

The Alphabetic Principle and Phonics

What is it?

The alphabetic principle is the understanding that words are made up of letters and letters represent sounds. If a child understands these letter-sound associations, he is on the way to reading and writing words. Phonics is the instructional method that focuses on these letter-sound associations.

Why is it important?

The English language is based on an alphabet, so being able to associate printed letters with sounds in order to sound out (decode) is necessary.

What can we do at home?

Building words - Using magnetic letters, make a three letter word on the refrigerator (cat). Have your child read the word and use it in a sentence. Every day, change one letter to make a new word. Start by changing only the beginning letter (cat, bat, hat, sat, mat, rat, pat). Then change only the ending letter (pat, pal, pad, pan). Finally, change only the middle letter (pan, pen, pin, pun).

Making words - For this game, you will need magnetic letters and three bags. Put half of the consonants into the first bag. Put the vowels into the middle bag, and put the remaining consonants into the last bag. Have your child pull one letter from the first bag. That will be the first letter of their word. Then have him pull from the vowel bag for the second letter of the word and from the other consonant bag for the third letter of the word. Next, the child will read the word and decide if it is a real word or a nonsense word. Take turns, replacing the vowels as needed until there are no more consonants left.

Writing words - Many children love to send and receive notes, and writing is a great way to reinforce phonics skills. Send your child notes in his backpack or place notes on the pillow. Have a relative or friend send a letter or email to your child. Whenever your child receives a note, have him write back. Don't be concerned about spelling. Instead, have your child sound out the words to the best of his ability.

Labeling words - When reading with your child, keep Post-it notes handy. Every so often, have your child choose one object in the picture and write the word on a Post-it. Put the note in the book to read each time you come to that page.

Practicing words with pictures - Choose pictures from a magazine or catalog. Say the name of the picture, have your child say the sound that the picture begins with and the name of that letter.

Hunting for words - Choose a letter and have your child hunt for five items beginning with that letter sound. As each object is found, help your child write the word on a list. For example, if the target sound is "m", the child might find and write mop, mat, Mom, money, and microwave.

Hints for helping your child sound out words

1. **High Frequency Words** - If the word is a high frequency word (such as, *is, of, or could*), say the word and explain that it doesn't follow the rules. It just needs to be memorized.

2. **First Sound** - Have your child say the first sound in the word and make a guess based on the picture or surrounding words. Double-check the printed word to see if it matches the child's guess.

3. **Sound and Blend** - Have your child say each sound separately (sss aaa t). This is called "sounding it out", and then say the sounds together (sat). This is "blending".

4. **Familiar Parts** - When your child starts reading longer words, have him notice the parts of the word that he already knows. For example, in a word such as *presenting*, your child may already know the prefix *pre*, the word *sent*, and the word ending *ing*.