

Children’s teachers often talk about phonics instruction. What is phonics and what does it have to do with reading and spelling development?

Questions 5 and 6 from *Helping Your Child Become a Reader*
(Scanlon, Anderson, Barnes, Morse, & Yurkewecz-Stellato, 2024¹)

Phonics skills involve knowing the connections between individual letters and the sounds they represent and groups of letters and their sounds – such as *th*, *sh*. Some letters and letter combinations represent more than one sound such as the *ai* combination in *paid* and *plaid*. Learners use phonics skills to “sound out” or “decode” words that have not been directly taught. This is an important way in which they learn to effortlessly identify the thousands of printed words they ultimately need to know. While the variability in the relationships between some of the letters and their sounds can sometimes make it challenging for children to use their developing phonics skills, engagement in reading and writing can help them to become more accurate and automatic with these skills.

Why is my child sometimes reluctant to sound out unknown words. What should I do when this happens?

Sometimes children are reluctant to sound out words because they do not yet have the needed phonics skills (see Question 5). They can also get confused or frustrated by words that cannot be fully sounded out. Or they may not be familiar with the sentence structure in which the word occurs or the word may not be in their spoken vocabulary.

When readers have a lot of experiences in which they cannot accurately identify words, they can lose (or not develop) confidence in their ability to figure out unknown words and, therefore, may be unwilling to try. This is one of the reasons we encourage caregivers to provide children with lots of opportunities to read books that are easy for them – that is, books in which they can already identify most, if not all, of the words, either because they already know them or because they have the skills to figure them out. When children encounter words that they cannot sound out completely, they can be encouraged to use the context (e.g., the rest of the sentence) to help adjust their attempted pronunciation so that the word **does** make sense.

Since beginning readers do not have fully developed knowledge of the relationships between letters and the sounds they can represent nor of larger spelling patterns (such as *ight*), figuring out unfamiliar words can be challenging. Further, as noted in Question 5, English includes some spelling patterns that are pronounced in multiple ways. For example, the *ea* combination is pronounced differently in *beat*, *bread*, and *break*.

Note

Many skilled readers perceive words as being decodable when the words are not entirely so. As a result, skilled readers may encourage learners to sound out words that cannot be accurately identified using phonics skills alone. For example, using their existing phonics skills, children might pronounce the ‘ou’ in the word ‘young’ in the way it is pronounced in the word ‘out’. This would, of course, not produce a real word.

¹ The complete 23 question booklet can be accessed at: eltep.org/isa-parent-booklet
All individual questions and the complete booklet can be shared for non-commercial purposes.



Because the English writing system is not entirely consistent in terms of how sounds are represented, sounding out words can be frustrating and may lead learners to be reluctant to try. Helping learners recognize and use additional sources of information (such as sentence meanings and pictures) that are available in the text can help. The suggestions below can be used *in addition to* encouraging children to use their phonics skills. These other sources of information can be especially helpful for words that have

spellings that are somewhat irregular/unusual – such as the words *said* and *they* or words that include letter combinations with variable pronunciations – such as the different ways that the *ow* combination can be pronounced – as in the words *snow* and *how*.

- **Think of a word that would make sense in the sentence.** It is important for learners to understand that the purpose of reading is to understand the text. Encouraging readers to check whether their attempt at a word makes sense in the sentence is critical to promoting reading comprehension – which is the ultimate goal of reading. If a child’s first attempt doesn’t result in a real word and/or is a real word that doesn’t make sense in the sentence, there are a few options learners can be encouraged to try²:

- **Check the pictures** – Especially for readers at early points in development, pictures are provided in texts to help them “read” words that they do not yet have the phonics skills to identify. Readers at this point should consider the picture AND the letter-sound information they already know. This suggestion would only be useful IF the picture provides information that could be helpful in identifying unknown words.

Try saying...

“Sometimes the pictures can help you figure out what a word could be. Let’s think about the sounds for the letters in this word and think about what this picture could be.”

- **Read past the puzzling word** – Sometimes reading past a puzzling word, to get the broader context of the sentence, will give the reader a better idea of what the puzzling word might be. (Note that using the word *puzzling* when talking about an unknown word is intended to convey that there are strategies readers can use to figure it out. Talking about unknown words as being *tricky* or *hard* may cause some children to feel defeated.) However, if a child is puzzling over a word that has an unusual spelling element – such as the *k* in the word *know* – it is appropriate to provide assistance. For example, you might say: “Let me help you with that word...the *k* is silent.” Alternatively, you could simply tell the child the word.

Try saying...

“Try reading to the end of the sentence to see if it gives you some ideas about what that puzzling word could be. Then go back to the word, think about the letters in the word again, and what would make sense.”

- **Reread** - In most cases, after an unfamiliar word has been correctly identified, readers should be encouraged to reread the entire sentence in which it occurred to make sure that everything fits. Doing so emphasizes the letter/sound relationships in some words, the sense-making purpose of reading, and increases the likelihood that words that were initially puzzling will be identified more readily on future encounters. Rereading can also promote fluent, smooth reading.

Try saying....

“Now that you’ve figured out the word(s), read the whole sentence to make sure that it makes sense and that everything fits.”

Note that it is fine to simply name an unfamiliar word for the child if it is unlikely that the word can be identified using a combination of the child’s phonics skills and the other sources of information (such as

² Note that the “Suggested Guidance” can be abbreviated as children become accustomed to the conversation around puzzling through unknown words.

pictures and the meaning of the sentence). It is also fine to name the word for the child if the child has encountered several unknown words and/or seems frustrated. In such instances, it can be useful to have the child reread the sentence in which the unfamiliar word(s) occurred. This re-reading will help the child better understand the text and will increase the likelihood that the child will be able to read those unfamiliar word(s) when they are encountered again.