

The importance of phonics

What is phonics?

Phonics is a basic skill used in learning to read and write. It consists of learning:

- the 44 sounds in the English language made by individual letters ('a', 's', 't', etc.) or groups of two or more letters ('sh', 'ou', 'ear', etc.)
- how to put these sounds together (blend) to make words (for example, blending 'c'-'a'-'t' to give the word 'cat').

Why is phonics important?

Knowing the letter sounds will help your child to work out words they have not seen before when they are reading and to choose the right letters for the sounds in words when they are writing. For example, if a young child sees the word 'shop' for the first time they will try to read it by breaking it down into three phonic sounds 'sh', 'o' and 'p' – this is called decoding. If they are asked to write the word 'shop' they will try to combine the sounds 'sh', 'o' and 'p' – this is called encoding.

What is the phonics screening check?

It is a short assessment to see whether your child has learned phonic decoding to the level appropriate for their age.

The check consists of your child being shown 40 words, which they will be asked to read to their teacher. It takes on average four to nine minutes, but there is no time limit. The teacher can stop the check if the child is struggling.

Half of the words used will not be real words but 'non-words' (or 'pseudo words'). These give an accurate assessment of phonic skills as your child will have to use their phonic knowledge to respond to the non-word, as opposed to their memory of what the word looks like. For example, if a child is shown the word 'bag', they may use their phonic skills to read the word ('b'-'a'-'g') but could also be recognising what the word 'bag' looks like from memory; if they are shown the non-word 'pag' they can only use their phonic skills to read the word.

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

How will deaf children benefit from this check?

The check will identify any child who is not achieving the level of phonics knowledge appropriate for their age. This means they can be given further help at an early point in their education.

Does my child have to take this check?

All schools will have to carry out the check. In exceptional circumstances a child may be excused, for example, a British Sign Language (BSL) user who has not yet been taught any phonics.

What happens if my child does not pass the check?

The Government says that if your child does not reach the expected standard, they should receive support from their school to improve their reading skills. In the case of a deaf child, this would usually involve support from a Teacher of the Deaf.

You could also ask the school how you can be involved in providing additional practice for your child.

Your child will be able to retake the check in Year 2.

Is reading and writing only about phonics?

No – there are other skills involved – the Government says: "All pupils should be taught to read for meaning and pleasure... 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." (Department of Education (2011) *Year 1 Phonics Screening Check Framework for Pilot*.)



What else do you need to think about this term?

Taking part in school trips

Your child's school will ensure the safety of all pupils. As well as preparing your child in advance about what to expect, it's worth thinking about any extra information the school may need about your deaf child, such as:

- practical issues, including hearing aid maintenance
- any additional medical needs
- specific needs, for example, sleeping with the light on.

Exams

You will need to speak with your child's support staff well in advance of exams. You can help your child to prepare for exams by:

- ensuring they have a quiet place to work, eat well and get plenty of sleep
- planning with them how, what and when they will revise
- allowing time for sport and relaxation.

Higher education

You may be thinking about your deaf child going to university. To help them make the right choice you could:

- attend some university open days or any parents' meetings held at your child's school/college
- look at the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) website: www.ucas.ac.uk especially the 'students with disabilities' section
- consider other options, such as apprenticeships: www.apprenticeships.org.uk or employment: www.connexions-direct.com.



NDCS and the British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD) have been advising the Government on the implications of this check for deaf children.