**PARENT’S GUIDE TO PHONICS**

**What is phonics?**

There has been a huge shift in the past few year in how we teach reading in UK [schools](http://www.phonicsplay.co.uk/member-only/WhatIsPhonics.htm). 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](http://www.phonicsplay.co.uk/member-only/WhatIsPhonics.htm) 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](http://www.phonicsplay.co.uk/member-only/WhatIsPhonics.htm) 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](http://www.phonicsplay.co.uk/member-only/WhatIsPhonics.htm) 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](http://www.phonicsplay.co.uk/member-only/WhatIsPhonics.htm) phonics games with them at other times of the day

**What schools do to teach reading**

**The Rose Review**

In March 2006 a report was published called The Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading, more commonly known as The Rose Review. This report had very clear recommendations about the teaching of early reading. This was very welcome as prior to this there was a lot of confusion about what [schools](http://www.phonicsplay.co.uk/member-only/WhatSchoolsDo.htm) should be doing.

**In a nutshell, schools should:**

Teach phonics as the main first method for children to learn to read words.

For most children this should begin at age 5.

Before the age of 5 children should be involved in pre-reading activities to prepare them for phonics work (See Phase 1).

Phonics should be taught in a systematic way across the school.

Phonics should be set within a rich language curriculum that develops speaking and listening, reading and writing skills.

Phonics teaching should be multisensory. This means children will learn using all their senses e.g. by singing, dancing, acting, using magnetic letters, making shapes in the air, looking at pictures, playing games, using computers, making sounds, making choices and as many other ways as possible. This is vital because all children learn differently.

**In addition, schools should be making sure that:**

All teachers have adequate training.

Monitoring is in place to ensure that all phonics teaching is high quality. This is essential to prevent children from falling behind wherever possible.

There are assessment systems in place to keep track of how all children are doing in phonics.

Where children do fall behind, they are given intervention (specific support with their phonics) to help them catch up as soon as possible.

**What will this actually look like?**

All schools following the recommendations will be using a systematic phonics [programme](http://www.phonicsplay.co.uk/member-only/WhatSchoolsDo.htm). The programme published by the government and available free to all schools is called Letters and Sounds. Other schools may have chosen to buy a commercial programme. There are a number of these available but the school should have taken care to make sure that any programme they use meets the recommendations in the Rose Report. Other schools may have created their own programme or have taken elements from more than one programme and merged them together.

**In schools using the Letters and Sounds programme, you would expect to see the following (schools following other programmes may vary slightly):**

Children in Reception, Y1 and Y2 should have a 15-20 minute phonics session every day. This session should be fast, fun and multisensory (see above). Each session will follow a clear sequence as follows:

**Introduction** - The teacher will explain to the children what they will be learning today and get them enthusiastic and motivated for the session.

**Revisit and review** - The children will [play](http://www.phonicsplay.co.uk/member-only/WhatSchoolsDo.htm) a quickfire game to practise something they have learned before and help build their confidence.

**Teach** - The children will be taught a new phoneme/grapheme or a new skill - this will be taught in a fun multisensory way and may well involve: songs, actions, pictures, puppets, writing giant letters in the air.

**Practise** - The children play fast, fun games to practise the new thing they have just learned. Many of the games on this site will be used in this section of the session.

[**Apply**](http://www.phonicsplay.co.uk/member-only/WhatSchoolsDo.htm) - The children will have a quick go at reading or writing sentences that involve the new thing they have just learned.

Each of these sections lasts a few minutes at most.

Outside of the phonics session children should be given lots of opportunities to apply the new skills that they have learned in all the lessons that they do. The more opportunities they are given the sooner they will become confident with these skills.

**Is this the only way that children are taught to read?**

Absolutely not! Phonics is the first step in helping children to crack the code of reading and writing. However children also need to learn strategies to tackle words that can't be decoded easily and also to be able to understand and engage with what they read.

Reading skills are also developed through regularly **Reading Aloud** to children.

**Guided Reading** sessions involve a group of children reading the same book with a teacher. Within the session they will revise specific skills then read independently up to a certain point in the book. The teacher will move around the group listening to each child read. Then the group will discuss how they used the specific skill they worked on at the start of the session and also discuss their thoughts, feelings and observations about what they have read.

**Literacy Lessons** are another key opportunity for teaching reading. Each literacy unit usually lasts for several weeks and will tackle a particular type of text e.g. fantasy stories, instructions etc. Over the course of those few weeks children should read various texts of this type and ideally learn one off by heart including actions and sound effects. They should also develop speaking and listening skills by exploring these texts through drama and role play and discussing how they feel about them. Specific skills related to the text, such as sentence structure or getting things in the right order should be explored and finally children should have a go at writing their own text. Clearly many parts of this process will help to develop children's reading skills. Within this process there will be many opportunities for **Shared Reading** in which a teacher will plan to model or develop a specific reading skill with a group of children.

**elping My Child**

**Unofficial homework - sharing what they have learned today**

Encourage your child to tell you what they have done at school today. The earlier you can get into this habit the better. Children in Nursery, Reception and Year 1 will have been learning songs and actions that they can show you and you can join in with. If your child absolutely won't tell you, have a chat to the [teacher](http://www.phonicsplay.co.uk/member-only/HelpingMyChild.htm) and see if there are actions or songs that they can share with you. Otherwise, try learning some songs and nursery rhymes at home together. Have a look at the interactive Hickory Dickory Dock game together or try some of the books below. Sharing songs and rhymes is something that you can easily do when you are busy with something else e.g. cooking, cleaning, driving in the car.

If you find out from the school which letters your child has learned so far, you could [print out](http://www.phonicsplay.co.uk/member-only/HelpingMyChild.htm) picture cards from this site. Ideally print them onto card and cut them up. See if your child can match up the pictures to the words and then use them to play matching games such as snap, pairs etc.

If your child plays any of the games from this site at school, they may wish to [play](http://www.phonicsplay.co.uk/member-only/HelpingMyChild.htm) them at home too. If they are willing, share this with them and encourage them to tell you how they are working things out. See the teaching ideas sheets to get some clues about the types of questions you could ask.

**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.

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](http://www.phonicsplay.co.uk/member-only/HelpingMyChild.htm) ways to praise your child. Iit 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. If you are stuck for ideas have a look at these [Ways to Praise.](http://www.phonicsplay.co.uk/member-only/WaysToPraise.pdf)

**Questions to ask the school**

If you wish to know more about how your child's reading is progressing and how you could help, here are some questions that you could ask your child's class teacher to find out a bit more information. Do bear in mind that class teachers are usually rushed off their feet and have a lot of children to take care of. They may not have all this information at their fingertips. You may need to give them a chance to get back to you. Also, no matter how concerned you are about your child, they will always do best if you and the class teacher are working as a team so try to keep discussions as positive as you can.

How do you teach phonics in this school?

Are you using Letters and Sounds or another phonics programme - if so, which one?

What phonic phase is my child working at?

Is this above, below or the same as the phase that the whole class are being taught at?

What book band are they reading at?

Is this above, below or the same as the average child in the class?

What would you suggest that I do to help my child at home?

**Concerned about your child's progress?**

The initial step should be to go and talk to your child's class teacher. They won't feel like you are bothering them. Teachers are generally very pleased to have parents who are interested and keen to help out at home. Ask them the questions above but also ask them:

Are you concerned about my child's progress with phonics and reading?

Is my child receiving any additional support with their phonics and or reading?

If the teacher is concerned or if you are still concerned, your next step should be to talk to the SENCO (Special Needs Co-ordinator). The class teacher or school office should be able to tell you who this is. Most teachers will be very pleased that you are doing this and may well suggest that this is your next step. Teachers often have to fight very hard to get support for the children in their class and parental support can be very effective.

Explain your concerns to the SENCO and ask if there is anything that they can suggest. They may well suggest just keeping an eye on your child or monitoring them as the first step. Don't worry, they aren't trying to fob you off. Before they can set any balls in motion they need to have collected some evidence about how your child is doing. Arrange with them to meet again when they have found out some more. Then, they may be able to suggest some tests that could be carried out or arrange for your child to have some additional support. If the SENCO and the class teacher both feel that your child does not need support then try to accept their reassurances - it is not in their interest to say that your child doesn't need support when they do. If however, you are still not happy, keep talking to both the class teacher and SENCO and keep raising your concerns (calmly and politely - remember you and your child need to keep working with these people).

In addition, ensure that you are using as many of the ideas as possible above and are reading every single day with your child, in one way or another.

You may feel that you wish to arrange for additional tutoring outside school for your child. This can be a very expensive option. Take great care to ensure that any tutor you choose is fully trained up in how to teach phonics and/or has specialist skills in supporting children who are having difficulties with learning to read. It may be quite hard to find tutors with these skills.