

Phonics and the Development of Your Child's Reading and Writing Skills

This factsheet is for parents of deaf children who would like to know more about phonics and how it can be used to help your child learn to read and write. You can find out how phonics is taught and how you can make sure your child benefits as much as possible from the teaching of phonics.

Unless stated otherwise, this factsheet is for all parents in the UK.

What is phonics?

Phonics is a way of teaching reading and writing.

At its simplest, phonics is the relationship between the letter you see on the page and the sound (**not** the letter name) that it makes when you say it. For example, knowing that the letter 'a' will have the sound /a/ as in apple or ant. We're using the accepted way of recording a unit sound – with slashes (e.g. /a/ and /ay/). Letters of the alphabet are put within quotation marks ('e' and 'o').

All 26 letters in the English alphabet have their own sound. However, the English language has more sounds than letters in the alphabet so your child will also need to learn:

- the 44 **sounds** in the English language that those letters make when they're written in groups of two or more letters ('sh', 'ou', 'ear', etc.)

and the skills of:

- how to say the sounds in the order they appear in the word and to put these sounds together ('run' or 'blend') to say the word. For example, the sounds /d/ then /o/ and then /g/ run or blend to make the word /dog/
- how to break words down into sounds in order to write/spell words.

Why is phonics important?

Phonics is really important in helping children to understand, enjoy and learn from reading in its many different formats (e.g. storybooks, textbooks, instruction manuals). It will help your child to work out words they haven't seen before when reading and to choose the right letters for the sounds in words when writing.

For example, if a young child comes across the word 'shop' for the first time they will try to read it by breaking it down into its three phonic sounds /sh/, /o/ and /p/. They will then run or blend these sounds together to say the word – this is called 'decoding'. If they were asked to write the word they would break it down into its sounds and write the

letter or letters that represent each sound that they hear – 'sh', 'o' and 'p'. This is called 'encoding'.

Your child will need support, but deafness shouldn't be a barrier to learning and developing literacy skills as well as other children.

Over the years, many teachers (including Teachers of the Deaf) have thought phonics, with its obvious emphasis on listening for and hearing sounds in words, inappropriate for deaf children. However, the earlier detection of deafness (especially through the Newborn Hearing Screening Programme) and improved hearing technology means that many deaf children may be able to benefit from the teaching of phonics.

At what age should my child start to develop their phonics knowledge and skills?

Children are usually first taught about phonics in their reception year. But, well before they start school children learn to 'tune into' everyday sounds around them and to the sounds of spoken language. Then, as their language develops, generally between the ages of two and three, they become interested in and start to enjoy the rhyme and rhythm of language. You can encourage your child through activities such as action songs, nursery rhymes, clapping rhythms and listening to stories where they have to take part by providing relevant sound effects (e.g. 'I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down').

After that, children will start to focus more closely on the sounds of their language by identifying:

- first, the number of words in a sentence (usually by making one clap for each word they hear)
- a little later, the number of syllables they hear in a word (often starting by clapping the syllables in their own name and those of their friends)
- finally, the number of sounds they hear in a word.

Eventually, an adult will be able to say the sounds of a word (e.g. /b/ /a/ /t/) to a child and the child will be able to blend them into the word – 'bat'. Later still, an adult will be able to give a simple word (e.g. 'red') to a child and the child will be able to break the word down into its sounds (/r/ /e/ /d/).

At this stage, a child is said to have developed 'phonological awareness' – this may well be after they've started school.

Phonological awareness clearly depends on listening for and hearing language sounds. Many children will pick up this information from hearing speech at home and on TV, etc. However, deaf children are often less able to take advantage of this type of 'incidental' learning so your child will benefit from any extra time you can spend on having fun with interactive songs, stories and rhymes.

How do schools teach phonics?

Phonics programmes

Most schools will use a 'published' phonics programme.¹ There are many of these programmes on the market and they are all very highly structured and comprehensive. Most have:

- a specific order and suggested pace for teaching the different sounds
- lesson plans on how to introduce new sounds
- information on fun activities and games to support the sound being taught
- computer software
- built-in revision so that children don't forget earlier sounds when learning a new sound
- a range of books that can be easily read by the children as they will only contain words with the sounds the children have been taught.

All phonics programmes start by teaching the **sounds** for the single letters of the alphabet. However, these sounds are not usually taught in alphabetical order. They're taught in groups that will allow the children to practise reading simple words as soon as the first group of six sounds have been learned. Most phonics programmes will start with the same group of six letters – 's', 'a', 't', 'p', 'i' and 'n'.

After the first group of sounds, programmes teach the remaining sounds in a different order. So for this reason, it's recommended that schools use just one programme to make sure that the children get the most benefit from the built-in revision of the sounds they've already learned.

Is a phonics programme right for my child?

On the whole, the phonics programme at your child's school should be suitable for most deaf children. However, it's important to remember that your child will not be able to hear the sounds as clearly and easily as hearing children. This means that your child's Teacher of the Deaf will need to make sure that mainstream teachers know how to adapt the programme for your child and that they also understand the importance of the following.

- Managing your child's technology to get the most out of it.
- Ensuring that any teaching takes place in a good listening environment (e.g. with minimal background noise). See our factsheet [Creating Good Listening Conditions for Learning in Education](#).
- The impact that your child's level of deafness has on learning sounds (e.g. sounds that might be difficult for your child to hear even with their hearing aids or cochlear implants, sounds that are difficult to differentiate through speech reading, etc.).
- Using strategies, if needed, such as one of the visual cueing systems where, as the letter sound is said, a specific hand shape or movement is made for that sound. The combination of hearing the sound and seeing the hand shape or movement can help the child to identify which sound is being said. This is particularly helpful for those letters which have no clear lip movements ('t', 'd',

¹ In England, the Department for Education publishes a list of programmes which meet their criteria for teaching phonics effectively and systematically. www.gov.uk/government/collections/phonics-choosing-a-programme

'n', 'k', 'g') and for those letters which have similar lip patterns (e.g. 'p' and 'b').

- Continuing to develop your child's language.

Teachers also need to be aware of the particular challenges that deaf children may have in learning phonics. The table below lists some of these challenges and how schools can help to overcome them.

Challenges/difficulties	Some possible measures schools can take to overcome the difficulties
Pace Most phonics programmes will have a recommended timescale for teaching the different sounds and this might be too fast for some deaf children.	Teachers should check that your child really knows the new sound before moving on to the next one. If not, your child must get extra practice time at school and, if possible, with you at home.
Use of computer software and DVDs Many phonics programmes now have their own software. Recent research suggests that these programmes can be more effective and motivating than worksheets in teaching phonics skills. However, even good quality, commercially produced software may use sounds that aren't different enough for deaf children to pick up on.	The teacher should check how suitable the resource is and get advice from your child's Teacher of the Deaf, if needed, on how to enhance the technology, or if there's an alternative resource for your child.
Auditory memory In working out a word phonically, the child has to: recognise each letter, remember the sound for each letter, remember the order each sound comes in and then blend all the sounds into the word. This means they have to hold a lot of information in their head at the same time about different sounds (known as auditory memory). This can be particularly hard for a deaf child as their auditory memory is often not very well developed.	The teacher should give your child extra time to blend the sounds of the letters to make the word (also known as additional processing time). Teachers of the Deaf can suggest different games or activities to help develop auditory memory. Giving your child extra opportunities to practise blending can also be really useful – ask your Teacher of the Deaf for advice on games and activities that can help.

<p>Listening/hearing in a large group Even if the room is a good listening environment with minimal background noise, deaf children will find it very difficult to hear if other children call out answers at the same time. When sounds and words are chanted out loud together, a deaf child may not hear the sounds clearly enough to be able to identify them – the pattern of sound is ‘smudged.’</p>	<p>Your child may benefit from having a new sound introduced in a one-to-one or small group situation first (pre-tutoring).</p> <p>The class teacher should set ground rules for working in a group/whole class with your child, making sure, for example, that children know they should speak one at a time, and that the deaf child can see the face of the speaker, etc.</p>
<p>Attention/concentration Even if a deaf child has the latest hearing technology, they will still have to listen very carefully in order to hear what's being said, and phonics teaching requires even more accurate listening. Children who lip-read will also have to concentrate hard on the different mouth shapes that are formed. Therefore, a deaf child is likely to tire more quickly than hearing peers and so lose concentration and attention.</p>	<p>Teachers must be alert to this fact and may sometimes find it helpful to teach your child in two shorter sessions rather than one longer session.</p>
<p>British Sign Language (BSL) users Some children use BSL as a first language.</p>	<p>The teaching of phonics should be delayed and advice taken from your child's Teacher of the Deaf.</p>

If your child doesn't have a Teacher of the Deaf, you should speak to your class teacher or to your school's special educational needs coordinator (SENCO). The teacher may need to get specialist advice from a Teacher of the Deaf to tackle any of the above challenges.

We have detailed guidance on teaching phonics to deaf children using any of the published programmes.² It's available from our Freephone Helpline or can be downloaded or ordered at www.ndcs.org.uk/publications.

² British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD), The Ear Foundation, the Ewing Foundation and the National Deaf Children's Society. *Teaching Phonics to Deaf Children: Guidance for teachers*. Revised 2016.

Is reading only about learning phonics?

No. Other skills are also involved and the Government says:

“All pupils should be taught to read for meaning and pleasure throughout primary school. The evidence shows phonics teaching is most effective when taught as part of a language-rich curriculum. Introducing a check of phonic decoding in Year 1 does not mean that teachers should delay teaching pupils wider literacy and comprehension skills.”³

How can I help my child with reading and phonics?

Sharing books

It's really important to share books and read to your children from an early age – long before they start school. You can begin with picture books – talking about the pictures and asking your child to point to different objects in them. Then progress to short stories, asking questions and getting your child to retell the story and act it out if it's appropriate.

These activities will get your child interested in books and in reading, as well as helping to develop their vocabulary. This is particularly important with deaf children who, unlike hearing children, will not be as able to pick up words from listening to others talking.

Rhymes (including nursery rhymes)

Phonics is about listening to sounds in words and so in the early years before school it's really helpful to read and recite rhymes with your child. After hearing the rhyme a few times, you should encourage your child to say the rhyming word at the end of a line and/or to join you in saying the whole rhyme. If the rhyme is accompanied by actions, this will help your child's listening skills.

Liaising with nursery staff

If your child is at nursery, you could ask the staff if they're teaching the children any particular rhymes, action songs, listening games or sound games (similar to those described in the section called 'At what age should my child start to develop their knowledge and skills of phonics?') as your deaf child would possibly benefit from getting some extra practice at home with you.

Liaising with school staff

Once your child starts school, you should carry on reading books to them. If you'd like to help your child with their phonics, ask the class teacher for guidance. It's very important that you're not trying to teach a different sound to the one that's being taught in school – this would be very confusing for your child. Many deaf children take longer than their hearing friends to learn new sounds and so benefit from getting this extra practice at home.

³ Department for Education, Year 1 Phonics Screening Check Framework for Pilot, 2011.

Have fun and enjoy learning

Any reading or phonics activity you do with your child should be seen as a game and should be fun for both you and your child. If your child has stopped enjoying the activity, or if it's making either of you feel stressed, stop straight away.

Share a concern/ask a question

If you have any concerns or questions about the development of your child's literacy or phonics skills, get in touch with your child's class teacher and/or Teacher of the Deaf straight away. If necessary, your child's Teacher of the Deaf can advise on alternative approaches to developing literacy.

Our resources [Helping Your Child to Develop Language, Read and Write \(for 3–4 year olds\)](#) and [Helping Your Deaf Child to Read and Write \(for 5–7 year olds\)](#) have more tips and suggestions for how you can help your child with their language and literacy.

Tips from parents of deaf children

We asked some parents of deaf children if they had any tips on using phonics to develop their child's reading and writing skills – and this is what they shared.

“Making a booklet which has each letter of the alphabet on a page with a picture corresponding to the letter e.g. apple, ball, cat etc. and up to three additional words on the page.”

“Emphasise the phonics sounds in words during conversation so children are hearing them as often as possible.”

“For reception children and above, you can get simple audio ‘follow-along’ books which are great in the car.”

“I think the main thing is to read with your child and listen to and gently correct speech, without making the child feel they are ‘wrong’. I would get my son to read the phrase containing the mispronounced word back to me and I would then read it back to him. We also used phonics flash cards and got other siblings to play along.”

“Learn the ‘jolly phonics’ actions which help children memorise the sound. Jolly phonics is the best scheme I’ve encountered which uses actions.”

For more support and advice from other parents of deaf children, join our forum [Parent Place](#) or visit our [Facebook page](#).

What is the phonics screening check?

If you live in England, there's a national check that's been used in schools since 2012. It's a short assessment, given at the end of Year 1, to see whether your six-year-old has learned phonic decoding to the level appropriate for their age.

Your child will be asked to read up to 40 single words (shown in groups of four) to their teacher. The whole check generally takes between four and nine minutes, but there's no time limit. This is helpful for a deaf child who may take longer to work out the words. If a child is showing signs of tiredness, the teacher can decide to give the child a break or if a child seems to be struggling, the teacher can stop the check.

Half of the words used will not be real words – these are sometimes also known as 'pseudo' words. These words give a more accurate assessment of phonics skills as your child will have to use their knowledge to work out the pseudo word, rather than their memory of what the word looks like. For example, if a child is shown the word 'bag', they may use their phonics skills to sound out and then blend the letters in the word (/b/, then /a/, then /g/), but they could also be recognising the whole word ('bag') from their visual memory. If they're shown a pseudo word such as 'vap', they have to use their phonics skills to read the word.

The check starts with simple two- and three-letter words and goes on to the more complex phonic sounds and two syllable words.

How will my child benefit from this check?

The check will identify **any** child who isn't achieving the expected level of phonics knowledge for their age. We know that many deaf children are still not doing as well as might be expected in reading and writing at school. So we welcome this opportunity to identify any deaf child who may need extra help at this early point in their education.

Does my child have to take this check?

All schools in England, with Year 1 classes will have to carry out the check. However, in exceptional circumstances a child may be excused, e.g. a BSL user who may not have been taught any phonics at this stage in their education.

What happens if my child doesn't reach the expected standard?

Your child's school will let you know the outcome of the check. The Government has been very clear that if your child doesn't reach the expected standard, they should get support from their school to improve their reading skills. In the case of a deaf child, this would usually include support and/or advice from a Teacher of the Deaf.

You could ask your child's teacher how you can help your child to do some extra practice. Your child will be able to do the check again in Year 2.

About the National Deaf Children's Society

The National Deaf Children's Society is the leading charity dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and young people across the UK.

We use the term 'deaf' to refer to **all types of hearing loss or impairment from mild to profound**. This includes deafness in one ear or temporary deafness such as glue ear.

We use the word 'parent' to refer to all parents and carers of children.

For more information take a look at our website: www.ndcs.org.uk

For information and practical support on issues related to your child's deafness, contact our Freephone Helpline on 0808 800 8880, email us at helpline@ndcs.org.uk or contact us via live chat at www.ndcs.org.uk/livechat

If you prefer to speak a language other than English, tell us the language of your choice and your phone number (in English). We will call you back with an interpreter within a few minutes.

This information can be requested in large print or as a text file.

© National Deaf Children's Society

Last reviewed: February 2016

Next review due: February 2018

Full references for this factsheet are available by emailing informationteam@ndcs.org.uk
Give us your feedback by emailing your comments to informationteam@ndcs.org.uk

