

Taking the Fuss Out of Phonics

It's remarkable how much controversy the issue of teaching phonics in reading has caused in recent years. The word "phonics" simply describes the sounds different letters make individually or in combination with other letters. Linguists have developed some complicated distinctions between these different sounds. But most parents and children do not need to understand the difference between a "diphthong" and "digraph" in order to learn the phonics they need to read. Here are some ways to build your understanding of the teacher's phonics instruction program:

- **Ask for an explanation of how phonics is taught.**

You might be surprised at the many ways students are encouraged to test out and use their understanding of sounds. For example, misspelled words in writing are used by many teachers to diagnose what sounds children know—and what sounds they still need to work with over time.

- **Recognize there is a sequence in phonics learning.**

Though all children learn at their own pace, there is a regular order to learning different sounds. Certain vowel combinations are more complex, and take more time because some vowel sounds can be subtle, or nonexistent.

- **Read with your children at home.**

Research shows that children who experience regular and frequent opportunities to practice reading are able to master dozens of phonetic rules for vowels. Through exposure to many examples of different vowels in print, the brain sifts, sorts, and begins to recognize phonics patterns that are too complex to be taught directly. Be sure to expose your child to a wide variety of reading materials such as books (fiction and nonfiction), magazines, and newspapers. Read daily with your child.

- **Encourage your children to write at home.**

Children will pick up consonant sounds first. Early writing often involves copying down the beginning consonant sounds in words, with final and middle consonant sounds coming later. Ask what sounds your child hears in different words as they read to you or write. Encourage beginning readers to write the consonant sounds. As they master consonants, encourage attempts at vowel sounds. Be sure to provide paper, stationery, postcards, pens, pencils, envelopes and stamps.