



Key guidance: Foundations for phonics

Foundations for phonics contributes to the provision for ‘Communication and language’ and ‘Literacy’ (DfE, 2022)¹; it should sit alongside a stimulating language-rich provision.

Foundations for phonics sets out the provision that should be in place to ensure children are well prepared to begin grapheme–phoneme correspondence and blending at the start of Reception. The provision should include a balance of child-led and adult-led experiences.

One of the most important aspects of Foundations for phonics is developing an awareness of sound, through activities that develop focused listening and attention, including oral blending.

Activities that develop focused listening and attention

Oral blending

Oral blending is the breaking down of words into phonemes (the smallest units of sound). It helps children identify and hear phonemes in words and blend them together to read a word. It is important that children have plenty of experience of listening to adults modelling oral blending and joining in with oral blending activities before they are introduced to grapheme–phoneme correspondence. This ensures they are ‘tuned into’ sounds when they begin Phase 2. Within a Nursery setting, this should be a short daily activity. Oral blending will continue into Phase 2 and beyond.

Use the oral blending games in the ‘How to’ videos as your daily blending practice activities. You will find the videos in the Weekly lesson content for Foundations for phonics. The download ‘Prompt cards: Foundations for phonics’ sets out the teaching steps for these oral blending games

Use the ‘Foundation for phonics progression and planning’ document to ensure that you cover the full curriculum, give appropriate support and challenge, and offer a variety of activities that engage the children in purposeful learning. This document details the order in which phonemes can be taught.

Remember, in Foundations for phonics we are focusing on just the phonemes. Just the sounds. You should not introduce grapheme cards at this stage.

Tuning into sounds

To enable children to begin to distinguish the initial sound in words, they need exposure to a range of games that develop this. These opportunities should be short games that are age-appropriate to ensure children are engaged in them. Games that involve children's names or animals, or are part of an alliterative story or poem, are good ways to develop this skill. The following games are included in this guidance and must be part of the weekly provision:

- Play with sounds
- Bertha the bus goes to the zoo
- Name play
- Voice sounds
- What's in the box?

You will find the 'How to' videos and accompanying Prompt cards for these games in the Weekly lesson content for Foundations for phonics.

Avoid

It is important to avoid the following. These will not be helpful in developing children's grapheme-phoneme correspondence or blending skills and can be detrimental to reading development.

- Asking children to guess words from the context or pictures, reading whole words or use of any other strategy to guess words.²
- Teaching letter names (including singing alphabet songs). This is not helpful to children at this stage; it causes confusion. Letter names will be taught in Reception at an appropriate point, once digraphs have been introduced.
- Inaccurate enunciation of pure sounds (see the download 'How to say the Phase 2 sounds'). There are also three videos which show you how to pronounce the sounds in the 'For parents' area of the website. These are organised by the term that children will learn them in Reception: Autumn 1, Autumn 2 and Spring 1.
- Using the grapheme cards. Remember – in Foundations for phonics we are focusing on just the phonemes. Just the sounds.

Phase 2

The above provision will ensure children are in the best possible place to begin Phase 2 at the very start of Reception. To enable children to have a strong start with their phonics learning, they must start Phase 2 by the second week of their Reception year.

Some children may be ready for Phase 2 teaching in Nursery. If this is the case, it is important to do this in consultation with the phonics or Reading Leader within the setting.

¹ Early years foundation stage profile 2022 handbook. DfE crown copyright, 2021.

² Education Endowment Foundation [<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/phonics/>], 2018.