

Synthetic Phonics - What is it?

By Sue Lloyd

As of September 2006 the government policy for teaching reading in all schools is synthetic phonics. Many parents are now wondering what this all means. The reality is that it is excellent news for your children. The government has been guided by the latest scientific research, which concluded that there were long term benefits to be gained for all children learning to read by a synthetic phonics method (research on www.jollylearning.co.uk).

Synthetic phonics is a term used by experimental researchers. The synthetic part means to synthesise, to put together (blending), and does not, in this case, refer to being artificial. It means that the children are taught from the beginning to work out unknown words by blending the letter sounds. This is what good readers do when they encounter a word they have not seen before.

Parents know, and have lately been told many times by the government, that it is very important to read books to their children. This is sound advice because it develops an interest in reading, and has a significant influence on their children's vocabulary, imagination, language and comprehension skills. It is also very enjoyable. However, it does not teach the children to read. A few children, who have a good visual memory and a natural ability to hear the sounds in words, are able to teach themselves the code. They notice that a word like 'tap' has a /t/ sound at the beginning and that there is a /t/ sound at the end of the word 'hot', and that they both are written with the letter <t>. They then use this knowledge to work out other <t> words. Children like this have no problems with learning to read and write. Unfortunately it is only a few children who have this natural ability to teach themselves. Most children need to be taught exactly how to do it, building up from simple words to more complex ones.

There is a code to English but it is more complicated than other languages, such as German, Italian and Spanish. This is one of the reasons why our code needs to be taught even more systematically. It is impossible for most children to learn all the code at once. Therefore they need to start with the simplest steps and gradually be introduced to the more complicated aspects. This is not nearly as hard, as we are led to believe, when the following principles of synthetic phonics are understood.

In a synthetic phonics programme, like Jolly Phonics, the children are taught a few letter sounds, such as s, a, t, i, p, n, and are immediately encouraged to blend regular words that use these sounds, such as s-a-t (sat), t-a-p (tap), pin, tip, pat etc. Note, at this stage, the children should learn each letter by its sound and not its name. For instance, the letter s should be s (as in sun) and not ess. More words can be read, as the next letter sounds are taught.

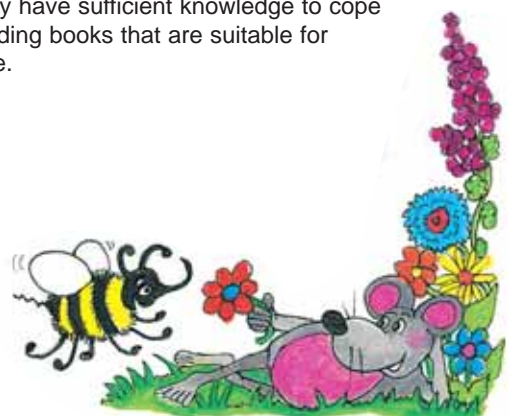
It is a building up process. It is important to only provide words that contain the letter sounds that your children know. With knowledge of the alphabet sounds and blending a child can read 300+ words.

However there are thousands of words in children's books, and learning the sounds of the alphabet letters is not nearly enough. There are 44 sounds in English and only 26 letters. This means that some sounds have to be represented by two letters put together e.g. ee (see), oa (soap), ou (out), er (letter), ng (ring), sh (wish) etc. These letter sounds are known as digraphs. As soon as a new digraph is introduced, the children need to practise reading words that use that particular digraph. For example, if the /ee/ sound has been taught, the children should be encouraged to blend words like seed, peep, meet, see, leeks, deep, need, feet, seen etc. The following groups of letter sounds are a basic start and help the children understand the main sounds of English.

1. s a t i p n
2. c k e h r m d
3. g o u l f b
4. ai j oa ie ee or
5. z w ng v oo (the oo as in book and the oo as in moon)
6. y x ch sh th (the th as in this and the th in thin)
7. qu ou oi ue er ar

Some tricky words, such as 'I, the, he, was, to and you' need to be taught before asking children to read books for themselves. Encourage the blending of these words, and looking at the part that is being awkward. For example, the word 'was', when blended, should rhyme with the word 'mass' but it is irregular and says /woz/. The children have to practise this type of word until the pronunciation is known and it is stored in their memory. It is important to choose books carefully for your children to read. Confidence is quickly lost if you ask children to try and work out words that are too hard for them, especially when they contain letter sounds that are not known. It is better to read the unknown word to them than encourage guessing, which can become a habit that is hard to eradicate.

The alternative ways of writing vowels still need to be taught, which is the last part of the main code. First of all the children learn one way of writing the /ai/ sound and then they have to learn that <ay>, as in 'day', and <a-e>, as in 'came', also represent the /ai/ sound. Once the children are fluent at blending words that use the first 42 letter sounds, and the following alternatives, then they have sufficient knowledge to cope with reading books that are suitable for their age.



Alternative vowel spellings

ai ... ay a-e (rain, play, made)

ee ... ea e-e (deep, meat, these)

ie ... igh y i-e (tie, night, my, line)

oa ... ow o-e (goat, snow, hope)

ue .. ew u-e (due, few, tube)

er ... ir ur (sister, girl, burn)

or ... au aw al (torn, August, saw, talk)

oi .. oy (boil, toy)

ou .. ow (loud, cow)

So, how can parents help their children at home? There is no doubt that gentle support and guidance is very helpful. The learning of the letter sounds is relatively easy, especially when there is support from home. As parents, we help our children to learn vocabulary ('What's that Mummy? - that's a cow').

It is in much the same way that we can help our children learn the letter sounds, by pointing to a letter(s) and saying the sound. Teaching letter sounds is much easier than teaching colours. On the other hand the essential skill of blending can be difficult for some children. These children fail to hear the word when the sounds have been spoken, but with gentle help they can all be tuned in to hear the word. It may take longer for some than others. Try developing this skill when looking at pictures in a book. Ask your child if he/she can see the d-o-g, the sh-ee-p, the c-ow-s etc. (keep to simple short words).

Some children are immediately able to put the sounds together and point to the dog, sheep and cows. Others will regularly need this kind of activity until the skill suddenly comes.

A little and often is the effective way. Once this is achieved then your child can attempt to blend simple words, providing the letter sounds are known. Have fun with your support.

Helping your child to read is a wonderful and essential gift.

