

How to help your child learn to read

If your child has recently started school, you might be wondering how you can help them learn to read at home, or perhaps you are interested in knowing a bit more about what they are learning at school. Most parents of young children were taught to read using a different strategy to the one used today, which is why it can be hard to know what to do for the best. This guide provides some information and advice from a qualified teacher about the current reading strategy in schools.

The way children are taught to read these days is called phonics (or more recently, Letters and Sounds). There are some other useful words you might want to know like phoneme (the sound of each letter) and grapheme (what each letter looks like).

Phonemes (sounds) and graphemes (how it looks) are now taught in a special order, this is because education specialists have worked out this is the best way children learn to read. The phonemes-graphemes are also split into groups called phases. This is to help teachers assess where children are with their phonics.

What differs now from when most of us were children, is the very short sounds that letters make. You may remember being taught “t” as a “ter” sound, now it has a very short and snappy “t” – if you whisper it, it’s easier to make the sound. The two you may find particularly tricky to pronounce are l and n. With the “l” sound, pronounce as you would at the end of “Hull”, more of an “ul” sound. With “n”, don’t be tempted to say “ner”, it’s very much an “n” on its own, like in “Euan”. Another tricky one is “r”, not “rer” as you might think, but more of a growling “rrr” sound. When you say a letter, think how it actually sounds in a word, for example “f” might come out as “fer” but in a word has a very short “f” sound, like in “fluff”. If you think that “f” is said “fer” then this word would become “ferluffer”.

For quite a lot of letters, there is the temptation to put an “er” on the end, “h”, “j”, “t” being just a few examples. It’s really important though that you keep the sounds really short, because if you think about it, when children are blending (which means putting the sounds together to make words), it won’t work if all the letters end with an “er” sound. Think of “cat”, with the way I was taught as a child it would make sense to pronounce it “ceratter”, whereas with the short whispered sounds it’s far easier to blend letters.

The vowel sounds (a, e, i, o, and u) can be taught as you normally say them (a as in apple, e as in elephant, i as in igloo, u as in under, o as in orange), however there are some exceptions (e.g. child) but these will be addressed in school later on. There is also a list of tricky words that do not follow the normal pronunciation of other words.

Here is the order in which the letters are taught, and the phases:-

Phase 1

- 1) Tuning in to sounds
- 2) Listening and remembering sounds
- 3) Talking about sounds

(so basically being aware that words are made of graphemes and phonemes).

- 4) Orally sounding out words to identify and spell them.
- 5) Hearing words that start and end with the same sounds.

Phase 2

Learning which letter makes which sound (one set taught per week):

Set 1: s a t p

Set 2: i n m d

Set 3: g o c k

Set 4: ck e u r

Set 5: h b f, ff l, ll ss

Phase 3

Set 6: j v w x

Set 7: y z, zz qu

Ch, sh th ng ai ee igh oa oo ar or ur ow oi ear air ure er

Phase 4

No new graphemes

Practicing all the graphemes and blending them together to make words. This phase includes learning to read and spell longer words

Phase 5

New graphemes:

Ay(day) ou(out) ie(tie) ea(east) oy (boy) ir(girl) ue(blue) aw(saw) wh(when) ph(photo)
ew(new) oe(toe) au(Paul)

Split digraphs (where the sound is split by another letter): a-e(make) e-e(these) i-e(like) o-e(home) u-e(rule)

New pronunciations for known letters:

l(fin, find), o(hot, cold), c(cat, cent), g(got, giant), u(but, put(in south of England),
ow(cow,blow), ie(tie, field), ea(eat, bread), er(farmer, her), a(hat, what), y(yes, by, very),
ch(chin, school, chef), ou(out, shoulder, could, you).

