

Introducing Synthetic Phonics!

Synthetic phonics; it is a technical name and nothing to do with being artificial. The synthetic part refers to synthesizing or blending sounds to make a word.

Phonics is a method of teaching children how spoken words are composed of sounds called 'phonemes' and how the letters in words correspond to those phonemes. The process of reading involves decoding or 'breaking' words into separate phonemes, so that meaning can be gained. On the other hand, the process of spelling requires the writer to identify all the phonemes in a word and then use their knowledge of the phonemic code to write or 'make' the word.

English is essentially a code that can be encoded (written) and decoded (read). We need to teach children this code with as much emphasis as possible on the rules and regularities of the written language.

We can make a word from the sounds and then break it apart again when we want to spell it. You will find that the teaching of spelling goes hand in hand with the teaching of reading; once you know the alphabetic code and how to listen for each phoneme then spelling becomes as easy as reading.

Written English is recognised as being a complex language. We have 26 letters but 44 phonemes in the spoken language. There are a huge number of letter combinations needed to make these 44 phonemes (a phoneme is the technical name for the smallest unit of sound and is a word children should learn). Other languages are more regular having fewer letters and fewer sounds which can make it easier to learn to read. Here at **Get Reading Right** we teach a group of phonemes together and right from the start children are making words and decoding simple consonant-vowel-consonant (c-v-c) words such as c a t and d o g. It is the speed, the efficiency and the effectiveness that characterises this approach.

At a glance: Synthetic phonics:

- Teaches all 44 phonemes
- Teaches all the ways each phoneme can be written
- Teaches children to blend phonemes in a word to read
- Teaches children to listen for sounds in words to spell
- Get Reading Right's Synthetic Phonics Toolkit helps you to teach all of the above.

So what is wrong with the old way?

Across the English speaking world there is recognition that there are far too many children failing to learn to read as well as they should. The costs to the individual as well as to society as a whole are huge. Government reviews in the UK, Australia and the U.S. have all concluded that all children should be taught to read using a systematic, synthetic phonics approach because this approach minimizes failure and maximizes success.

Previous approaches to the teaching of reading often taught children spelling rules that subsequently turn out not to work. It is often a long time into a child's schooling that he/she even starts to decode (sound out) a word or actively use these skills to read words in books. Children who miss some early teaching, have some learning difficulties, or are young in for their year group often have trouble acquiring a systematic understanding of the phonemic code. It can be a hit or miss affair especially if the child changes schools or his/her language of instruction.

At a glance:

- The pace of teaching and learning was too slow
- All 44 phonemes were not taught
- Children were not encouraged to use their phonic knowledge to spell new words
- Children were not taught the many ways that each phoneme can be written.

How does Synthetic Phonics differ from the 'old' type of phonics?

Synthetic phonics starts with phonemic awareness and the matching of phonemes to single letters. At the same time it shows how these phonemes (sounds) can be 'blended' to produce words and the words can be 'segmented' to write.

Firstly, children learn simple letter to sound correspondence. This is when a phoneme is represented by a single letter as in the word /c/ /a/ /t/. When that's mastered children learn that sometimes one phoneme is represented by two letters; like in the word /ch/ /o/ /p/ (/ch/ is only one phoneme (sound))

Then after that, children will learn that sometimes a single phoneme can be represented many different ways. Like the sound /ay/ in play. Children will eventually learn that this phoneme can be written;

/ay/ as in the word play

/a-e/ as in the word spade

/ea/ as in the word break

/ey/ as in the word hey

/eigh/ as in the word eight

/a/ as in the word later

/ei/ as in the word vein

Finally children will learn that sometimes a single (or more) letter may represent more than one phoneme; for example, the 'O' in /most/ and the 'O' in /hot/ or the 'ow' in /wow/ and the 'ow' in /tow/.

This advanced code is taught only after the basic rules are mastered. At first the rules are regular with no exception.

Another big difference you will notice is that the phonemes are taught at a faster, more efficient rate than ever before. No more letter a week. Children may learn up to 8 phonemes in a week! Sounds like a lot, but they all cope! Children start to make their own words straight away. There is recognition that although English is complicated, there is a high degree of order to it, and this needs to be taught.

At a glance:

- The pace of teaching and learning is faster
- All 44 phonemes are taught in a particular order
- Children are encouraged to use their phonic knowledge to read and spell new words
- Children are taught all the ways that each phoneme can be written
- Children are taught that phonics can be used to read, write and to spell; that the code is reversible.

What do all these technical words mean?

What is a phoneme?

It is the smallest unit of sound and a piece of terminology that children like to use and should be taught. At first it will equate with a letter sound but later on will include the digraphs.

What is a digraph?

This is when two or more letters come together to make a phoneme. /oa/ makes the sound in boat.

What is blending?

Blending is the process that is involved in bringing the sounds together to make a word or a syllable and is how /c/ /a/ /t/ becomes cat.

What is a consonant blend?

Previously, consonant blends were taught as if there was something special about them. Children were taught that /st/ was one phoneme, when actually it is two, /s/ and /t/. Think about it. Why teach /st/ when children already know /s/ and /t/, it just wastes time and clogs up children's memory. But note that sh is a digraph. It cannot be made by a process of blending the two letter sounds of /s/ and /h/ together.

At a glance:

- It is not important to know all the jargon. It is important to try to use these words with children – they will pick them up!
- It is important to know how to pronounce each of the phonemes correctly
- Remember that teaching the old consonant blends just wastes time and energy with something children already know.

How do we know teaching synthetic phonics works?

Each of the governments mentioned has conducted systematic reviews of what works and what doesn't in the early teaching of reading. Each review came to similar conclusions and each government made recommendations that every child should be taught to read and spell using a synthetic phonics approach. Other recommendations were that every teacher be trained to teach reading using this method. Another important recommendation was that parents need to be shown how to use a synthetic phonics approach to help their children at home. As of September 2006 every school in the UK every school has been instructed to use this approach. One study in Scotland showed that children taught using this approach were still ahead of their peers in reading and spelling some seven years later. In our experience we have had similar situations with whole schools enthusiastically adopting the approach once its effectiveness has been demonstrated.

At a glance:

There has been extensive research worldwide.

You may like to look at:

- Research conducted by St Andrews University in Scotland
- National Enquiry into the Teaching of Early Reading in Australia
- www.rff.org.uk
- www.childrenofthecode.org

Hey! Not all words can be decoded!

That's right. They can't. But so many can, and at this stage in children's education, we concentrate on the ones that can. That's not to say that we don't introduce words in the beginning that children will need to read simple texts and write simple sentences. We try to stick to tricky words that are not easily decodable. We call these tricky words 'Camera' words because children must learn them, just like they were taking a photo of them with their 'mind's eye'. They are encouraged to memorise the whole word.

What are 'Camera' Words?

Camera words are a group of words in the English language that children like to use in their speech and in their writing that cannot be decoded or needs advanced skills to do so, for example 'was'. It's a very common word but very hard to decode. Children want to read and spell these words right at the beginning of their schooling. Knowing a small bank of these tricky words helps children to begin to read and write sentences that make sense and encourage them to communicate in writing right from the start.



At **Get Reading Right** we recognise that even when we expose children to phonetically regular words and teach the phonemic code rules there are going to be words that are exceptions that are useful to learn. These words are introduced and taught in a fun, lively way as "Camera words".