Features of phonics for reading and spelling

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If your child attends a pre-school or school, you will already know how important ‘phonics’ is regarded to support the teaching of reading and spelling nowadays.

What you may not realise is that the English alphabetic code, with its 44 smallest sounds of speech and 200+ letters and letter groups is the most complex alphabetic code in the world. Historically, the teaching profession largely abandoned the teaching of phonics replacing it with other methods such as introducing children to ‘real books’ to entice children to pick up reading, or building up recognition of individual words over time, word-by-word, through flash cards and reading scheme books. The problem with trying to ‘pick up’ reading through exposure to books, or whole-word learning, is that there are many thousands of English words in literature – and not all children can recall a bank of words well enough or at all.

This has resulted in an alarming percentage growing bank of words not well enough or at all.

So, what are the features of the modern-day Systematic Synthetic Phonics approach to reading?

Knowledge:

Teach the KNOWLEDGE of the alphabetic code (the letters and sounds such as s as in snake, sh as in sheep, -ng as in ring, ee as in eel, -ay as in tray). There are 44 sounds but most have many spelling alternatives. At first mainly one spelling is taught for each sound (‘ai’) and further spellings will be taught later (ay, e-ay, ey, ey, ey).

Some letters and letter groups also have alternative pronunciations which need to be taught – so, for example, the letter group ee is code for the /i:/ sound as in eat, the /ai/ sound as in head, and the /ai/ sound as in break. The alphabetic code is reversible: from print-to-sound for reading purposes and from sound-to-print for spelling purposes.

Free charts to assist with this can be found at www.alphabeticcodecharts.com

Apply and extend:

As the children build up their alphabetic code knowledge (the letters and corresponding sounds), they practise their basic skills of reading, spelling and handwriting.

Common words which are tricky, unusual or useful (but the code has not yet been taught) are introduced steadily and sensibly throughout a phonics programme and the tricky or unusual parts of the words are pointed out specifically to the children (and often provided on posters for wall display). This includes words such as:

- are
- one
- was
- to
- you
- again
- the
- of
- said
- two
- birth
- squirt
- bird
- third
- firm
- shirt
- stir
- thirsty

Three core skills:

1. Teach the SKILL of ‘sounding out and blending the sounds’. Read all through the word, from left to right, to decode. The first step is to scan, or glance, through the printed word to recognise any letter groups in the word, such as ‘sh’ or ‘ae’.

2. Teach the SKILL of splitting up the spoken word from beginning to end to identify the sounds. Say the word very slowly and naturally and the sounds will ‘pop out’, then allot the letters or letter groups which are code for those sounds for encoding/spelling the word.

3. Teach the SKILL of holding the pencil correctly with tripod grip and how to form the letters correctly (lower case and capital letters) on writing lines.

With phonics, say the letter group as its ‘sound’ when handwriting, so sh is written whilst saying (or thinking) the sound /sh/ as in sheep.

To find more information visit our website at www.phonicsinternational.com

Three free posters with practical details of the Phonics Routines are available: www.phonicsinternational.com/FR_PI_Posters_for_phonics_routines.pdf