

## PHONICS ROUTINES

Spelling and decoding are **reciprocal processes of encoding language into print and lifting it back off the page** – going from sound to print or vice versa.

**Routines matter.** They help children who are struggling to learn to read to avoid confusion. They add clarity about how to approach this difficult task.

Avoiding confusion **matters a great deal for some children.**

Many children will learn to read no matter what teaching methods are used.

However, there is a substantial number of **children who require great precision.** They need to be crystal clear about how to go about decoding print (lifting words off the page) and about how to go about encoding print (spelling). **These skills must be taught explicitly and repeatedly.** There are three core skills at the heart of phonics – **knowledge of phoneme/grapheme correspondences** (PGCs), **blending** and **segmenting**

Teaching must be **consistent** to **de-mystify working with the complex, reversible alphabetic code.** It is necessary to keep the number of people practicing phonics with a struggling reader to the fewest possible and to maintain the greatest continuity and consistency possible.

All adults should adopt the same, **clear, simple routines** – identical as much as possible.

Many children may learn to read and spell without phonics instruction or even with inconsistent routines; however, **routines matter most for the students who are struggling the most.** If you are working with a student who is finding it a challenge to decode or encode, consistency and continuity is a great gift.

### Teaching Print Decoding and Spelling with Complex, Reversible Alphabetic Code

#### *Decoding* – print to sound process

Decoding is NOT the same thing as “reading” (which is about comprehension). However, it is **a necessary first step** which for the most part (not entirely, but mainly) precedes reading comprehension. Theories of reading which rely on multiple methods of cuing from context, pictures etc. are disproven and are inconsistent with reading processes in the brain (where letters need to link to known word sounds through orthographic mapping to trigger meaning connections). A great body of reading science supports the need for a reading program which will engage and enthuse readers and teach 1) phonemic awareness, 2) phonics, 3) fluency, 4) vocabulary and 5) comprehension.

**All readers must develop facility with the complex alphabetic code (phonics).** Many will do so through inductive reasoning and self-teaching or via rather haphazard exposure to incidental phonics teaching. However, many (as many as 20-40%) will not. Poor readers rely on context and pictures and guessing at words based on anything other than the print within the word itself. There is no scientific evidence supporting the practice of teaching children the strategies used by poor readers. Skilled readers have developed automaticity of decoding based on the complex, reversible alphabetic code. That is what must be taught to ‘not yet skilled’ readers.

#### *Decoding Routine*

Children need to be explicitly taught the ideas and specifics of the complex, reversible alphabetic code, in a developmentally appropriate manner.

*The suggestions in this handout are compiled from many sources such as Debbie Hepplewhite (Phonics International), Denise Eide (The Logic of English) and others. Information about teaching systematic phonics is readily available but care must be taken to consider the wide range of opinions and to focus on where there is an evidence base (systematic phonics) and match to what works for students and teachers.*

These are the important things to know and teach about the alphabetic code:

The English language has a fascinating history – but this has resulted in a complex alphabetic code for the writing system. 26 letters of the alphabet represent the 44 or so smallest sounds identifiable in English speech. They do this in three complicated ways:

1. one sound (phoneme) can be represented by one, two, three or four letters: e.g. /a/ can be represented with one letter, 'a' as in apple. /f/ can be represented by two letters 'ph'; /igh/ sound can be represented by three letters 'igh' as in 'light'; or the sound /oa/ can be represented by four letters 'ough' as in 'although'.
2. one sound can be represented by multiple spelling alternatives (graphemes): e.g. the sound /oa/: can be represented at least seven or eight ways - o, oh, oa, ow, oe, o-e, eau, ough
3. one grapheme (letter or letter group) can represent multiple sounds: e.g. 'ough': /oa/ though, /o/ thought, long /oo/ through, /ou/ plough, /u/ thorough

On an Alphabetic Code Chart, the units of sound (phonemes) can be shown in slash marks. Vowel sounds provide the main volume and depth in spoken words whereas the consonant sounds are generally much quieter and sometimes very high-pitched such as /s/ and /t/.

Teachers need to teach the separate units of sounds carefully, avoiding the added 'schwa' or "uh" sound: e.g. "sss" not "suh"; "t" not "tuh".

***Use an Alphabetic Code Chart to plan and track what has been taught/will be taught.***

Create a phonics binder for every child. The binder should include a personal copy of the Alphabetic Code Chart, an exercise book for spelling practice, zip folders for building banks of both GPCs and known words for decoding and for spelling (three separate zip folders). Examples are readily available online e.g. <https://alphabeticcodecharts.com/> (see other sites of that author, D. Hepplewhite, as well).

Consistently use language to explain the pronunciation of printed words. For example, "In this word, these letters (*point to the letter group*) are code for */say the sound made by the letter group/*." For example, when a child is 'stumped' when they come across the word 'straight' (and assuming they can sound out through the /s/ /t/ /r/ sounds), underline and point to 'aigh' and say "in this word, these letters are code for /ai/" and if that GPC is not already on the alphabetic code chart, make sure to add it.

Do not confuse whether you are modelling encoding or decoding; do not include unnecessary or redundant information. For example, when segmenting for encoding purposes **say** "boat - /b/ /oe/ /t/" do not blend those sounds back into the original word (i.e. do **NOT** say "boat - /b/ /oe/ /t/ - boat". That would be counter-productive as you are working with/teaching segmenting for encoding purposes and not blending for decoding purposes).

*Decoding – start with print – get to sound*

Phonics teaching/routines for decoding:

1. Teach the Grapheme/Phoneme Correspondences (**GPCs**) of letters and letter groups as per an Alphabetic Code Chart
2. Build a cumulative bank of **known GPCs** for each child
3. Practice and build automaticity for **GPCs**

4. Teach and practice sounding out all through words:
  - a. **Scan** all-through-the-printed-word to **recognise any known GPCs**
  - b. **Say** the **sounds** for the graphemes and **blend to 'discern' and say the target word** (use *cumulative words, sentences and texts*)
  - c. **Modify/tweak** the pronunciation of the target word if necessary, and until the word is recognized
5. Build a **bank of known** words for each child (words the child can consistently sound out accurately)
6. **Practice and build automaticity** for each word (sounding out until no longer necessary).

*Encoding* – sound to print process

Spelling is not sufficient for written expression but is a necessary sub-skill. Spelling strengthens reading decoding skills, and decoding skills strengthen spelling. Developing **automaticity** for spelling supports written expression in the same way that making math facts automatic supports math problem solving. Reducing cognitive load, making routine skills automatic, leaves cognitive resources for the development of ideas, planning, organizing, word choice, voice and expression in written language.

Working on spelling through phonics assumes that children are being taught GPCs and the various spellings that encode the phonemes of the English language.

*Spelling – start with sound encode to print*

Phonics routines for encoding:

Teach the pre-requisite skill of saying sounds all-through-the-spoken-word:

1. Phonemic awareness - Attune the learner's 'ear' to phonemes by saying a whole spoken word:
  - a. Once
  - b. Second time
  - c. Third time - sssllllloooowllllyyyy
2. Model - Saying the sounds all-through-the-spoken-word. Say the sounds as close as possible to phonemes in real speech (consider volume and pitch, avoid 'uh' on the end of consonant sounds).
3. Student says the sounds all-through-the-spoken-word.
4. Practice with words with smaller numbers of sounds (not letters) and gradually build to words with greater quantity of sounds and practice with words made up of two to five sounds. If you find a limit on the number of sounds the student can currently work with, account for this in choosing spelling words.

Once student has practiced the pre-requisite skills of saying sounds all through the spoken word, the phonics routine for encoding:

1. Orally segment (identify the sounds) all-through-the-spoken-word
2. Tally sounds and mark lines on paper
3. Identify/select correct graphemes as code for the identified sounds (teacher may provide choices at earlier stages of practice)
4. Move tiles/blocks (if using such a tool) or print/write picture-sounds (letters) as able
5. Sound out and blend to check spelling
6. Over time, build up "known spelling" word banks
- 7.