

Explaining Letters and Sounds and the teaching of phonics

Letters and Sounds aims to build children's speaking and listening skills in their own right as well as to prepare children for learning to read by developing their phonic knowledge and skills. It sets out a detailed and systematic programme for teaching phonic skills for children starting by the age of five, with the aim of them becoming fluent readers by age seven.

What Are Phonics Phases?

Phases are the way the Letters and Sounds Programme is broken down to teach sounds in a certain order.

At the same time whole words that cannot be broken down easily, (we call "tricky words") are taught to the children.

Phase One

Activities are divided into seven aspects, including environmental sounds, instrumental sounds, body sounds, rhythm and rhyme, alliteration, voice sounds and finally oral blending and segmenting.

Phase Two

Learning 19 letters of the alphabet and one sound for each. Blending sounds together to make words. Segmenting words into their separate sounds. Beginning to read simple captions.

Phase Three

The remaining 7 letters of the alphabet, one sound for each. Graphemes such as ch, oo, th representing the remaining phonemes not covered by single letters. Reading captions, sentences and questions. On completion of this phase, children will have learnt the "simple code", i.e. one grapheme for each phoneme in the English language.

Phase Four

No new grapheme-phoneme correspondences are taught in this phase. Children learn to blend and segment longer words with adjacent consonants, e.g. swim, clap, jump.

Phase Five

Now we move on to the "complex code". Children learn more graphemes for the phonemes which they already know, plus different ways of pronouncing the graphemes they already know.

Phase Six

Working on spelling, including prefixes and suffixes, doubling and dropping letters etc.

What are "Tricky words"?

Tricky words are words that cannot be 'sounded-out' but need to be learned by heart. They don't fit into the usual spelling patterns. In order to read simple sentences, it is necessary for children to know some words that have unusual or untaught spellings. It should be noted that, when teaching these words, it is important to always start with sounds already known in the word, then focus on the 'tricky' part.

What are High Frequency words?

High frequency (common) are words that recur frequently in much of the written material young children read and that they need when they write.

What do the Phonics terms mean?

Phoneme: The smallest unit of sound in a word, e.g. c/a/t, sh/o/p, t/ea/ch/er.

Grapheme: A letter or group of letter representing one sound, e.g. sh, igh, t.

Clip Phonemes: when teaching sounds, always clip them short 'mmmm' not 'muh'

Digraph: Two letters which together make one sound, e.g. sh, ch, ee, ph, oa.

Split digraph: Two letters, which work as a pair, split, to represent one sound, e.g. a-e as in cake, or i-e as in kite.

Trigraph: three letters which together make one sound but cannot be separated into smaller phonemes, e.g. igh as in light, ear as in heard, tch as in watch.

Segmentation: means hearing the individual phonemes within a word – for instance the word 'crash' consists of four phonemes: 'c – r – a – sh'. In order to spell this word, a child must segment it into its component phonemes and choose a grapheme to represent each phoneme.

Blending: means merging the individual phonemes together to pronounce a word. In order to read an unfamiliar word, a child must recognise ('sound out') each grapheme, not each letter (e.g. 'th-i-n' not 't-h-i-n'), and then merge the phonemes together to make the word.

Mnemonics: a device for memorising and recalling something, such as a hand action of a drill to remember the phoneme /d/.

Adjacent consonants: two or three letters with discrete sounds, which are blended together e.g. str, cr, tr, gr. (previously consonant clusters).

Comprehension: understanding of language whether it is spoken or written.