

Chapter 1

Pondering the Power of Phonics

In This Chapter

- Understanding phonics and how phonics is taught
 - Preparing your child to learn phonics
 - Discovering how phonics concepts build on one another
-

You've already seen your child through walking, talking, eating with utensils, potty training, and countless other processes. Reading is just another part of growing and discovering. Reading is necessary for success in life, and phonics can help. Phonics is a method of word recognition. It helps children understand how to slide letter sounds together to form words. If you're curious and have some knowledge of phonics, you need to know from the get-go that this book presents a specific phonics approach to reading and spelling. This book, in itself, is very basic because I wrote it for a parent and a child. But no matter what age you are, this book can help you.

Several years ago I taught phonics to two middle-aged men. Both had suffered from look/say teaching in grade school, and had feeble decoding and spelling skills. I taught the same lessons that applied to any beginner: the sequential flashcards and the vowel chart. After they realized that they could decode unknown words, they were on their way. Because they were both intelligent and successful people, they applied their knowledge and greatly improved their skills.

In this chapter, I give you a brief introduction to phonics and the way this book approaches it to help you and your child master the art of reading. This chapter also outlines the concepts you see throughout this book and how I (as an experienced phonics tutor) approach the subject with children. With equal doses of patience and perseverance, and help from this book, your phonics routine will run as smoothly as a fine-tuned Cadillac.

Taking the First Steps toward Using Phonics

Getting your child reading at the earliest possible age and keeping him happy at the same time makes the whole process of learning to read easier. Learning to read isn't supposed to consume every moment. As your child enters this stage of discovery, he needs to be busy with other things — like playing outside, having a hobby or two, learning board games, experimenting with art supplies, and so on.

The phonics approach to reading proves itself to be the best. It isn't reading in itself; it's the best method for word recognition, far superior to the look/say (see the word/say the word) approach. Phonics covers all the bases. Sliding sounds together to make words gives way to instant recognition of the words as you progress in your reading. Phonics training also makes for excellent spellers.

Phonics, quite simply, is a method of learning to read in which you connect sounds with letters or groups of letters. For example, *c*, *k*, and *ck* can all represent one sound: /k/.



The term *phonic* shouldn't be confused with the word *phonetic*, which simply describes the sound of human speech. I use *phonetic* occasionally in this book when describing sounds of letters or words, but the term doesn't apply to the letters or words themselves.

Some words are purely phonetic in that they don't have any sort of visual reference, such as the words *and* or *but*. Words that have a visual reference, such as nouns like *cat* or *rabbit*, are often referred to as *sight* words or *look/say* words throughout this book.

Whether you choose home-school or regular school for your child, your goal is to educate him to his unique capacity. You want to help him develop his inherent talents and abilities, which will serve him for his entire life. When you teach him to read, you're there with him at the beginning of his intellectual achievement.

Phonics For Dummies contains a program that you can use to instruct your child in how to read. There are many methods for teaching phonics, but the one used in this book involves teaching a child to read starting with the following:

A remarkable offshoot of phonics

When you take the phonics approach to teaching your child to read, your child learns to use his language skills in an organized way. The method starts with the most basic elements of language and then builds on them a little at a time. Your child is accumulating layers of skill and is able to hang on to them. (Saxon math books take a similar approach to mathematics.)

You've probably heard someone say something like, "My mind is like a sieve! I read or hear something, and it goes right on through!" Teaching your child with an organized method

keeps him from ever having to utter these words. It's akin to painting a great piece of art by using the brush as a tool rather than splashing paint and allowing it to stick where it may. Learning to read with phonics (the brush) programs the brain to retain information. Children enjoy unlocking new words, and when the words are unlocked, the retention is easy. The end result enables them to quickly grasp unknown words, learn their definitions, bank the knowledge, and then move on to the next level.

- ✓ The most frequently used words
- ✓ The most often used letters that make up the words
- ✓ The easiest-to-sound letters that make up a word

This means that you aren't teaching the alphabet in alphabetical order, which may be a new concept to you, but it's a successful and tried-and-true method.

You can use this method to help your child pronounce the consonant and vowel sounds of the alphabet, decode words, and read. Your child will learn guidelines for interpreting different letter patterns. Along the way, he'll discover how to read in a logical and methodical manner. The phonics program breaks down learning into succinct, compact units so that your child can learn one skill at a time without getting frustrated. Phonics becomes fun and easy for your child.

There is a bit of a controversy regarding how to teach phonics. Educators disagree about how large a role phonics should play in learning to read and how often teachers should use phonics in teaching reading. But learning to read, spell, and write is only part of phonics.

The phonics approach I present in this book enables your child to think logically in terms of reading and spelling words. He'll develop techniques for processing and using the information. You'll see him progress quickly from lesson to lesson.

Getting Your Child (And You) into the Swing of Things

Before getting into the nitty-gritty of phonics, you first need to examine and warm up to the idea of instructing your child. To learn how to read, the student depends on an instructor. Who might that be? This book confers the title upon you! No parent has to be a PhD to teach his or her child to read, write, and spell. By following the instructions in this book, you can wear the crown of Master Teacher. You can discover all the techniques you need to teach your child how to read and spell.



Your self-confidence rubs off on your child. Realizing the importance of a positive attitude is half the battle. The rest is letting go of your doubts about success and trusting the teaching method that I present in this book to do the job.

Atmosphere and timing

Children learn best in a quiet, stress-free atmosphere where they know what to expect. Before diving into the first phonics lesson, accustom your child to the idea of “school time” — a part of the day devoted to learning phonics. Let him know that this time is special, not a time for play or watching TV. Eventually, your child will accept the guidelines and even begin to look forward to your time together.



Watch your own stress level as you conduct the lessons. You may grow frustrated when your child isn't grasping a lesson as quickly as you'd like, but don't let it show. Call the lesson short if you have to. Or go over a phonics concept that your child is already familiar with to get back on track.

For most children, keeping a schedule is important. Children learn better if their lessons come at a specific time each day because they know what to expect and can mentally prepare themselves for learning.

Applying the skills consistently

When your child is ready for some application, he'll start to apply his new-found skills at the local restaurant by grabbing crayons and printing feverishly on the kids' placemat, quizzing you, following mazes, and asking to play hangman. If that isn't enough, he'll be reading the road signs — or at least picking out the letters. He'll sound out words on the cereal box, sing along

with a phonics song Grandma gave him, or actually pick out words in a Dr. Seuss book. Even better, he'll be reading by repetition and phonics in Mac and Tab. With your help, he can apply the skills he's learning every day.



Provide age-appropriate material for your child to read. He'll be reading quite well by the time he masters the material through the end of Part III, but you really don't want him reading a front-page crime report in the local newspaper. Even though he's able to decode multisyllable words, he won't necessarily comprehend them in an adult context. Early on, the challenge and need is to provide lots of material that he can easily read so that the previously acquired skills can be successfully practiced.

Helping you and your child look forward to your lessons

Most people remember kindergarten as a wonderful experience. They liked kindergarten so much because it wasn't a traditional class, but a class that involved hands-on learning and experimentation with different kinds of materials, as well as a class that engaged all the senses — not just the eyes and ears. The techniques I introduce in this book can help you turn “school time” into something your child will look forward to and remember fondly, like kindergarten.

Singing

You absolutely have to start with singing the ABC's. As kids learn their ABC's and the sounds that go with them, their innate creativity and talent comes to the fore and they groove on the fun of learning. Put anything to song — vowel guidelines, syllabification guidelines — even if you have to invent a melody. Children are natural learners when material is presented in song. They'll repeat your songs and remember the guidelines they refer to.

Playing games

This book is filled with activities that make learning fun. You don't necessarily have to follow the directions to a T. Mix it up a little. For example, instead of telling your child to point out the short *a* in one of the reading lessons, give him an ice cream cone and allow him to take a lick every time he sees a short *a*.

Glory and praise

Your child will beam with pride when he reads his first word, sentence, and paragraph. He'll brag to Grandma, the other kids, and anyone who will listen. Lay the praise on thick and give him the attention he deserves for a job well done.

Livening it up with flashcards and other teaching aids

Throughout this book, I give detailed explanations about how to use various teaching aids. Here's a short list of the teaching aids that you need in order for your child to get the most out of his learning time:

- ✓ **Flashcards and charts:** These visual aids can help a great deal in reading instruction, and they make the learning experience more lively and cheerful.
- ✓ **Craft and writing materials:** You need paper, pencil, crayons, markers, and a pair of scissors.

Sight words (those that kids learn to know on sight without decoding by sound) make great flashcards. When you flash sight words to a bunch of kids, you find out which ones are visual learners (those whose strength lies in seeing the word as a whole better than another) and which little angels are auditory learners, whose listening skills are stronger. Using the phonics method to teach reading and spelling enhances all the learning processes.



You can write anything you want on a flashcard. It's a great device for combining work with fun. Your child can work through the flashcards by himself or ask someone else to go through them with him. While you're getting your lesson ready for the day, hand the flashcards to your child and he can quietly flip them himself until you're ready. For more info on using flashcards, see Chapter 2.

Getting an Overview of the Phonics Fundamentals

In teaching children to read with the phonics method in this book, each lesson builds upon the next, and one skill leads to another. This way, as children accumulate knowledge about phonics, they learn with confidence. The following pages explain how different phonics concepts are introduced and how they build on one another. You get a solid idea of what's in this book by reading these pages.

In every chapter in this book, I present a specific approach to phonics. The chapter lessons go something like this:

1. Your child warms up by reading flashcards with sounds and words.

This activity engages speech, sound, and sight.

2. Your child listens attentively as you read a story, and then you ask questions to assess your child's listening comprehension skills.

3. You and your child read the phonics tables and assimilate the lesson.

You ask the child to spell words from the lesson, and he responds to the spoken directions by spelling the words orally (thereby engaging yet another sense).

4. You dictate words and sentences to your child for your child to write.

5. Your child reads aloud for his pleasure (and yours) so that you can determine how well he's progressing.

Starting with the basics

Starting in Part II of this book, your child discovers that letters make sounds, sounds make words, and words make sentences. From there, you teach the four most commonly used and easily understood letters — *m*, *s*, *t*, and *a*. By using these letters, you can spell many words and even write simple sentences. Spend as much time as you need on these letters. You want your child to feel confident using them before he gets into blending letters to make sounds. You also teach the child two sight words, *a* and *the*. As your child progresses, you add more sight words to the list of words he should memorize.



Be sure to distinguish between small words that can be sounded and true sight words. For example, *do* and *of* and *done* are true sight words. However, *cat* and *dog* and *three* aren't sight words because they can be sounded.

In Chapter 3, I ask you to introduce the letters *m*, *s*, *t*, and *a* in your very first phonics lesson. These letters are easy to print. When you introduce these letters and sounds to your child, he sees, says, sounds, and blends them. In this first lesson, he reads several words formed by combining those letters. You also teach him the sight words *and*, *the*, and *a*. With these look/say words — or sight words — your child can read short sentences from the first lesson. He may also be able to print them as you dictate the sounds to him.

Blending basics

After your child knows the sounds of letters, you work on blending them together to make words, as shown in Chapter 3. Blending may be the biggest hurdle your child faces. Don't lose patience. Some children pick up blending right away; others need time and practice. Most children can fly through their phonics lessons after they understand blending.

Vowel sounds and digraphs

Your child explores more consonants, and then he discovers the rest of the vowels and their short sounds. About this time, your child will be able to read simple sentences. Chapters 4 and 5 prepare your child for bigger words and words that are harder to spell. He's introduced to *digraphs* (two consonant letters blended together to make a completely new sound, like *ch*) and plural words.

Vowels and diphthongs

In Part II of this book, your child passes from the beginning to the intermediate stage as he learns how to read and decode words with various kinds of long vowels. I also introduce the elusive *y* and *w*, the two consonants that can also serve as vowels, and *diphthongs* (two letters joined to create a completely new sound).

Plunging into advanced phonics

Part III of this book deals with words with two or more syllables, their structure, and their pronunciation. By now, your child has a large vocabulary and is reading smoothly. I explain what diacritical marks are (they're the marks and symbols that appear in dictionaries to tell you how to pronounce and accent words), and I tell you how to read these marks to find out how to pronounce words, as well as how to find out where to put the accent in a word.

Word endings and tenses

Next, your child moves ahead to the *ed*, *ing*, and *er* suffixes. Your child's reading level expands at this point, as he discovers the difference between the

present and past tense. He also learns to double the consonant and drop the *e* when spelling words with the *ed*, *ing*, or *er* ending.

Some new sounds and unusual spellings

Your child explores the soft sounds of *c* and *g*, and although I introduce a few guidelines to make it easier to handle these sounds, your child has to memorize most of the *c* and *g* words for spelling purposes. Your child has now reached the point where memorizing becomes more necessary, and he's introduced to words that need memorizing, such as *eight*, *though*, and *cough*.

Prefixes and suffixes

Your child will have reached the advanced phonics level by now. He tackles suffixes and prefixes, explores roots, and begins to understand how prefixes and suffixes can change the meaning of a root.

The minor players

Part IV of this book looks into exceptions to the guidelines of phonics. It looks at the odds and ends of phonics, including these items:

- ✓ **The schwa:** The schwa sound takes the place of most vowels, and exists as a concession to pronunciation. It makes the quick *uh* sound.
- ✓ **New digraphs and sounds:** In this new digraph, one of the letters makes its normal sound, and the other is silent (as in *knife* and *write*). You also look at words borrowed from foreign languages that don't conform to English guidelines.
- ✓ **Vowel criminals:** Some vowels follow absolutely no pattern (as in the words *carry* and *mirror*). Your child looks at these vowels, as well as some long vowels (as in *old* and *find*) and the letter pairs *gh* and *ou*.
- ✓ **The letter *x* and the *zh* sound:** The letter *x* makes three sounds — you explore all three and look into the *zh* sound, which is in more words than you probably realize.

At this point, your child is officially an expert. Compliment him, brag to your relatives, and show some pride. Your child has earned it. But most of all, rest easy knowing that his academic career will be much easier because of this phonics training. And give yourself a pat on the back for being a great teacher.

Ramping Up to Exciting Books and Readers

After your child is reading, you can cultivate a love for reading! When you and your child are well into Part II of *Phonics For Dummies*, you've passed the point of no return. Sounds ominous, but I want to assure you that your child is well on his way to being a fluent reader. After he knows how to blend sounds to make words, there's no end in sight to what he can read. You get to decide what kind of books to choose. If you want to supplement his reading, this section prepares you for making great choices in reading material. What your child likes to read really matters!

Phonics storybooks

A typical phonics storybook is one that emphasizes word families; that is, the book contains very few sight words in the stories but places heavy emphasis on phonetic words. However, providing your child with the right books can be a challenge. You can recognize appropriate books by their use of a lot of repetitious and phonetic words. Most school libraries contain some, but many local libraries don't. Your best bet is to try the bookstore. If you're willing to pay a few bucks, you can find *Bob* books and maybe some *Mac and Tab* books. Ask the salesperson to do a search for you; she may come up with some goodies. Another possibility is a school supply store. Your last option is surfing the Internet for used books.

Including look/say readers

A typical look/say reader not only uses sight words but also makes use of repetition. Look/say readers are a lot easier to find than phonics readers. Almost every old reader book dating back to the 1930s is a look/say book. If you can find them, using them as supplements is fine as long as your main method of teaching is phonics. I use the word *supplement* in a serious way.



Don't let your child guess at a word. Telling him is better than letting him guess. After all, he's supposed to be reading for fun.

Because the sight words are so repetitious, your child is practically memorizing the stories. You can often find old look/say readers at book sales. You may also find them in school libraries.



Keep in mind that most children's books that you find in the library or bookstores are look/say or whole language books. Whole language and look/say books are similar because neither emphasizes phonics.

Fun with Dick and Jane

Kids often fly through the classic, adorable *Dick and Jane Readers* that you can still purchase at your local retail outlets and toy stores. When your child reads a book that has a lot of repetition (like the *Dick and Jane* books do), the cadence may fool you into thinking that his reading skills are superb. But keep in mind that he may not yet be a phonetic reader. These books are okay to use, because they exercise the visual aspect of reading and are great practice for fluency and expression. Another fact is that many of the words are phonetic, and through repetition, your child learns. Kids start to see entire sentences instead of reading just one word at a time.

At the risk of sounding inconsistent, I want to tell you why I like *Dick and Jane* for reading for pleasure:

- ✓ They use pictures that are heartwarming and inspire children to put themselves into the story.
- ✓ They activate the Dolch list (see Chapter 2), which is 85 percent phonetic, and use the words in repetition.
- ✓ They enhance fluency, expression, and comprehension.

I hope I don't offend my *phonetics only* buddies, but I believe these books can have a limited role in teaching. I don't advise using the teacher's manuals, but let the kids enjoy the stories.

Boosting Skills with Fun Activities

If kids are good at just one thing, it's having fun. And the more fun they have learning, the more fun you'll have teaching them. Keep your teaching on the lighter side and your reading sessions will never become a chore. Instead of having your child hunker down with gobs of worksheets, give him a variety of activities that lighten the load of homework. Give him a small number of activities and make each one count. Ask for only ten minutes of work five times per week. These activities make good practice, and practice, you know, makes perfect.

In this book you encounter a variety of activities. They're designed for your child to print either directly in the book or on a separate piece of paper. All the activities that you find in the chapters are streamlined for the lesson at hand. In fact, the activities in this book can be used as models to enable you to create your own activities. Look for the Activity icon throughout this book as a guide to fun activities for you and your child. Chapter 18 also includes a list of activities to enjoy.



I advise you to make copies of the exercises, which allows you to preserve your book if you so desire.