



## The Y1 Phonics Screening Check - a response from the RRF

The DFE will launch a Year 1 phonics screening check from 2012. This check is intended to assess the progress of the pupils' phonics skills with the aim of identifying those pupils who are falling behind.

This short assessment will be a 'light touch' screening check which will be carried out by teachers towards the end of Year 1. It will consist of 50% real words and 50% non-words with graphemes (letter/s) and phonemes (sounds) the children have been taught.

### **What are non-words?**

Non-words are words that do not have meaning like 'meff' or 'chup'.

### **Why include non-words in a reading check?**

Non-words are an effective method of assessing alphabetic code knowledge (the ability to identify letter/s and match them to the sounds they encode) and skills (being able to blend those sounds into words). The use of non-words ensures that the pupils must rely on their alphabetic code knowledge and blending skills as they will be unable to resort to a visual memory bank of words they can already read.

### **Why is it important for children to learn about phonics (the alphabetic code) and the skill of blending sounds?**

When children rely solely on their visual memory to read, they can read words they already know. But what strategy do they have when they encounter a new word? Using their knowledge of phonics to identify the sounds the letters represent and then blend the sounds into words is the only way they can independently decode new words. This is particularly important as the reader begins to read more multi-syllabic words which are too complex to remember in any other way.

In the same way that it is important to ensure that children have secure number bonds before they progress to learn multiplication, it is important that children have a secure phonic foundation before they are able to develop higher order reading skills such as comprehension, inference, skimming, summarising, etc.

It is true to say that some children can unscramble the alphabetic code for themselves and appear not to need phonics instruction, but most cannot. Those who unscramble the code themselves will become fluent readers any way. As phonics teaching is necessary for most children, and can only enhance the progress of those who have

deduced it, we believe that systematic phonics teaching will improve the reading ability of all children.

Many English schools have a significant number of pupils with English as a second language (ESL). A structured phonic programme enables ESL learners to understand the alphabet code and to access it phonetically. They benefit from this approach not only for reading but also for extending their English vocabulary as it enables them to access a very large number of English words. Teaching English spelling and reading within the structure of an alphabet code, accessed by sound, clarifies what can otherwise remain a daunting complexity.

### **Who objects to this initiative?**

Reservations have been voiced by the UKLA (United Kingdom Literacy Association) who have concerns about the check for a variety of reasons, mainly because they consider phonics as only one strategy of a number of strategies that children use to read.

Phonics specialists are keen to emphasise that phonic decoding is an essential foundation which, if taught systematically, will help most children to read. They recognise that there are other reading skills of a higher order, which also need to be taught to many children once they have their decoding skills in place.

Another concern raised is that phonics is a 'drill and kill' method of teaching to read: that in the process of learning the mechanics of decoding, children lose their enthusiasm for reading.

Phonic specialists believe this is a misplaced fear. In fact, the opposite happens. A solid phonics foundation creates fluent and enthusiastic readers because the skills taught facilitate independence and success. Phonics instruction, if done systematically, should be only the initial and short stage of teaching children to read.

Some Early Years teachers have concerns but this is more to do with the age at which reading is taught in the UK rather than the actual screening check. If we are teaching our children to read at the early age of 5 all the more reason to do so systematically.

### **Who supports this initiative?**

Phonics specialists welcome the screening check for two reasons:

1. It will ensure that all children have a good phonics foundation.
2. It will identify those pupils who need extra support.

In the past, too many pupils have reached secondary school with a poor phonics foundation and this has been a major obstacle to their educational progress. It is very important to identify these pupils and support them early on.

### **Should teachers fear a phonics screening check?**

Schools that offer a coherent and systematic phonics programme from the beginning will find this screening check very useful. It will reflect the success of their systematic synthetic phonics programme and will identify those pupils who need extra help.

Schools that do not follow a systematic phonics programme will find that their pupils are not doing as well as they should. This phonics screening check will help them to

identify problems which, if not addressed early, can only lead to pupils failing further up the school, leaving them unable to access the world of reading. This failure will have a serious and detrimental effect on their future lives.