

Information for Parents related to the Teaching of Reading

Beginner readers should be taught four things:

- grapheme–phoneme correspondences (that is, the alphabetic code) in a clearly defined, incremental sequence
- to synthesise (blend) phonemes (sounds) in order all through a word to read it
- to segment words into their constituent phonemes for spelling
- that blending and segmenting are reversible processes.

Phonics is a body of knowledge, skills and understanding that children need in order to master an alphabetic language – English, in our case. Unlike Japanese, for instance, which uses ideograms to represent ideas visually, English records the sounds of the language with an alphabet. It is generally accepted that English has 44 sounds.

The way the 26 letters of the alphabet (singly or in combination) are used to represent the 44 sounds is referred to as the alphabetic code. In the alphabetic code in English:

- a single phoneme can be represented (spelt) in different ways, using one, two, three or four letters. For example, the sound /aw/ can be represented as ‘**or**’, ‘**saw**’, ‘**haul**’, ‘**lore**’, ‘**fraught**’ and ‘**sought**’ one grapheme (that is, a letter or combination of letters) can represent different sounds. For example, the digraph (two letters) ‘ow’ sounds different in ‘**crowd**’ and in ‘**low**’; the four letters combined in ‘ough’ are pronounced differently in ‘**through**’, ‘**rough**’ and ‘**bough**’; the letter ‘c’ represents a /s/ sound at the beginning of ‘circus’ and a /k/ sound in the middle, and so on.

The sounds are not taught in alphabetical order, but in order of usefulness, so that children can start to read and spell simple words as swiftly as possible. Success breeds success. A very common sequence begins by teaching children how to represent each of the following six sounds by a letter (as below):

Sound	Letter
/s/	s

/a/	a
/t/	t
/i/	i
/p/	p
/n/	n

If these sounds are learnt securely and the children are *also* taught to blend sounds together to read whole words, they can then read (and spell) simple vowel-consonant (VC) words such as ‘it’, ‘in’, ‘is’ and ‘at’ and consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words such as ‘sat’, ‘pin’, ‘nip’, ‘net’, ‘tip’. The skills of blending and segmenting

The previous section looked at the alphabetic code, that is, the **knowledge** children need about how the 44 sounds (phonemes) of the English language are represented by one or more letters (graphemes).

This section looks at two essential **skills: blending for reading and segmenting for spelling.**

Blending and segmenting are ‘reversible processes’: that is, if you can blend the sounds together to read a word, you should also be able to identify and break down (segment) the individual sounds in a word you hear to spell it. To spell the word, you need to represent each sound you hear by a letter – or more than one letter.

Before looking at blending and segmenting, here is a brief introduction to phonemes.

Phonemes

A phoneme is the smallest unit of **sound** in a word. It is important that, a child can identify clearly the separate sounds in individual words. You could talk to children about the sounds *they* can hear in words. Listening to the individual sounds in words is a skill needed for spelling, not reading, but if a child can hear individual sounds and the differences between them, she or he is well on the road to reading.

The importance of blending

The skill of blending sounds together needs to be taught directly. Children may be able to say the sound a letter ‘makes’ when shown the letter (for instance, on a flashcard), but this does not necessarily mean that they can

blend individual sounds together to make a whole word. (Letters do not actually ‘make’ sounds: they are just a way of representing that sound in writing.)

In Reception and Year 1 classes, you will often see this teaching being done with the aid of a puppet who is helped by the children to draw the sounds together to make the word. Alternatively, the teacher might refer to a robot who can make only the individual isolated sounds. The teacher might say, for instance: ‘The robot says “/l/-/a/-/m/-/p/”. How would we say it? Let’s put all the sounds together.’

Correct articulation

Correct articulation is vital in helping children to learn to blend sounds together. This means making sure that the sound produced (each individual phoneme) is as precise and accurate as possible and that no additional sounds are added. For instance, the sound /m/ that starts ‘mother’ or is embedded in ‘impress’ needs to sound /mmmm/ and not /muh/. The clearer the sound, the easier it is for a child to blend together (synthesise) the individual sounds to read a word because there are no unnecessary sounds getting in the way.

Segmenting

Segmenting is the reverse of blending. In segmenting to spell a word, the teacher or the child is listening to a whole word, identifying the individual sounds (not letters) that make up the word and choosing a letter or more than one letter to represent each individual sound.

Tricky words

So far we have looked at words that are phonically regular.

Children should also be taught to read words that are not completely phonically regular, often called ‘tricky’ words in phonic schemes. Children need to be taught to read these tricky words on sight, so that they do not have to spend time puzzling them out. You should expect to see teachers regularly helping children to practise their speedy recall of tricky words, often with something as simple as flashcards.

In terms of spelling, children need to remember the tricky parts of a word, that is, the letters that do not match the usual grapheme-phoneme correspondences they have learnt. For example, the word ‘said’ is not phonically regular in that the sound /e/ in the middle of the word is normally written ‘e’ as in ‘bed’ (or sometimes ‘ea’ as in ‘bread’, ‘dread’ or ‘read’ – past tense) and not ‘ai’ as in ‘paid’. However, the sounds at the beginning

and end of 'said' are represented with 's' and 'd', just as one might expect; it is only the middle of the word that is tricky.