

Phonics

Everything you need to know:

As a parent you will probably have heard the word “phonics” used when talking about the way that children learn to read. When you were a child, it’s possible that you were taught to read through learning by sight, looking the shape of the word as a whole.

These days, children are encouraged to break down the individual sounds in words in order to “decode” them and work out what they are. They may also be pronounced in a different way than you are familiar with, as children are taught to only say the very smallest unit of sound, so for example, the letter ‘m’ is pronounced ‘mmmm’ instead of ‘muh’. Here are some of the key aspects you’ll need to know to help your children with their phonics learning.

- ① **Phonemes**
- ② **Graphemes**
- ③ **Segmenting and Blending**
- ④ **Common Exception, High Frequency and Tricky Words**

1. Phonemes

Phonemes can be explained as the smallest unit of sound in a word. These can be:

- Single sounds such as r, m, n.
 - Digraphs (this means two letter in a sound) such as ch, sh, oo.
 - Trigraphs (this means three letters in a sound) such as igh, ear or air.
 - Split digraphs (sometimes called split vowels)
- these are made up of two letters that are “split” by having another little in the middle of them. For example a_e in “game” or i_e in “tide”. You may know this as ‘magic e’, although that’s not how it is generally taught or referred to now.

The English language has 44 phonemes. Over the course of Reception and Year 1, children are taught to read and write each phoneme, forming them accurately. The 44 phonemes are as follows:

s sit t tip p pet n neck m man a apple e egg i ink o off g grapes d duck

c clock k r rug h him u under ai train ee bee igh night b bed f frog l lorry j jam

v van oa goat oo look oo food ar car w wish x box y yellow z zip qu queen or fork

ur burn ow cow oi coin ch chips sh shed th teeth th this ng ring ear near air stairs ure pure

Remember that we said the phonemes are often pronounced in a way you aren’t familiar with? Take a look at our quick guide for pronouncing each phoneme. If you are still unsure, there are lots of brilliant pronunciation videos on YouTube - we recommend “Phonics: How to pronounce pure sounds” by Oxford Owl (or simply ask your child’s teacher!).

Children also need to know the **names** of letters, as pronounced in the alphabet, and their alphabetical order. The letter names and letter sounds can be talked about alongside each other, but it is important that you don’t just refer to the alphabetical name of the letter when talking with your child.

2. Graphemes

Graphemes are the written symbols that represent the sounds – the phonemes.

They can be a single letter or a group of letters. There are often multiple ways to write each phoneme (multiple graphemes for each phoneme), for example the phoneme 'ay' as in 'play' can be written as 'ai', 'a', 'a-e', 'ei' and 'ey', depending on the word you are writing.

These different ways to write each sound will be explored in more detail as your child nears the end of the Reception year and throughout Year 1, so don't worry about them too much yet! It's always useful to have the discussion with your child though, especially as they may come across these different graphemes in reading books.

3 . Segmenting and Blending

Once children have started learning some phonemes, they will quickly move onto segmenting and blending them.

Blending is when children use their knowledge of phonemes to read words, saying the sounds in quick succession to hear the word. For example
c-a-t = cat
g-oa-t = goat
sh-ee-p = sheep

Segmenting is the opposite of blending and is when we break down a word in order to write it, according to the sounds we hear in that word. Children will use segmenting skills, as well as their knowledge of phonemes to spell out and help them to write words. For example they might identify all the phonemes in c-a-t to help them write it down.

4. Common Exception, High Frequency and Tricky Words

As you might have guessed, the English language can be quite complicated, and not every word can be decoded into phonemes or follows traditional spelling rules.

These words are not words for which phonics ‘doesn’t work’, but they may be exceptions to spelling rules or words which use a particular combination of letters to represent sound patterns in a rare or unique way.

If you try to decode words like “was” and “said”, for example, they would sound very different to how we usually say them! Words like this are often referred to as “common exception words” or “tricky words” - they are exceptions to the rule, or tricky to read using phonic knowledge alone.

For this reason, we have to teach children to read common exception words by sight, e.g. from memory.

“High frequency words” are often decodable, especially as your child becomes more familiar with the different phonemes. This term refers to words that we come across in our reading and writing most frequently, therefore it is beneficial for children if they learn to sight read them, and later spell them correctly. .