

Understanding phonics: a helpful guide for families, parents and carers

Reading is a foundational life skill and a source of pleasure and wonder.

It is one of the most important skills children learn and the teaching of **phonics** plays an important role in helping them become confident, fluent readers.

This guide will help you understand what phonics is, why it is important in learning to read, and how children can be supported at home to develop their awareness of sounds, and of the relationships between sounds and letters.

What is phonics?

Phonics includes linking sounds (called 'phonemes') to their corresponding letters (called 'graphemes'). Students read words by recognising the relationships between written symbols and their corresponding sounds.

Phonics is one of 6 components that make up a comprehensive reading program.

The other components are:

Oral language	Knowing and using spoken words to express knowledge, ideas and emotions
Phonemic awareness	The knowledge of sounds (phonemes)
Vocabulary	Understanding words in isolation and in context
Fluency	Reading accurately and at an appropriate rate with expression
Comprehension	Making meaning from text which includes developing knowledge of grammar

These are the foundational skills that have a reciprocal relationship and are all necessary to enable students to independently read and respond to increasingly complex fiction and non-fiction texts.

Why is phonics instruction important?

Research and evidence show that phonics instruction is a highly effective way to teach children to read. It helps them develop **decoding skills** (translating printed words into speech), which assist in reading unfamiliar words. Phonics gives many children the tools to figure out new words and understand spelling patterns, building their reading fluency and comprehension.

How is phonics taught in schools?

The key elements of phonics are:

- 1. Phonemes:** the smallest units of sound in speech (e.g., the sound /k/ in 'cat').
- 2. Graphemes:** the letters, or groups of letters, that represent these sounds (e.g., the letter 'c' in 'cat').
- 3. Blending:** combining individual sounds together to read a word (e.g., /c/ /a/ /t/ = 'cat').
- 4. Segmenting:** breaking down words into their individual sounds to spell them (e.g., chat = /ch/a/t).

Phonics is taught through a structured, sequential approach where children learn the simplest sounds (such as /s/, /a/, and /t/ and gradually move to more complex sound-letter patterns (such as /ee/, as in the sound in the word 'bee' and /oa/ as in the sound in the word 'cloak'. This is known as teaching **using a systematic, synthetic phonics** approach. In simple terms, children learn different sounds, then practice blending sounds together to read words.

The Academy is grateful to Parents Victoria for their expert advice in producing this guide



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What might a phonics lesson at school look like?

Your child's teacher will use a range of ways to engage your child in a lesson on phonics. A typical lesson might include various combinations of the following and other methods:

Daily practice	This incorporates short, focused lessons on the key elements of phonics outlined above, that build on previous learning.
Reading	Students practice reading a variety of books that include words with sounds that the students have been taught.
Dictation	The teacher reads a sentence that includes taught sounds or spelling patterns aloud and students practice spelling and writing the sentence.
Multisensory methods	Phonics is often taught using visual (sight) auditory (hearing), and tactile (touching) methods (e.g., saying sounds, tracing letters).

How can families support phonics learning at home?

Learning to read takes time, encouragement and support, and each young person progresses at their own pace. It's important to celebrate small achievements in progress, and encourage children to keep trying, even when it's challenging for them.

When children enjoy learning, they are more likely to stay motivated, which helps them develop a strong foundation in reading.

Making phonics practice fun is key to keeping children engaged and motivated. Here are some suggested engaging activities to support phonics development.

Activities

At the end of this printout, there's a list of phonics activities to stick on the wall and practice with your kids.

What if my child is struggling with phonics?

If your child is having difficulty, speak with their teacher. Some children need extra practice or a more individualised approach.

How long does phonics instruction last?

Formal phonics instruction typically begins in Early Childhood education and continues until children can read fluently. It intensifies from Foundation to around Year 2 or 3, but some children may need more time. Families can help by engaging in any of the activities listed in this guide before or during formal instruction.

Further reading

Cairney, T. (2024). Literacy, families and Learning. Blogspot.com. <https://trevorcairney.blogspot.com/search/label/phonics>

Castles, A., Parrila, R., &Kohonen, S. (2024). What is phonics and why is it used to teach reading? The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/what-is-phonics-and-why-is-it-used-to-teach-reading-232593>

Independent Schools Victoria. (2024). Phonics: A guide for parents. The Parents Website. https://theparentswebsite.com.au/phonics-a-guide-for-parents/#msdynttrid=OyEUAL8MGYz82TdLD2Wj48F9MaE3gSOEED2_Ka9wSSo

Literacy Hub. (2023). The big six of literacy: A guide for families. <https://www.literacyhub.edu.au/for-families/the-big-six-of-literacy-a-guide-for-families/>

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Learning phonics at home

Print this list out and stick it on the wall or the fridge, so you can practice phonics with your kids at home.

<p>Read together</p> <p>Choose books that interest your child and spend time reading aloud together.</p>	<p>Phonics bingo</p> <p>Create bingo cards with letters, sounds, or words. As you call out the sound (phoneme) or word, children mark it off the corresponding card.</p>	<p>Memory games</p> <p>Use flashcards with letters and images that start with the corresponding sounds on them. Have children turn them over and try to find matching pairs of letters and images e.g. Cc and cat.</p>	<p>I spy</p> <p>Play 'I spy' focusing on sounds and letters. For example, 'I spy with my little eye something that begins with the sound /b/.'</p>
<p>Sand or salt trays</p> <p>Encourage children to trace letters in sand or salt trays while saying the sound.</p>	<p>Playdough letters</p> <p>Encourage children to form letters with playdough and then say the corresponding sound as they make each letter. This can be extended by using the letters to form words and sound them out.</p>	<p>Hopscotch with sounds</p> <p>Draw a hopscotch grid outside, with each square containing a letter. Children hop on the squares and say the corresponding sound of that letter aloud, reinforcing learning with movement.</p>	<p>Phonics songs</p> <p>Find fun phonics songs online that help children remember sounds through repetition and music.</p>
<p>Nursery rhymes and poems</p> <p>Rhyming helps children recognise sound patterns. Encourage them to point out rhyming words and identify the sounds and letters that the rhyming words share.</p>	<p>Sound hunt</p> <p>Ask children to find objects around the house or classroom that start with a certain sound or letter. For example, 'Can you find something that starts with /s/?'</p>	<p>Word hunt</p> <p>Hide cards with letters or words around the room, and have children search for and read them out aloud as they find them.</p>	<p>Letter collage</p> <p>Have children cut out pictures from magazines of items that start with a specific sound. They can create a collage for each letter sound.</p>
<p>Phonics jump</p> <p>Write letters on pieces of paper, place them on the floor, and have children jump to the correct sound as you call it out.</p>	<p>Sound labels</p> <p>Label objects around the house or classroom with their phonemes (sounds). For example, place a label on the door with the sound '/d/,' and encourage children to sound it out each time they pass by.</p>	<p>Sound of the day/week</p> <p>Make one sound (phoneme) the 'sound of the day' or 'sound of the week' and encourage children to listen for it in conversation, TV shows, or books over that time period.</p>	<p>Make your own</p> <p>Have fun inventing activities together using sounds and words.</p>

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