

Phonics for fun, for life-chances and for life!

Learning about 'phonics' is great fun – and the phonics adventure often begins at home thanks to child-friendly games and activities available in toy shops and book stores. Parents, grandparents and carers can help youngsters to make links between letters, letter groups and speech sounds when seeing names of family members in birthday cards, sharing stories, noticing print in the environment during walks, and when writing shopping lists!

There are really fabulous games, visual aids, interactive resources and appealing decodable reading books to teach phonics systematically in schools in England (and some other countries) nowadays. In school, children are provided with reading and writing activities that match the 'alphabetic code' (the letter/s-sound correspondences) they have been taught so far and that enable practice of applying [their phonics sub skills and core skills](#). The Government in England has provided additional funding for many infant and primary schools to buy phonics programmes, reading books, phonics resources and, most importantly, purpose-designed training in the [Systematic Synthetic Phonics Teaching Principles](#).

The teaching of reading can take many forms and for many years this has been a hotly debated and misunderstood subject!

*'Phonics' is generally thought of as a method for teaching infants to read rather than understood as a very important body of knowledge (the letter/s-sound correspondences of the *alphabetic code*) and the phonics skills (decoding for reading, encoding for spelling) required and applied even by literate adults.*

Did you know that most adults apply alphabetic code knowledge and phonics skills to read new words and to spell longer and more challenging words perhaps without even realising it? So 'phonics' is important for adults' literacy and not just a method for teaching infants to get started with reading!

Even if we were not taught the alphabetic code explicitly as children, the chances are that many of us managed to figure out the code on our own without realising this. We know, however, that not all children manage to work out the alphabetic code for themselves well enough or at all – and this is the case in all English-speaking contexts and countries - not just in England. Wherever the English language is taught as a first or additional language, there is a notoriously high percentage of weak literacy and illiteracy especially notable when phonics teaching went out of fashion in the teaching profession and when the design of children's reading book schemes were based on repetitive and predictable texts (instead of cumulative, phonically decodable texts). How we teach reading and spelling can, and does, damage life-chances as literacy underpins education and struggling with reading and/or writing can lead to a serious lack of self-worth which in turn can lead in some cases to erratic behaviour, truancy, delinquency and even criminality.

The conclusions from [governmental inquiries](#) about reading instruction in the USA, Australia and the UK have led to much greater promotion of *systematic synthetic phonics* (SSP) teaching. The verb *to synthesise* refers to the *blending* of the sounds when the reader 'sounds out and blends' to discern the target spoken word – in effect, translating the printed word into the spoken word. The *Systematic Synthetic Phonics Teaching Principles*, however, also include teaching that the alphabetic code is *reversible* for spelling purposes – that is, how to identify the sounds (phonemes) all through the spoken word, allotting graphemes (letters and letter groups) for the identified sounds.

Systematic Synthetic Phonics teaching is really important for teaching reading and spelling and serves virtually all children exceptionally well both for the short-term and for *long-term* reading and spelling capacity. Worryingly, if pupils require additional phonics teaching beyond infant age, do you think that THEY think they are getting lessons in 'phonics *adult stuff*' or 'phonics *baby stuff*? Teachers are initially surprised by this question but after some thought they admit that the pupils themselves probably consider they are receiving phonics *baby stuff for any intervention (special needs) provision*. This *perception* that phonics is baby-ish really needs to change for everyone as we get better and better at understanding that the role of phonics for reading and spelling is important for adults and children alike.

Further, as teachers increasingly find themselves teaching children or adults with English as a new or second language, *it can only be an advantage for everyone to gain greater phonics expertise* – appreciating the range and variety of the individual sounds of speech in different languages and that some languages have more, or far fewer, sounds compared to around the 44 of the smallest sounds (phonemes) identifiable in the English language. Phonics involves the ability to detect (hear) and enunciate (say) the sounds of speech – then link those sounds to the written code (the letters and letter groups – including both upper case and lower case letter shapes). The Spanish language, for example, only includes 5 vowel sounds compared to the 20 or so vowel sounds identifiable in the English language. In total, the Spanish language has around 24 sounds including vowel sounds and consonant sounds. A Spanish child learning to speak, read and spell in English, then, will need to develop an ear for hearing/identifying the *additional* English sounds and to practise saying them – as well as linking all the sounds to the complex English written code which (to make reading and spelling in the English language *even more challenging*) has many *different spelling alternatives* for most of the sounds (phonemes). The sound /ee/ (sounds are shown in slash marks), for example, can be spelt in many ways such as **eel**, **eat**, **me**, **concrete**, **briefcase**, **key**, **sunny**. But, as many of the graphemes (letters and letter groups) have *different pronunciation alternatives* (dependent on the words themselves), this adds a further complication to teaching and learning to read. The grapheme ‘ea’, for example, is pronounced differently in **eat**, **head** and **great**. Although teaching and learning the English alphabetic code comprehensively is a huge task, nevertheless children as young as three, four or five can soon recognise letter shapes and say their sounds, and progress to be able to sound out and blend the letters and letter groups in printed words to discern the target spoken words (decoding) – and they can be trained to split up (orally segment) spoken words from beginning to end, and allot letter/s to spell the words (encoding). It’s quite amazing!

The Alphabetic Code Chart in every classroom and home

All teachers should be knowledgeable about the English *alphabetic code* (the letter/s-sound correspondences) to enable them to support pupils of all ages, in all circumstances, *as required*. Equally, all parents and carers should have access to good information about phonics to understand about the teaching in school and the basis of the alphabetic code for reading and spelling – and to work in partnership with teachers and the children wherever possible.

A great starting point to understand about phonics is having access to an overview ‘*Alphabetic Code Chart*’ as a core, ever-present, visual aid. This shows the sounds (mainly phonemes but with some combined phonemes) down the left-hand column with the *spelling alternatives that are code for the sounds* across the rows. *Alphabetic Code Charts* should be a standard resource that is as well-known and utilised as ‘*Alphabet*’ posters that show the *bank of letter shapes* in *alphabetical order*: https://phonicsinternational.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Tabletop_Alphabet_V2.pdf

An Alphabetic Code Chart can be a *general* chart or designed for the *organisation* and code content of a specific systematic synthetic phonics programme. It would be helpful if it becomes common practice for all schools to provide parents with a mini version of an Alphabetic Code Chart. See <https://alphabeticcodecharts.com> for a wide range of FREE Alphabetic Code Charts to view or download – including an AUDIO chart.

Be sure to look at an example of the Spanish alphabetic code and how simple it is – and relatively easy to teach: https://alphabeticcodecharts.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/3_CaD_pics_Spanish_Alphabetic_Code_Chart.pdf

Compare the ‘simple’ or ‘transparent’ Spanish alphabetic code to the complexities of the English ‘complex’ or ‘opaque’ alphabetic code: https://alphabeticcodecharts.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/DDD_parents_PI_TableTop .

England’s Year One Phonics Screening Check

In England, a national *Year One Phonics Screening Check* was introduced in 2012 for children to undertake at the end of Year One (for six year olds after two years of systematic phonics provision). The purpose of the check is to confirm that children have learned phonic *decoding* to a standard considered by the Government to be age-appropriate. The phonics check includes 40 words for children to read consisting of letters and letter groups that are most likely to have been introduced in the planned, systematic teaching prior to the check. The list of words includes 20 *real* words and

20 *pseudo*-words. The pseudo-words are accompanied by pictures of little monsters to distinguish them from the real words. Using pseudo-words is a well-established way of assessing if children can apply code knowledge accurately to decode new and unknown words. The results *should inform the bigger picture of teaching effectiveness for decoding* and particularly help to inform infant teachers in Reception, Year One and Year Two. See the [information on the Department for Education \(DfE\) website](#):

Use of the data

Individual children's results should be made available to parents to inform them about their own child's progress in word reading skills. School-level results are made available to *Ofsted* (England's inspectorate) to inform inspections but phonics check results are not published in performance tables. National and local authority results are reported to allow teachers to benchmark the performance of their own schools. National results enable standards to be tracked over time which is very important for understanding the effectiveness of the teaching.

The teaching profession has been showered with so many different methods and philosophies for teaching children to read over the decades that it is essential we take this matter seriously. It is large-scale testing which alerted us to the decline in reading standards over time relative to various prevailing teaching methods.

The Year One Phonics Screening Check (PSC) was rolled out in June 2012 for the first time across England resulting in a wide variety of responses to the advent of this check.

Critics of the Year One Phonics Screening Check expressed various concerns such as:

- Teachers might be inclined to over-emphasise their phonics teaching at the expense of spending time on comprehension activities such as *'talk'* and promoting the *'love of books'*.
- Some people think that as children are unique individuals with *'different learning styles'*, they therefore do not all need phonics teaching as they can learn to read through different routes.
- Some people think that it is too early to begin systematic phonics teaching from the ages of four to five and that the phonics check forces teachers to begin explicit phonics teaching too soon.

Following a House of Commons inquiry, Sir Jim Rose (with a team of inspectors) was commissioned to conduct an independent national review. The recommendations were accepted by the Government ([Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading, March 2006](#)). Rose pointed out that whatever the *learning styles* of the children, it was the *same* alphabetic code knowledge and skills that they needed to learn and that children should not be left to *'ferret out'* this knowledge for themselves.

The *Simple View of Reading* model (Gough and Tunmer, 1986) was recommended by Rose as a *useful conceptual framework* to illustrate the two main processes involved in reading: 1) *word decoding/recognition* (to lift the words off the page technically) and; 2) *language comprehension* (understanding the words that have been lifted at the level of *spoken* language). Teachers understand that reading involves far more than decoding the words on the page and should not allow the phonics check to alter their provision for developing language comprehension and promoting a love of books. [Masses of chatter in the home and access to plenty of books](#) really helps with developing reading skills – also contributing to knowledge and understanding of the world so essential for life-long educational chances. See this link for the diagram of the Simple View of Reading (and additional *Simple View of Writing*):

https://phonicsinternational.com/The_Simple_View_of_Reading_model.pdf

Do we really need a national phonics screening check?

Some teachers argue that they don't need a national assessment to know their pupils' reading levels but there *were* some surprises when children considered to be good readers made unexpected errors with the pseudo-words. It is important that children can read words accurately whether in *books* or in *word lists*, however, as they are constantly faced with new printed words to read in literature that are not necessarily in their *spoken* vocabularies. Reading *unknown* real words is the *equivalent* of reading pseudo-words and children need to be able to read words they know and new words that they don't know to enrich their spoken language and to access new literature increasingly *independently*.

The big issues:

1. **Weak literacy in English-speaking countries:** It is right for governments to take the findings of research and leading-edge teaching very seriously and to pass on the [findings of national inquiries](#) to the teaching profession.
2. **Accountability:** If a government actively promotes a specific teaching approach based on the overarching research findings, it is only right that the government then tries to *discover* and *understand* the consequences of the method and material promoted – as the government is *accountable* for what it promotes.
3. **Continuing Professional Development:** Teachers should benefit professionally from noting and understanding results obtained as a national snapshot with objective conditions (*same test, same time, same delivery*) to guard against under-achievement in some settings and to examine results *over time*. Comparisons from year to year and between similar schools should help to inform teachers of just what is possible with the most effective teaching and learning practices.

Concerns about the Year One Phonics Screening Check in England were raised at a *Westminster Education Forum* seminar and attendees were invited to submit short responses for publication with the transcript of the event. See this link for [Debbie Hepplewhite's response to the questions raised on the agenda](#):

[Debbie also addressed the concerns of David Reedy](#) (United Kingdom Literacy Association) who considered the Year One Phonics Screening Check should be abandoned.

Indeed, surely all schools in all countries teaching English for reading and spelling should adopt an objective phonics screening check – England's year on year material for the PSC is made freely available to be adopted.

Exciting times!

These are very exciting times as we know more now about teaching reading and spelling than ever before. We are using the internet for sharing phonics information and to provide interactive and printable resources to support teachers, learners and their parents and carers. Publishers and manufacturers are designing quality phonics resources, Systematic Synthetic Phonics programmes and decodable reading books to support our systematic and incidental phonics teaching in school and at home. F-a-n-t-a-s-t-i-c!

[Debbie Hepplewhite MBE FRSA](#)

Phonics Consultant, Trainer and Programme Author

Advisor to the UK Reading Reform Foundation: <https://rrf.org.uk>

Founding Committee Member of the International Foundation for Effective Reading Instruction: <https://iferi.org>

For a wide range of FREE Alphabetic Code Charts: <https://alphabeticcodecharts.com>

For a full, comprehensive FREE systematic synthetic phonics programme validated by the DfE – provided online for all ages: <https://phonicsinternational.com>

For a wide range of FREE Alphabet and handwriting resources – including guidance videos for fully joined handwriting: <https://debbiehepplewhitehandwriting.com>

For FREE nursery phonics resources and guidance for use before a full SSP programme – featuring phonics skills and sub-skills and learning the sounds linked to upper case and lower case alphabet letters (3 to 5 year olds): <https://phonicsinternationalpreschool.com>

Debbie has authored four SSP programmes ‘validated’ by the Department for Education in England:

- 1) **Floppy’s Phonics** (published by Oxford University Press) <https://floppysphonics.com>
- 2) FREE **Phonics International** for all ages (as mentioned above): <https://phonicsinternational.com>
- 3) **No Nonsense Phonics** consisting of hard copy Pupil Books and parallel Teacher Books (ready-made, to buy resources with full information and FREE training): <https://phonicsintervention.org> [Note: This site also includes supplementary resources – FREE and [to buy](#) e.g. Alphabetic Code Charts, Alphabet Tabletop, Frieze, Flash Cards, Sounds Mats, Mini Code Cards, and Debbie’s *Phonics Reading Books* series (hard copy and eBooks), that can all be used to with *Wand Phonics*, *No Nonsense Phonics* and the *Phonics International*.]
- 4) **Wand Phonics** (a digital and interactive body of work with full audio, published by Wand Education) DfE validation is for use with *Phonics International* and/or *No Nonsense Phonics* (for blended learning) <https://phonicsintervention.org/product/wand-phonics-digital-interactive-platform/>

These programmes are suitable for mainstream teaching and intervention – and for English-speaking learners and learners for whom English is an addition language.

See Debbie’s very inexpensive, self-study course <https://phonicstrainingonline.com>

Read what people from many different contexts and countries [have said about the course](#).

Debbie’s [‘REVIEWS/LITERACY BLOG’](#)