



Key guidance: Foundations for phonics

Foundations for Phonics contributes to the provision for ‘Communication and language’ and ‘Literacy’ (DfE, 2020); 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.

The most important aspects of *Foundations for Phonics* to develop in the nursery are:

- sharing high-quality stories and poems with children
- learning a range of nursery rhymes and action rhymes
- activities that develop focused listening and attention, including oral blending
- attention to high-quality language with children (see the ‘Language and Vocabulary’ section of the website).

Sharing stories and poems

Research shows that children benefit from daily sharing of high-quality stories and poems from a young age: they learn language faster, enter school with a larger vocabulary and become more successful readers (Mol et al., 2008).

From the start of nursery, children should have lots of opportunities to engage with books that fire their imagination and interest, as well as immerse them in language they would not otherwise be exposed to. They should also be provided with a range of high-quality books to choose and read (in their own words), as well as to share with an adult.

Children will benefit from reading both as part of a class or key group and also one-to-one with an adult.

Further information about sharing stories and poems with children can be found in the ‘Reading for pleasure’ section of the website.

Effective ways of sharing books and poems

- Use a balance of reading styles. Research suggests that the most effective styles are:
 - dialogic – where the children are active participants in the reading (rather than just reading to the children); talking about and around the book, rather than just focusing on the text
 - pause reading – where the practitioner pauses and encourages the children to talk (Colmar, 2014)
 - use of props or objects – particularly effective for children with low levels of language (Wasik and Bond, 2001)
 - use of elaborative reminiscing – where the practitioner and children relate events in the story to events in the children's life (Reece et al., 2010).

It is important that, over time, children have a balance of these styles of sharing a story, even though children with language impairments seem to benefit less from the dialogic style and more from the simpler styles of pause reading and use of props or objects (cf. Mol et al., 2008).

- Use high-quality books that provide children with a range of new vocabulary and develop a love of books and reading.
- Build anticipation – provide children with a small bit of information about the book before you read.
- Share your passion and enthusiasm when reading – discuss your favourite books so that children can develop their own passions and enthusiasms.
- Read the book yourself, before reading it to the children, to ensure you can develop interest and draw out new and interesting vocabulary.
- Encourage the children to join in with repeated refrains (such as 'Run, run, as fast as you can, you can't catch me, I'm the gingerbread man').
- Use different voices for different characters to spark interest and imagination.
- Trigger their curiosity and invite their participation by 'wondering aloud' (for example, **say:** *I wonder why that happened? I think that means ...*)
- Read stories over and over again. Hearing words repeated is crucial to children learning new language.
- Select books that reflect the children you are sharing stories with.

Learning nursery rhymes and action rhymes

Singing a range of nursery rhymes and action rhymes must be part of the daily routine. Children need to experience a rich repertoire of nursery rhymes and action rhymes that include multi-sensory experiences, such as action rhymes in which children have to add claps, knee pats or foot stamps, or move in a particular way. They need to build a stock of rhymes through hearing them in different contexts.

Effective ways of sharing nursery rhymes and action rhymes

- Use a wide range of nursery rhymes and action rhymes.
- Repeat these often, so that children learn the words and actions for themselves.
- Use actions and clapping.
- Use different voices and sound effects.
- Use kinaesthetic approaches.

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 section of the website provided in this guidance as the daily oral blending activities. The teaching steps for these games are clearly set out in the downloadable 'Foundation for phonics prompt card'.

The accompanying 'How to' videos can be found in 'Reception How to videos' in the 'Oral blending games' section of the website.

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?'

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 guidance on 'Phase 2 grapheme information sheet' and 'Pronunciation videos'). There are three videos which show you how to pronounce the sounds. These are organised by the term that your child will learn them: Autumn 1, Autumn 2 and Spring 1.

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 2021 handbook. DfE crown copyright, 2020.

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