Teaching your kids to read using synthetic phonics

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Education, education, education

We all want the best for our children. More than ever we recognise that a successful education is the key to their future. Jobs for those who have been less successful at school are ever more scarce. Our young people today face the challenge of competing for work against people from all over the world, whilst having to find the money to pay the cost-of-living in New York, London, Montreal or Sydney.

More than ever as parents we feel the need to help them get off to a good start in life. We know that reading is a foundation stone for success in education.

How best to teach reading?

Governments too recognise the need to improve educational standards. As a result, there has been a passionate debate in the past about how best to teach reading. Often though this has been the noise of people fiercely agreeing. They’ve just not always listened well enough to realise that.

Broadly though most would agree that reading requires two specific skills:

1 Turning letters on the page into words.

2 Understanding what the words mean.

Your child spends the first few years of their life trying to understand what the spoken word means. Improving their comprehension is still very important, but the key change here is they need to turn letters on the page into words.

Why is English spelling so tricky?

If you were to design English from scratch, you’d do so very differently to make reading and spelling much more straightforward. There’s 44 distinct sounds (phonemes) in English that are used to make up words. Yet, there’s only 26 letters in the alphabet to represent them.

The alphabet pre-dates English, and was not invented nor changed to support it.

Of course, English was not designed, it rather emerged as an amalgam of the different languages of the successive waves of invaders of early England. It’s evolved over time and picked up influences from other languages.

This colourful history complicates the challenge of reading and writing English as the language is not uniform in the way words are spelled. There was a noble attempt in the US to simplify the language, resulting in some words being spelled more simply in American English than British English (so colourful became colorful). It didn’t get very far though.

How words are spelled in English is complicated. If your child finds reading and spelling difficult, it’s not their fault.
So, how are we (as adults) able to read when we don’t know our letter sounds? Well, quite simply, we’ve learned through years of practise to read thousands of words by sight – at a glance. We don’t need to work out what sounds the letters in the word make, because we know what the word is just by looking at it. At that rare time we come across a new word, we’re able to compare it to the thousands of words we already know.

A child starting to learn to read doesn’t know any words by sight - every word is new – and they have nothing to compare against. Of course, you could try to teach them thousands of word individually... But, there’s a quicker, better, smarter way.
In recent years, an approach called synthetic phonics has received wide support and been endorsed by government bodies in different countries. This adoption has been spurred on by some well-documented research on its success as a teaching method.

Synthetic phonics is a method of teaching reading where the child learns some letter sounds and then practises “blending” these sounds together to make a word. So, they learn the sounds made by “i” and “t”, and then put them together to make “it”. Children are thrilled when they read a word like this. They feel great satisfaction from working out the answer. It’s like solving a puzzle. (As a side note, the “synthetic” in synthetic phonics refers to the act of synthesising - combining - the letter sounds together to make the word).

Synthetic phonics also helps children with spelling. To spell a word, they:

- break it down into its different sounds (called segmenting)
- write the letters that make those sounds.

Teaching the letter names later

One of the things that can surprise parents is that synthetic phonics prioritises learning letter sounds, above letter names. Essentially this is because synthetic phonics is about helping children learn to read as quickly as possible. Synthetic phonics is based upon a set of evidence-based principles - ideas that have been tested and found to work.

If children try to learn their letter names at the same time as their letter sounds, this doubles how much they need to learn. Therefore it will increase how long it takes them to learn their letter sounds and slow down the speed with which they learn to read. It’s the speed with which they learn to read that is one of the big motivating factors for children using synthetic phonics.

Also, some children become confused, stating the letter name when they should be giving the letter sound. To read, they need to learn the letter sounds, and practise blending them together to make words.

Typically, practitioners and schemes - including the UK’s National Curriculum - advise learning letter names later. Children often enjoy learning their letter names by singing the alphabet song.

If a system teaches letter names and letter sounds together this can often be a sign that it doesn’t follow other principles of synthetic phonics. That is, it does not follow the evidence based principles that have been found to work.

Often, as parents who were never taught phonics, our temptation is to teach our children what we do know, letter names. Unfortunately, this won’t help them learn to read and it may confuse them.
Teaching reading and writing together

Given synthetic phonics helps with reading and spelling, it makes sense to teach reading and writing together. So, teach a child how to write each letter sound as they learn the sound it makes.

Education research has also shown the benefits of teaching children following a multi-sensory approach. Engaging more than one sense at a time when teaching a child helps them learn faster. Thus getting them to write engages the kinaesthetic (tactile) sense and having them say the sound at the same time engages their audio sense.

Teaching sounds in small groups

Children are typically taught a small group of sounds together, so they can move on quickly to the real fun of reading some simple words.

This allows them early practise of blending sounds together to make words. Children can see the point of learning their letter sounds when they have the thrill of being able to read a word made from those letter sounds.

Teaching the most frequently-used sounds first

To help children read as many simple, well-known words as quickly as possible, children are taught the most frequently-used sounds for these words first.

Why not learn letter sounds in alphabetical order?

Parents often expect their children will learn their letter sounds in alphabetical order. However, letters in the alphabet are not ordered by how frequently children will use them. Thus if a child learned their sounds in alphabetical order, they would learn some of the sounds they need to read common words much later.

It also has other problems too. For instance, “q” isn’t a letter sound. It’s only ever used in words as part of “qu”. There’s also, the b and d issue. Children often write letters and numbers backwards when they first learn to write. Many children therefore confuse “b” and “d”. An obvious strategy to mitigate against this is to teach them at different times. Something that doesn’t come easily if you teach in alphabetical order.

Remember that the alphabet, and by extension, the order of the alphabet, were not invented for English. Teaching children letter sounds in alphabetical order is not going to help them learn to read as fast as teaching them letter sounds in the optimal order for learning to read.

Learning letter sounds in alphabetical order is not a very effective way to teach alphabetical order either. An activity where children practise sorting letters into the correct order is likely to be more productive. Or, singing “the abc song”.

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Making progress

Once they’ve learned the first group (“s”, “a”, “t”, “p”, “i”, “n”), they can blend them together to sound out and read more than a dozen simple words such as “sat” and “it”.

If you see one of the words in a book or newspaper, ask them to see if they can read it. This will build their confidence and help them to recognise the letters in different fonts. Once they are able to recognise all of the first six letter sounds, they’re ready to move on to the next set.

As they progress onto different sets of sounds, they’ll find that:

- the number of words they can read grows exponentially;
- some sounds are represented by two letters (e.g. “sh” in “should” and “ch” in “chair”);
- some letters can be used to represent a different sound depending on the word they are used in; and
- some words just don’t follow the normal rules (they’re often referred to as “tricky words”)

In the early stages of reading, children should focus on trying to sound out CVC words (consonant-vowel-consonant) words. Otherwise the memory load of trying to remember the letter sounds they’ve already worked out is too much. Later, they can progress to CVCC words. Only much later, should they try to tackle multisyllabic words.

What sort of letters should they learn first?

Lowercase?

Uppercase?

Cursive?

Should they learn lowercase, uppercase or cursive (joined-up) letters first? It does vary between schools in some countries what children are taught first. Although in England and Wales, the National Curriculum ensures it’s lowercase.

We’d make two arguments for learning lowercase letters first:

1. Children read faster when they recognise the shapes of words. This is harder to do if the words are WRITTEN IN UPPERCASE rather than lowercase.
2. The vast majority of letters are normally written in lowercase in books and on the Internet. Some children’s books use just lowercase letters only moving onto uppercase when children are ready to learn basic grammar such as sentences beginning with a capital letter.
Putting letter sounds to use - reading their first books

Of course, the point of reading is to understand what the text is saying. A typical four-year-old already knows thousands of words, they just can’t read them yet. You want to find a reading scheme that not only uses words the child knows, but words that only contain the letter sounds they know. Thus words they can sound out even if they have not read them before.

Unfortunately, in English some very common words like “the” and “my” do not follow the common grapheme-to-phoneme mapping your child has been learning. Your child won’t be able to sound them out. You want to choose storybooks that use the minimum of these words, and as much as possible only introduce words after the child has learned their less common grapheme-to-phoneme mappings. Otherwise, they won’t be able to sound out and read the words and they’ll lose confidence and start to guess rather than applying their hard-won letter sound knowledge.

With the right reading scheme, when your child come across a new word, they can work it out by sounding it out and blending the sounds together. They’ll be so pleased when they sound a word out and discover what it is.

You should hit a virtuous circle, where they enjoy reading because they can work out new words, and want to practise their letter sounds so they can read even more words.

Why is 'q' not taught as one of the sounds?

The alphabet pre-dates English by something like 3,000 years. It was not adapted or altered for English. There are therefore mis-matches between English and the alphabet.

One of these is that “q” does not correspond on its own to a sound in the English language. It’s only ever used in English as part of “qu”.

Helping children to learn faster

To maximise the ease with which different children learn something like phonics, it is good to use an approach that makes use of several of their senses. Thus if you can engage their eyes, ears and hands, they’re likely to concentrate better than if they are just listening or just watching.
Understanding what the words mean

Talk to them about the story as they read it. What’s happened so far, what do they think might happen next and about the characters. This will help your child to comprehend the meaning of the story. Bear in mind that initially the effort of reading new words, will make it hard for them also to understand the text. They might need to read it several times.

Ideally, look for storybooks that ask questions and check your child’s understanding and reading.

It’s also invaluable for you to read to them, as then they can focus just on understanding the story. Saving them the effort of reading for themselves makes it easier for them to grasp what’s happening. You can also read more interesting stories to them where the storyline is more involved. As an adult, you’ll put expression into your voice that helps convey the meaning. Listening to you will help them develop this skill.

Different children like different types of books. Some children may prefer non-fiction books with lots of facts about animals, others may prefer fiction. The key is that they learn to enjoy reading. As they get older, you can encourage them to try other types of books.

Why many popular reading series will undermine your child’s confidence in reading.

Now, here’s a dirty reading industry secret. Many popular children’s reading books were written before synthetic phonics became mandated by governments. These books weren’t written to be part of a phonics reading scheme even if they’ve now have had the phonics label stuck on.

Sometimes they are sold as levelled reading books. The levelling is normally in terms of comprehension, but may not take into account what level your child is on in terms of learning letter sounds.

Many of them introduce a lot of words early on that your child won’t be able to sound out, and they don’t even warn your child that is the case. Some children lose faith in their ability to read using the letter sounds they’ve learned, and start resorting to guessing. They come to see themselves as bad readers.

So, how do you find a good reading scheme that will help build your child’s phonics skill and confidence? Look for reading series that say they have decodeable storybooks.

Decodeable books are ones that just use words that can be read using the letter sounds that follow the common grapheme-to-phoneme mappings. You will also want to find a reading scheme where the books introduce new letter sounds in the order that your child is learning them.

A good decodeable book series will also highlight when it does use a tricky word that your child won’t be able to sound out, so your child will know they need help with that word. A good decodeable book series won’t undermine your children’s confidence in reading.

Sometimes schools who have moved over to teaching using phonics, can’t afford to buy new decodeable reading books that support learning to read using phonics. Unfortunately, instead the child gets given levelled books that introduce words on the wrong phonics level for your child.
## Appendix – Your insider’s guide to the language of reading and phonics

There’s a set of terms used in phonics that you may come across. Understanding these terms will give you an in-depth understanding of how synthetic phonics works and some of the complications.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>What it means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>phoneme</td>
<td>The sound. There are 44 different sounds (phonemes) used in English. Most words consist of several sounds. A word like “bat” is made up of three short sounds.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There’s a special written representation for phonemes that you may see used. In this representation, the sounds in “bat” would be represented as /b/ /a/ /t/. The slashes around the letter show that we mean the phoneme rather than the letter.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>As another example, the phoneme (sound) /k/ is used both at the start of “kit” and “cat”. Note that “kit” and “cat” actually start with the same phoneme although a different letter is used to represent that phoneme in these words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grapheme</td>
<td>The letters that represent a particular phoneme (sound). Some graphemes are just one letter, e.g. “a”. Other graphemes are multi-letter graphemes e.g. “ch” in chair.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some graphemes are used to represent more than one phoneme. That is the same letters can make a different sound depending on the word they are used in. For instance, the multi-letter grapheme “oo” makes a certain sound in words like “too” and “moo”.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>It makes a different sound in words like “good” and “look”. This difference can seem quite subtle to spot at first, but there is one.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Conversely, different graphemes can be used to represent the same phoneme. For instance, “c”, “k” and “ck” are all used to make the same sound - /k/. Typically though “ck” is only used at the end of words (e.g. clock).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>What it means</td>
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<tr>
<td>digraph</td>
<td>A two-letter grapheme that represents a phoneme e.g. “ch” in chair, “sh” in show and “ck” in tick. There’s also three-letter graphemes called trigraphs e.g. “air” in chair.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| blending | Blending is reading a word you don’t recognise by using your knowledge of letter sounds. It consists of three steps:  
1. Breaking down a written word into its different graphemes. For instance, “cat” is “c - a - t” and “boss” is “b - o - ss”. “ss” is a two letter grapheme (digraph) that makes the same sound as “s”.  
2. Saying the phoneme (sound) for each grapheme in quick succession.  
3. Listening to what you just said to see if it sounds like a word you know. It won’t always sound exactly the same, you’re after a close rather than perfect match. Your child can use the context of the story to help them figure it out.  
Blending is a skill that gets easier the more children practise it. |
| segmenting | Segmenting is spelling a word by using your knowledge of phonics. It’s like the reverse of blending.  
1. Listen to a spoken word. Say it slowly to break it down into the individual sounds (phonemes) that make it up.  
2. For each phoneme (sound), think about the graphemes (letters) that can be used to represent it. As you’ll see elsewhere there may be several different graphemes that are used to represent one phoneme. If that’s the case, just pick one for now.  
3. Write out the graphemes you’ve chosen for each sound. Does the word look like right? If you had a phoneme that could be represented by more than one grapheme then try the other grapheme.  
For instance, if the last sound could be “s” or “ss”, you might remember that often “ss” is often used at the end of the word. |
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Term</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>grapheme to phoneme mappings</td>
<td>The specific letters (grapheme) that map to specific sound (phoneme).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>letter sounds</td>
<td>An ordered set of letters used to represent the basic speech sounds of a language (phonemes).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>decodeable words</td>
<td>Words that can be decoded (broken down) using common grapheme-to-phoneme mappings. For example, “cat” breaks down into /c/ /a/ /t/.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tricky words</td>
<td>Words that contain an unusual grapheme-to-phoneme mapping. Some common words don’t follow the normal rules for mapping graphemes-to-phonemes for all their graphemes. Instead, they use a mapping that’s quite rare for at least one of their graphemes. For instance, “my”, the grapheme “m” here corresponds to its normal “mmm” sound. However, normally the grapheme “y” corresponds to the /y/ sound as used at the start of a word like “yet”. It can though also make the long vowel sound for i (/I/). The same sound as the letter name. This is what it does for “my”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CVC words</td>
<td>CVC words are consonant-vowel-consonant words like “cat” and “dad”. There also CVCC words such as “fact”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| split digraphs               | Split digraphs are complicated, and typically tackled quite late on in phonics. Examples are words such as “cake” and “made”. Literally, the digraph has been split by a consonant. The digraph /ae/ makes the long vowel sound /A/. The consonant /k/, although it is in the middle splitting the digraph, is actually sounded out at the end of the word. Thus “cake” is sounded out as /c/ /ae/ /k/.
| multisyllabic                | Multisyllabic words are words made up of multiple syllables. “Piano” is an example of a two-syllable word. You can break multisyllabic words apart into their syllables when sounding them out. When you say a multisyllabic word, there’s a brief pause between each syllable. |
PocketPhonics Stories

PocketPhonics Stories is the award-winning app that follows the synthetic phonics approach outlined in this guide. It was rated by Balefire Labs as one of the ten best education apps they’d ever seen. Our phonics apps have been used to teach children to read and write in over 3000 schools.

PocketPhonic Stories teaches over 60 grapheme-to-phoneme mappings, and includes over 40 decodeable storybooks. After each group of letter sounds, your child reads some storybooks that use those letter sounds. The very few words they won’t be able to sound out are highlighted in red. Every word can be tapped and the app helps the child sound it out. The storybooks are levelled in terms of letter sounds, word length and comprehension.

There really is nothing else like it on the App Store. To try it out, download PocketPhonics Stories from the App Store and start your free trial.

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