



FIRST YEAR AT SCHOOL

WHAT'S PHONICS GOT TO DO WITH READING AND WRITING?

The short answer is: phonic knowledge is important, but it's not the whole story.

Phonics and reading

'Phonics' is the term used to describe the relationship between letters of the alphabet and spoken sounds. We all use phonics when we come across an unfamiliar word and we break it into parts (syllables) or 'sound it out', for example: 'Sh-i-p' or 'Dip-lo-do-cus' was a 'din-o-saur'.

However, if we had to decode every word in that way, we'd never get the full meaning of a story or piece of information.

So, instead, as experienced readers:

- we recognise by sight those words we've met many times
- we predict from the meaning we've gathered so far—'Mother hen went looking for her lost ch ...'; we predict 'chick' is the most likely final word
- we look at the beginning of an unfamiliar word—e.g. 'man-u-fact-ure'; we recognise 'man' and decode the rest.

When a young child is learning to read, we don't ask them to sound out each word, and we don't stop and correct them if they 'get a word wrong'. We encourage them to 'read on' and come back to that word when they've got the sense of the whole sentence. Or, if they get stuck, we tell them the word, re-read the sentence so far and encourage them to finish it. We might make a note to find 'the problem word' in other texts, to build their 'sight vocabulary'. We might ask them to look at the picture, think about what is happening in the book and then see if they know what the word is.

Spelling and writing

Being able to spell words accurately is an important part of communication, but spelling is not easy. In English, a letter can stand for many different sounds. For example, the letter 'c' sounds different in 'cat', 'chair' and 'cent'. So, while it's fun to 'sing the alphabet song', on its own, that won't help a child to learn which letters stand for which sounds in which words.

Effective spellers use five 'strategies' (Topfer & Arendt, 2010).

They focus on:

- sound—'Can I break this word into chunks or sounds?'
- visual cues—'Do I recognise familiar letter patterns in the word', e.g. 'tr-ack', 'b-est'
- the word meaning—'Does the meaning of the word help me to spell it?' e.g. 'bake'/'baker'/'bakery'
- connecting—'Can I think of another word that looks or sounds the same?'
- checking—using words in books, on charts, online.

So, if these are the strategies children will need to become good spellers and writers, we help them by:

- tuning their ear to sounds by saying and reading rhyming words and making up new ones with them—'clickety clack, down the tracks to Uncle Jack's'
- listening for words that start with the same sound in songs and stories—'Sammy seagull's sandals'
- talking about and helping them to write the letters of their name
- clapping the syllables in their name—'pack your bag, Stel-la'
- making alphabet books and asking the child to point to the first letter or listen for the first sound of the word that names an object
- talking about the correct use of upper and lowercase letters when we write messages together—'Dear Dad, we have gone down town'
- involving them in writing lists and emails and getting them to 'sign in' at care or preschool.

When young writers produce a cluster of letters such as 'gdn' for 'garden', we celebrate their success because they are using the dominant sounds to represent a word—they are becoming a speller and a writer!

Good readers and writers have a rich 'library of words', especially descriptive words—'The rusty, red roof looked weary at the end of the long, windy day'. Children build their 'word library' through wonderful conversations and fabulous stories.

Summary

Children need to learn about phonics—the relationship between a letter of the alphabet and the sound it represents—in the contexts where they are used, not as isolated drills. They learn to become effective speakers, readers and writers through conversations, playing with words and sounds and joining in home reading and writing activities.



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