, explaining what you are doing. Speaking and listening are the building blocks for reading and writing. The more language your child is exposed to, the more they will understand and use for themselves.

Letters and Sounds

The systematic phonics programme called 'Letters and Sounds' is divided into six phases. During the programme, new skills are taught, continually building on previous learning.

Phase 1

This is the beginning of the systematic learning of phonics and takes place predominately in Nursery or Pre-School. It falls primarily within the Communication, Language and Literacy area of learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum.

During this phase, children should be exposed to a language-rich environment. Activities are mainly adult led and build up to teaching children the important basic elements such as oral segmenting and blending.

Useful Tips

Sharing books from an early age is hugely beneficial for children.

Enjoying and sharing books from being young, enables children to see reading as a source of pleasure.

Through the sharing of good books, children's vocabulary increases which enables them to talk confidently.

This phase is divided into seven strands:

Aspect 1: Environmental Sounds

Children are exposed to a variety of sounds in the environment, being encouraged to copy them.

Aspect 2: Instrumental Sounds

Children are encouraged to listen to and make sounds using different instruments.

Aspect 3: Body Percussion

Children use their body to accompany songs and rhymes, for example, by clapping and tapping.

Aspect 4: Rhythm and Rhyme

Children are exposed to a range of books and rhymes. Children are encouraged to join in with repeated refrains and rhymes.

Aspect 5: Alliteration

Children are encouraged to listen to initial sounds within words. They are asked to think of other words beginning with the same sound.

Aspect 6: Voice Sounds

Children are asked to create different mouth movements and say a range of sounds.

Aspect 7: Oral Blending and Segmenting

This stage is vital before children are exposed to grapheme to phoneme correspondence (learning which letter represents each sound). It is all done orally and is to encourage children to hear the separate sounds within words.

Oral Blending

At first, the adult will show the children how this is done. The separate sounds (phonemes) are clearly spoken aloud, in order, fairly quickly and are then merged together into the whole word. For example:

m-a-n man

The merging together of the sounds is called blending. Initially, children may not be able to merge the sounds together independently and will need frequent practise which is highly beneficial.

Oral Segmenting

This is the opposite to oral blending. Here, children hear the whole word before it is then broken into separate sounds (phonemes). For example:

dog d-o-g

This skill is called segmenting and is vital in order for children be able to spell. Initially, children might only be able to hear the initial sound and will need frequent practise.

Ways You Can Support Your Child at Home

Share a range of rhymes.

Practise oral blending in and around the home. You can do this by talking in the following way:

- c-a-t, cat
- Can you put on your s-o-ck?

Initially, the children will just listen and then with time, they will be able to join in, hearing the words the sounds create.

Phase 2

This phase builds upon the oral blending and segmenting of the previous phase. Children must continue to practise what they have learnt. They will also then be taught the grapheme-phoneme representations (letters) for 19 letters. Additionally, they will be taught that phonemes (sounds) can be represented by more than one letter. For example: **fin**, **huff**

The suggested order for teaching the sounds, is as follows, with one set being taught each week:

Set 1	Set 2	Set 3	Set 4	Set 5
s a t p	i n m d	g o c k	ck e u r	h b f,ff l,ll ss

The process of learning a sound, includes:

- Saying a number of words with the same initial sound, exaggerating it. E.g. ssssnake, ssssun
- Showing the children the grapheme (letter) that represents the sound.
- Flashing a card with the grapheme on one side and a picture on the other. When the children see the grapheme side, they are to say the sound. When they see the picture sound, they are to say the word corresponding to the picture.

VC and CVC Words

During this phase, children will be taught to read different words using the sounds and letters they have been exposed to.

V = vowel

C = consonant

VC words are those that consist of a vowel and then a consonant (am, on, it). **CVC words** are those that consist of a consonant then a vowel and then a consonant (cat, dog, pen). Some words such as bell are also CVC words because they only have three sounds. **b-e-ll**

Useful Tip

Pure sounds should be used when children are saying sounds. This means, where possible, the 'uh' sounds after consonants should not be said. E.g. the sound 'f' should be pronounced **ffff** rather than **fuh**.

The children will use magnetic letters to make and spell words, read words on the whiteboard and on flash cards as well as beginning to write words.

Tricky Words

During this phase, the children will also be exposed to tricky words; words that cannot be sounded out. **the, to, I, go, no**

Ways You Can Support Your Child at Home

Using the sounds the children have been exposed to, the following games and activities can be done:

- Using flashcards, expose children regularly to the sounds they have learnt. Remember to use pure sounds.
- Magnetic letters - Using magnetic letters on the fridge or any type of magnetic surface, children can practise making words.
- Make words using letter cards or magnetic letters. Ask the children to blend the sounds together to make the words.
- Ask children to spell out CV and CVC words both orally and on paper.

Phase 3

The purpose of this phase is to:

- Teach more graphemes; the remaining letters of the alphabet and some sounds of which are made up of two or three letters, known as digraphs and trigraphs.
E.g. 'ee' as in bee
- Practise blending and segmenting a wider range of CVC words.
- Read more tricky words and begin to spell them.
- To read familiar words on sight, rather than decoding them.

The following sounds are taught:

Set 6	Set 7	Digraphs	Trigraphs
j v w x	y z,zz qu	ch sh th ng ai ee oa oo ar or ur ow oi er	igh ear air ure

CVC Words Containing Digraphs and Trigraphs

Below are some examples of the words your child will be reading in this phase:

ship cook fork high beard chair

Frequent practise allows your child to become more fluent.

Useful Tip

It is important children quickly learn to recognise digraphs and trigraphs as one sound, rather than as separate letters. E.g. rain should be read as r-ai-n not r-a-i-n

Tricky Words

During this phase, the children will also be exposed to tricky words; words that cannot be sounded out.

he she we me be was my you her they all

Ways You Can Support Your Child at Home

Using the sounds the children have been exposed to, the following games and activities can be done.

Using flashcards, expose children regularly to the sounds they have learnt. Remember to use pure sounds. Try to increase the speed at which children are shown the sounds.

Phase 4

The purpose of this phase is to consolidate the sounds already taught. Children are also exposed to adjacent consonants (consonant blends and consonant clusters) and multisyllabic words.

Useful Tip

It is important children learn to read words without blending as soon as possible. Children progress from blending out loud, to blending in their head before reading on sight. The sooner they can read on sight, the quicker their fluency will improve.

CVCC and CCVC Words

Blends and clusters such as the following are taught:

'nt' as in tent

'st' as in toast

'pl' as in plum

'sp' as in spoon

Tricky Words

During this phase, the children will also be exposed to tricky words; words that cannot be sounded out.

For example:

said so do have like some come were there little one when out what

Ways You Can Support Your Child at Home

Using the sounds the children have been exposed to, the following games and activities can be done:

- Continue to use flashcards with the sounds already taught.
- Practise sounding out a range of CVCC and CCVC words.
- Ask your child to make a word using magnetic letters or to write it down.

Phase 5

Typically, phase 5 is taught in Year One.

The purpose of this phase is to broaden a child's knowledge of graphemes and phonemes for use in reading and spelling. When spelling words, children will now need to choose the appropriate graphemes to represent phonemes.

New Graphemes for Reading:

ay ou ie ea oy ir ue aw wh ph ew oe au
a-e e-e i-e o-e u-e

Useful Tip

Split digraphs are introduced in Phase 5.

a-e e-e i-e o-e u-e

Children will learn that the 'e' on the end causes the initial vowel to make the longer vowel sound rather than the shorter one.

E.g. ay ee igh ow oo

For example:

oh Mrs people Mr called looked could asked their

Ways You Can Support Your Child at Home

Using the sounds the children have been exposed to, the following games and activities can be done:

- Ask your child to make or spell words. Support them whilst they figure out how the sound needs to be represented.
- Focus on split digraphs using flashcards, try to increase the speed you show children.
- Encourage children to write as many sounds/words as possible in a set amount of time.
- Expose children to a wider range of stories which include longer texts.

Phase 6

When children enter this phase, they should know most of the common grapheme-phoneme correspondences. As a result of this, they should be able to read hundreds of words. This will be in one of three ways:

- Reading the word on sight when they are very familiar.
- Decoding the word quickly and/or silently.
- Decoding the word aloud.

During this phase, the aim is for children to become fluent readers and increasingly accurate spellers.

Ways You Can Support Your Child at Home

Using the sounds the children have been exposed to, the following games and activities can be done:

- Ask your child to make or spell words. Support them whilst they figure out how the sound needs to be represented.
- Focus on different suffixes, adding them to root words. Ask children to read and write the words.
- Encourage children to write as many sounds/words as possible in a set amount of time.
- Expose children to a wider range of stories which include longer texts.

Handwriting

Since the introduction of the current National Curriculum in 2014, the importance of handwriting has significantly increased. Connections between handwriting, composition of writing and spelling have been made.

It is expected that children learn to sit correctly, hold a pencil correctly and form letters correctly, knowing where they should start and end. This leads them into joining letters correctly, ideally in Year 2.

Pre-Writing Skills

It is essential that a child begins to write when they are ready. In order to prepare your child, there are many activities that can be done in various settings, including at home.

Writing readiness can be defined in a number of ways:

- hand and finger strength
- upper limb strength
- hand dominance
- pencil grasp
- hand-eye coordination

Ways You Can Support Your Child at Home

- From an early age, allow your child access to various writing materials of all shapes and sizes. (paint brushes, crayons, pencils, pens)
- Encourage participation in skills that involve manipulating objects. (jigsaws, threading)
- Encourage activities to promote finger strength. (tweezers, building bricks, playdough)
- Encourage activities to promote gross motor skills. (painting walls outside with water, using a wheelbarrow, climbing ladders)
- Encourage activities to promote hand-eye coordination. (ball games, skipping, throwing a frisbee, throwing stones into the sea)

Assessment

Since 2012, all children have been assessed in Year One to determine whether they have learnt phonic decoding to an appropriate standard. This is called the Phonics Screening Check.

They are asked to read forty words, twenty real and twenty nonsense words.

Useful Tips

- Make up nonsense words using the sounds already taught. E.g. vaib
- Ensure your child decodes these words out loud for accuracy.
- In the screening check, these words will have a picture or an alien alongside to remind the children they are a nonsense word.

What Else Can I Do at Home?

Promoting a love for reading is paramount. There are many different ways this can be done from an early age:

- Sing nursery rhymes from an early age. When your child is old enough, they can join in.
- Share books regularly. Buy books or go to the local library. Read books by the same author and reread your child's favourites.
- Listen to your child read and remember to continue to read to them. It is important they are exposed to vocabulary beyond their reading ability.
- Allow your child to see you reading for pleasure. It may be fiction or non-fiction.
- Allow your child to practise their reading skills. Encourage blending aloud, as well as in their heads.
- Talk about books. Ask the children what is happening, how the characters are feeling and what they have enjoyed.
- Use props and puppets to tell stories. Allow their imaginations to run wild!
- Use ambitious vocabulary, explaining its meaning.
- Listen to songs and add actions.
- Read rhyming books together. Ask the children to fill in missing parts and join in with repeated refrains.
- Make reading a pleasure not a chore!