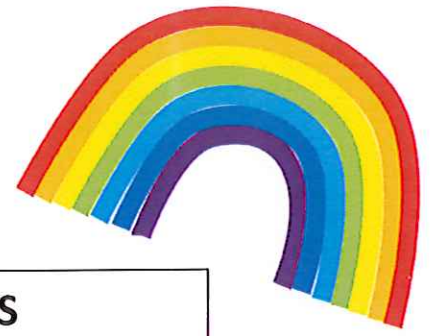


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THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO PHONICS

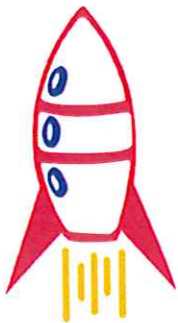
It's a tried-and-tested system for teaching reading and spelling, but for most parents of new school starters phonics is a bit of a mystery. Lucy Dimbylow explains the basics you need to know.

Ever heard of a phoneme? What about a grapheme or a digraph? Chances are you've never encountered these terms before, but all that is about to change. One of the main focuses of the Foundation Stage is phonics, and from the moment your child starts school they'll begin learning the sounds that pave the way for reading and spelling. It's all very different from how you were taught, but it works: research shows that after a year of phonics teaching, children are able to achieve a reading age 11 months ahead of their actual age.

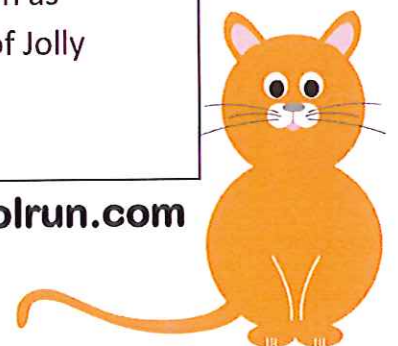
So what is phonics all about?

Phonics involves learning the sounds of the English language, of which there are around 44. Some sounds are represented by single letters, such as 'a' as in 'apple', while others are represented by groups of two or more letters, like 'ay' as in 'day'. A phoneme is the sound itself, and a grapheme is the letter or group of letters that represents it.

Once your child has learnt an initial bank of letter and sound relationships, they can begin to decode written words by saying each sound aloud and 'blending' them together. For example, the word 'ship' contains three separate sounds – 'sh', 'i' and 'p'. By saying them in order, your child will be able to hear the whole word. 'This process of blending the individual sounds to decode a word is known as synthetic phonics,' explains Chris Jolly, Managing Director of Jolly Learning, which publishes the [Jolly Phonics](#) scheme.

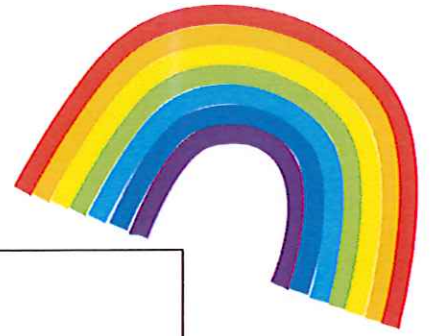


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Why does it work?

Phonics provides children with a method for decoding the vast majority of English words. This is in contrast to the old-fashioned approach of memorising words based on their shape or initial letter. 'Children learn to read much faster if they can decode words themselves rather than relying on memory,' explains Chris.

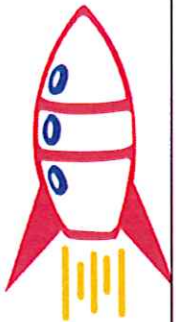
Most synthetic phonics programmes use mnemonics to help children learn the sounds. In Jolly Phonics, children learn actions alongside sounds; for instance, the sound 'd' is represented by making drumming motions. Other programmes have different memory aids, such as pictures.

Synthetic phonics also rejects the idea that many English words are irregular. 'Now, we teach children alternative spellings for the same sound – such as 'ee' and 'ea' – which means they can read and write most of the words in the English language,' Chris says. There is a small bank of so-called 'tricky words', including common words like 'their', 'who' and 'where', but these are drip-fed throughout phonics teaching rather than memorised all in one go.

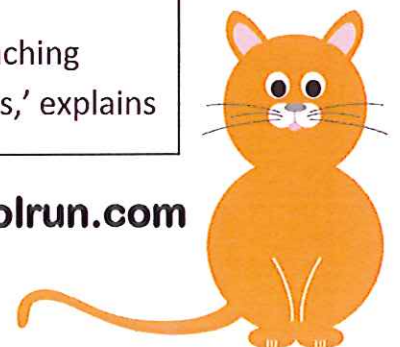
What schemes are used to teach phonics?

The basic model for teaching phonics in primary schools is Letters and Sounds, a free programme published by the Department for Education and Skills in 2007. It aims to build children's reading, speaking and spelling skills through phonics, starting at age four plus and with the aim of all children being fluent readers by seven.

'While Letters and Sounds provides detailed guidance for teaching phonics, it doesn't include teaching aids or learning resources,' explains



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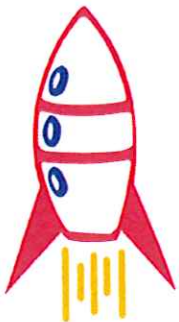
Debbie Hepplewhite, author of the [Phonics International](#) scheme and consultant for [Oxford Reading Tree](#) Floppy's Phonics Sounds and Letters programme. Some teachers devise their own resources, but most schools use a commercial phonics scheme in the classroom. These schemes include Jolly Phonics, Floppy's Phonics, Oxford Reading Tree (comprising ranges of fiction and non-fiction books including Biff, Chip and Kipper stories and Songbirds), [Big Cat Phonics](#) and [Read Write Inc.](#)

Although the programmes differ slightly, for example in the mnemonics and resources used, they all employ the same basic principles, and many schools use elements from more than one scheme – for example, teaching Jolly Phonics actions alongside Oxford Reading Tree books.

What is taught when?

The government's Letters and Sounds programme sets out six phases for learning phonics, starting in Nursery and ideally finishing by the end of Year One, although some children may need extra phonics teaching into Year Two. These are:

- **Phase one (Nursery/Reception):** developing an awareness of sound, such as environmental sounds, rhythm and rhyme.
- **Phase two (Reception):** learning sounds for 19 letters of the alphabet, starting with the most common (s, a, t, i, p and n), and beginning to segment and blend words.
- **Phase three (Reception):** learning sounds for the remaining seven letters of the alphabet, and some two-letter graphemes. On completion of this phase, children are said to have learnt the 'simple code' and know one grapheme for each phoneme in the English language.



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- **Phase four (Reception):** learning to blend and segment longer words including those with adjacent consonants, like 'swim'.
- **Phase five (Year One):** learning more graphemes for the phonemes which children already know, and different ways of pronouncing the graphemes that they have learnt. This is known as the 'complex code'.
- **Phase six (Year One):** working on spelling.

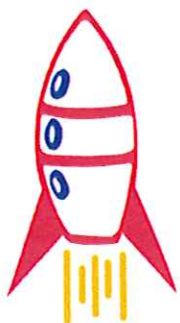
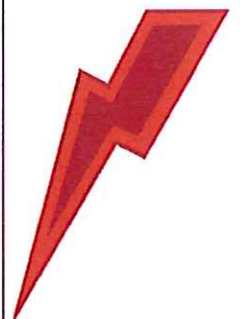
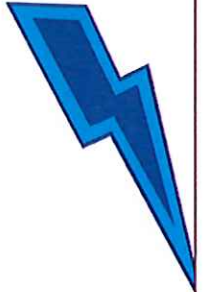
How is phonics teaching different to how reading was taught in previous generations?

In the past, phonics teaching was combined with other strategies. For example, children were taught to recognise common words by sight, rather than by sounding out and blending. 'This system would fail some children straight away, as not all manage to learn words by their shape,' says Debbie.

Children were also encouraged to use other clues to work out unfamiliar words, such as making a guess based on the first few letters or by connecting the word with the pictures on the page. 'Nowadays, guesswork is discouraged, because learning the alphabetic code removes the need for guessing,' Debbie explains. 'If a child can't decode a word, it's better to model how to sound it out and blend it, or, if they really can't grasp it, tell them the word.'

What's all this about a phonics test for Year One children?

From 2012, the government is introducing a new 'phonics screening check'. Year One children will be asked to read a mix of 40 decodable real words and non-words with their teacher. It should take around two to three minutes per child. The check is designed to ensure that



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schools are teaching phonics effectively, and to identify children who need extra support.

What guidance can you expect from your child's teacher?

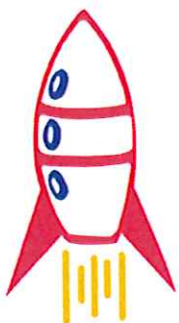
'Schools should provide lots of information and support for parents to help their children,' says Debbie. It's good practice for schools to hold an information session early in the Reception year to explain the basics of synthetic phonics.

One golden rule is to ensure that you pronounce phonemes correctly when you're helping your child sound out words. For example, the letter M should be sounded as 'mmm', not 'muh', and V is 'vvv' rather than 'vuh'. If you're not sure how to say the sounds, there's a free audio guide at

<http://www.oxfordowl.co.uk/question/index/3>.

If your child is struggling with the books he brings home, speak to his teacher. 'To read independently, children have to be able to decode the words on the page, so reading books should be closely matched to your child's current knowledge of phonics,' says Debbie.

And the one piece of advice that all teachers agree on? 'As well as listening to your child read, read to him, and talk to him about anything and everything,' Debbie advises. 'The more you read and talk, the more you'll help his awareness of phonics while building up his vocabulary and knowledge of the world.'

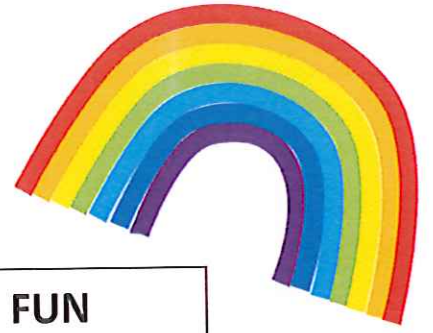


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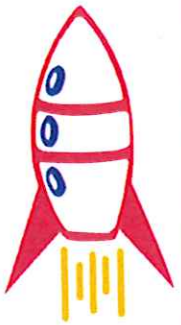
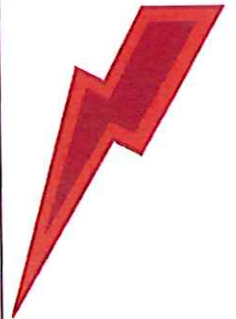
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10 WAYS TO MAKE PHONICS LEARNING FUN

Whatever you're teaching your child, it's great to find 'real life' opportunities to help give their learning meaning. Teacher and education writer Phoebe Doyle suggests ten ways to make phonics part of your child's everyday life.

1. **Sound of the day.** Decide together on a sound to focus on during the day. Look out for objects with that sound in and point them out to each other. Record them in a list as you spot them and count them up at the end of the day, always trying to get a new highest score by adding more words to the list than on previous days.
2. **Post-it sounds.** Write whatever sounds you are working on onto five Post-it notes. Your child can go around your home or garden finding objects that contain that sound and marking them with the Post-its.
3. **Make words from newspaper headlines.** This is a bit like writing ransom notes! Cut out some headlines from newspapers (obviously ensuring they are suitable for your child to read – local newspapers can be a safer bet!). Ask your child to cut out some sounds, remembering that groups of letters such as 'ch' 'sh' 'igh' 'ar' 'oa' are usually one sound. Once they have plenty of sounds they can make words using the sounds and stick them onto a large sheet of paper.
4. **'I spy' in the supermarket.** Liven up your weekly wander around the aisles with a competition to spot the most items in a supermarket beginning with a certain letter or sound. The



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winner is the player who finds the most; if just one person is playing they can aim to find ten.

5. **Sound buckets.** Arm yourself with several seaside buckets and label each one with a sound you've been working on. Ask your child to find objects around the house which contain the sound and pop them into their bucket to show you.
6. **Let them eat cake!** There's nothing like cake to boost motivation! Make some cupcakes with your child and ice some sounds on the top with icing pens (digestive or Rich Tea biscuits work well as a no-baking alternative). Arrange them on a large plate or tray and try to make words using the cakes. Of course the reward for this activity is in the eating! Once your child's icing skills are more refined they could write CVC (consonant vowel consonant) or CCVC (consonant consonant vowel consonant) words on them too.
7. **Jewellery making.** Buy some lettered beads and threads to make bracelets. Encourage your child to make gifts for friends and family including either their name or words that mean something to them, such as their favourite animal or colour. They can use their phonic skills to help them with the spellings.
8. **There are some sounds at the bottom of my garden...** Bury some plastic letters in the garden or a sandpit. Encourage your child to dig them out, say the sound they make, and form into words once they've excavated enough.
9. **Cookie monster!** Make cookie dough and cut it out using letter cookie cutters. Talk about the sound the letters make as you work. Once the cookies are cooked and cooled, arrange them to make words or even simple sentences. Then enjoy munching

