

Explainer: what is phonics and why is it important?

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The efficacy of phonics as a method of teaching has been debated for several decades, and has recently come back to the forefront of public debate.

This time, the focus is on the phonics check – a screening tool designed to identify early readers who may be in need of intervention, and provide some indication of how successful current phonics teaching methods are. The UK has been using the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) since 2012, and now there is a push to implement a trial of the same check in Australia. This has raised some concerns. So what's the fuss about phonics?

What is phonics?

Scientific studies have repeatedly found that explicit systematic phonics instruction is the most effective way to teach children how to read. Without it, some children will end up having serious reading difficulties. But what is explicit systematic phonics? Let's break this term down.

Phonics: Teaching children the sounds made by individual letter or letter groups (for example, the letter 'c' makes a *k* sound), and teaching children how to merge separate sounds together to make it one word (for example, blending the sounds *k*, *a*, *t* makes *cat*). This type of phonics teaching is often referred to as 'synthetic phonics'.

Explicit: Directly teaching children the specific associations between letters and sounds, rather than expecting them to gain this knowledge indirectly.

Systematic: English has a complicated spelling system. It is important to teach letter sound mappings in a systematic way, beginning with simple letter sound rules and then moving onto more complex associations.

The term 'phonics' has been used quite loosely by several reading programs, with some straying from these fundamental principles.

For example, some programs, such as Embedded Phonics, teach phonics by asking children to guess unfamiliar words using cues, such as the meaning of a word gleaned from sentence context.

Other programs ask children to look at words (for example, pig, page, pen all start with the same sound) and learn letter-sound rules by analysing or making comparisons between those words (analogy or analytical phonics).

These programs are not as effective as those focusing on letter-sound knowledge taught in an explicit and systematic fashion.

Why is it important?

Phonics instruction teaches children how to decode letters into their respective sounds, a skill that is essential for them to read unfamiliar words by themselves. Keep in mind that most words are in fact unfamiliar to early readers in print,



even if they have spoken knowledge of the word. Having letter-sound knowledge will allow children to make the link between the unfamiliar print words to their spoken knowledge. Another aspect that is rarely discussed is that the letter-sound decoding process itself is a learning mechanism. For example, make a mental note of how you feel when reading the following words:

Wingardium Leviosa

When you first read these words, you probably used your letter-sound knowledge, which involved two important processing stages:

1. It helped you produce the correct sound of an unfamiliar print word. If you're a Harry Potter fan, the pronunciation also probably lit up connections to the meaning of the word.

2. It drew your attention to the details and the combination of the letters of the word.

These two steps then function as a learning mechanism, allowing you to recognise the previously unfamiliar word quicker the next time around (go back to read the words again and see how you feel about them now).

This transition from slowly sounding out a word to rapidly recognising it, is what we call "learning to read by sight". Every reader must make this transition to read fluently.

It is true that there are many

English words, such as 'yacht' and 'isle', that do not follow typical letter-sound rules. Even then, research has shown that children can still learn these words successfully by decoding some parts of the word (*y ... t* for *yacht*), with help from spoken vocabulary knowledge to facilitate the learning.

Phonics is important not only because this knowledge allows children to read on their own, but it is also a learning mechanism that builds up a good print word dictionary that can be quickly accessed.

Will it really improve reading?

Recent National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results have shown no improvement in reading and writing skills despite much government funding.

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results demonstrated a steady decline in children's reading ability in Australia since 2000.

So will more effective phonics instruction really help to improve these results?

Of course, reading effectively (whether to learn or for pleasure) is not just about phonics or having a decent store of single words.

Functional reading requires several other skills such as good vocabulary, the ability to extract inferences, and synthesise and hold information in

memory across several sentences. But if your single word reading is not efficient, comprehension is going to be dramatically affected.

If we use building a house as an analogy, understanding text is the complete home; single word reading ability is the structural frame of the house, and phonics is the foundation of that frame.

Effective phonics instruction is important because letter-sound knowledge is the foundation needed to build up reading and writing abilities.

The phonics screening check will indicate whether children have gained the necessary skills. If not, schools need to review current methods of teaching and implement methods that stick with evidence-based principles of explicit, systematic phonics teaching.

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