

A Beginner's Guide to Phonics

Everything you need to know to get started at home

A free resource from Why Play Learning

What Is Phonics — and Why Does It Matter?

If you've started looking into teaching your child to read, you'll have come across the word *phonics* pretty quickly. But what does it actually mean — and do you need to be a teacher to use it at home?

The short answer is: absolutely not. Phonics is simply the link between sounds and letters. It gives children a reliable, logical way to decode written words — and it's something you can explore together, little by little, in your own time.

■ You don't need special training to support your child with phonics. Curiosity, patience, and a few playful activities are all you need to begin.

Section 1 — Understanding the Basics

Phonemes: the building blocks of words

A **phoneme** is the smallest unit of sound in a word. The word *cat* has three phonemes: /k/ /a/ /t/. It's important to know that phonemes are *sounds*, not letters — some phonemes are represented by two letters together, like *sh* in *ship* or *ch* in *chin*.

Graphemes: how sounds are written

A **grapheme** is the written symbol (letter or group of letters) that represents a phoneme. For example, the /f/ sound can be written as *f* (fun), *ff* (off), or *ph* (phone). This is why English spelling can seem tricky — one sound often has several spellings!

Blending and Segmenting

These are the two core phonics skills your child will develop:

Blending	Putting sounds together to read a word. For example, hearing /d/ /o/ /g/ and blending them to say 'dog'.
Segmenting	Breaking a word into its sounds to spell it. For example, hearing 'cat' and identifying /k/ /a/ /t/.

Section 2 — The Phases of Phonics Learning

Phonics is usually taught in phases, moving from simple to more complex patterns. Don't worry about rushing through them — every child moves at their own pace, and that's perfectly fine.

Phase

What Your Child Is Learning

Phase 1	Listening and talking — tuning into sounds in the environment, music, and speech.
Phase 2	First letter sounds: s, a, t, p, i, n, m, d, g, o, c, k. Simple blending begins.
Phase 3	More complex sounds including <i>sh, ch, th, ng</i> and vowel sounds like <i>ai, ee, oa</i> .
Phase 4	No new sounds — focus on blending longer words with consonant clusters like <i>st, bl, tr</i> .
Phase 5	Alternative spellings of sounds, e.g. <i>ay</i> for the /ay/ sound as well as <i>ai</i> .
Phase 6	Spelling rules, prefixes, suffixes — building towards fluent reading and writing.

■ **Phase 1 is often overlooked, but it's genuinely the most important! Listening walks, clapping syllables, and sound games lay the foundation for everything else.**

Section 3 — Tricky Words (and Why They're Called That)

Some words in English don't follow regular phonics rules — or they contain sounds that haven't been taught yet. These are often called **tricky words** or **high-frequency words**. Words like *the, said, was, they* and *come* fall into this category.

Children are usually encouraged to learn these by sight — through games, flashcards, and repeated exposure in books — rather than trying to sound them out phonically.

■ **Make tricky words fun! Write them in sand, build them with fridge magnets, or play snap with homemade flashcards. Repetition through play is the key.**

Section 4 — Practical Activities to Try at Home

You don't need worksheets or expensive kits to teach phonics. Here are some simple, playful ways to build phonics skills every day.

■ **Sound Hunts** Go on a listening walk indoors or outside. How many different sounds can you hear? This builds the listening awareness that underpins all phonics learning.

■ **Syllable Clapping** Clap the syllables in words together: *but-ter-fly* (3 claps), *dog* (1 clap). Use names, favourite foods, animals — anything that interests your child.

■ **Sound Sorting** Gather a handful of small objects or pictures and sort them by their starting sound. A simple tray with letter cards works perfectly.

■ Decodable Books

Short books written specifically to practise phonics sounds give children the satisfaction of reading independently. Many are available free online or cheaply in charity shops.

👉 ■ Multi-sensory Writing

Let your child practise forming letters in sand, shaving foam, or with large chalk outside. Involving the body helps sounds stick.

■ Word-Building Games

Use magnetic letters or letter tiles to build simple CVC words (consonant-vowel-consonant): *cat, pin, hop, mud*. Then change one letter at a time to make new words.

Section 5 — Frequently Asked Questions

Q: My child is 4. Is it too early to start?

A: Phase 1 is perfect for very young children. Listening games, nursery rhymes, and sound play are all phonics learning. Formal letter-sound work is usually introduced around age 4–5, but follow your child's lead above all else.

Q: What if my child finds it hard?

A: Some children take longer to grasp phonics — and that's completely normal. If your child is struggling, it's worth exploring whether they need more time on earlier phases, or whether a multi-sensory approach (using movement, colour, or touch) might help. If you have ongoing concerns, speak with your GP or health visitor.

Q: Do I need to use a specific phonics scheme?

A: No. Many home educators use a structured scheme like *Jolly Phonics* or *Read Write Inc*, but others piece together their own approach from books, games, and free online resources. What matters most is consistency and keeping it enjoyable.

Q: How long should phonics sessions be?

A: Short and frequent is far better than long and infrequent. Five to ten minutes daily is plenty for young children. Little and often helps sounds become automatic.

Q: What about reading aloud to my child?

A: Absolutely essential — and it never stops being valuable. Reading aloud together develops vocabulary, comprehension, and a love of books that supports everything else you do.

You're doing an amazing job. Choosing to support your child's learning at home is a gift — and phonics doesn't need to be complicated. Start with what feels manageable, celebrate every small step, and trust your instincts. You've got this. ■

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