



Department
for Education

The phonics screening check – responding to the results
Departmental advice for Reception and Key Stage 1 teachers

Introduction

The purpose of this booklet

This advice is designed to support you in thinking about your next steps after the phonics screening check. It is not only for teachers of pupils in Year 1, but also for those teaching in Reception and Year 2.

Remember that the check is not a reading test. It was designed simply to identify pupils who might not have gained the phonic knowledge and skills they need to make a secure start to decoding.

What best describes the outcomes for your Year 1 pupils this year?

What were the outcomes for our pupils?	✓	Page
Almost all our pupils exceeded the expected standard.		4
Most of our pupils will need further support: – generally; – just for section 2; or – just for pseudo-words.		5
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Some pupils will need further support.		8

Taking an overview of the check and thinking about any surprises should help you to plan your teaching. Perhaps your more able readers did not do as well as you expected. Perhaps there were pupils who knew the sounds but could not always blend them together to read the words. Maybe the pupils learning English as an additional language surprised you by how much they had absorbed.

This booklet provides some pointers for evaluating what you do. There is also advice from some of the schools that performed very well in the pilot of the phonics check in May 2011.¹

The importance of phonics

Word-reading is one of the essential dimensions of reading; the other is comprehension.

Skilled word-reading involves working out the pronunciation of unfamiliar printed words (decoding) – which is why the screening check is important – and recognising familiar printed words.

Underpinning both of these is the understanding that letters represent the sounds in spoken words. Fluent decoding supports pupils' comprehension, because they don't have to devote mental energy to individual words. A good grasp of phonics is also important for spelling, contributing to fluency and confidence in writing.

¹ Coldwell, M. et al. (2011) Process evaluation of the Year 1 phonics screening check pilot (Research Report DFE-RR159), DfE.

A whole-school approach

Everyone is involved in teaching pupils to read, so talk about the outcomes with other staff, including senior leaders. Also, look back at the provision these Year 1 pupils had last year and what their assessments showed.

We began refreshing our school's approach to early reading by separating the Year 1 and Year 2 classes. We then made Foundation Stage teachers accountable for Year 1 phonics skills, so they understood that learning the basic code in the Foundation Stage is crucial for securing knowledge of the more complex code in Year 1. We now rotate Foundation Stage and Year 1 teachers, so they see children through two years of development.

– Cobden Primary School

Reporting to parents

Schools must report to parents on whether or not their child has met the standard on the phonics screening check. After that, however, it is up to schools to decide what other information to give. Parents might want to know how near or far from the standard their child is, what help the school will provide next year, and what they could do to help at home.

Responding to the outcomes – planning the next steps

Section 1: 'Almost all our pupils exceeded the expected standard'

The check shows that almost all your pupils are able to read a large number of different words containing the grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) they have learnt, whether or not they have seen these words before. However, don't stop now – it is vital that you continue teaching phonics into Year 2. High-quality phonics programmes extend well beyond the level covered by the screening check.

Pupils who are still learning to read come across words that they have not seen before much more frequently than experienced readers do. Therefore, they need to be skilled in decoding words that may contain alternative graphemes for the sounds they have already learnt.

Phonics-orientated books are very useful for teaching and applying children's learning. As soon as children are secure in their knowledge, and grasped all the decoding skills, we send home books from our library collection to push the children's fluency in reading. The quality of the stories tends to be better in library books and we hope that language will go into the children's writing.

– St Thomas More RC Primary School

Good phonic knowledge is also important for spelling, including for pupils who are reading fluently. Younger pupils have not had enough time to learn the accurate spelling of all the words they may want to write so, for a while, they still depend on phonics to work out what letter(s) to use to represent the sounds they can hear.

You will need to pay close attention to any pupils who did not meet the expected standard. Did they fail to meet the standard by just one or two items or was their performance markedly below that of their peers? In either case, read the rest of this booklet.

Give some thought, too, to how parents can support their children with phonics. How do you work with them to increase their own knowledge?

We have three parent workshops a year, including evening sessions for Year 1 and Year 2 parents, and that's a crucial link. We encourage parents to come to the presentations about our phonics programme to ensure that they can support their child in learning phonics effectively at home. We've found we need to be quite strict with parents – they must use the pure sounds to make it possible to blend them. It's particularly crucial with Reception children.

– Langton Green Primary School

Section 2: ‘Most pupils will need further support – generally, just for section 2 or just for pseudo-words’

If most of your pupils did not meet the expected standard, think about:

- the content and coverage of the phonics programme or programmes you use;
- the pace and quality of teaching in phonics sessions – in Reception as well as Year 1;
- whether pupils have enough practice in blending sounds to read words; and
- pupils’ approaches to tackling unknown words.

While the outcomes strongly suggest you need to improve the teaching of phonics, this does not mean ignoring wider reading. Pupils should always be listening to stories and poems, even when they cannot read them themselves. Teaching phonic knowledge and skills establishes the foundations they need to read independently.

Content and coverage

Ideally, you should be using just one phonics programme, not mixing elements from different programmes or schemes.

The key has been taking one programme and really sticking to it. It must be a systematic approach, with a discrete session dedicated to phonics, and then applying the knowledge throughout the day.

– Langton Green Primary School

Most phonics programmes encourage the teaching of at least one grapheme for all 40-plus phonemes by the end of Reception, alongside the skill of blending sounds together to read words. The programmes then move on to less common graphemes and alternative sounds for graphemes during Year 1.

It is vital that whatever you do is systematic, that is, that you teach each GPC in turn and make absolutely certain that all the pupils know each one. As well as learning new GPCs, pupils should always be revising and consolidating the ones taught so far.

We’ve looked back and realised the improvement in standards we’ve made. Without our commitment, our children simply wouldn’t have known the sounds in the phonics screening check. We really thought we were covering phonics before, but we weren’t. It’s no use just paying lip service to it.

– Langton Green Primary School

If your pupils found all or most of Section 2 difficult, think about:

- whether you are teaching GPCs systematically; and
- whether the programme you are using covers the GPCs that were checked in Section 2.

You might want to scrutinise and possibly refresh or update your phonics materials.

Quality of teaching

Consider these questions:

- Is the pace of teaching in the individual, daily lessons, in Reception as well as Year 1, brisk enough to teach all that the pupils need to know by the end of Year 1?
- Are pupils revising and consolidating what they were taught in earlier lessons?
- Would improving multi-sensory work be helpful?
- Are assessments being used well enough to find out exactly what each pupil knows?

The schools that did very well in the pilot of the screening check tended to review every pupil's progress every half term.

Every teacher used the phonics tracker and we now review progress every half term. We've stuck to that approach throughout the classes and this way, if a child's progress slows, we can explore why and we can keep tabs on those we're concerned about. We monitor more than phonic decoding; we monitor children's writing too. We spot gaps in knowledge, such as spelling 'ground' as 'grownd' because they only know the 'ow' sound in 'brown'. We know then we need to introduce the 'ou' variation. We have a 'use it or lose it' approach. If we spot consistent mistakes, we revisit these with the whole class. We plan, follow the plan and revisit the plan! If it's not taken on board, we know which children to support.

– Cobden Primary School

Blending sounds to read words

Consider whether pupils spend sufficient time on learning to blend sounds to read words, so that they can apply that skill to any GPCs they are being taught. It may be that teachers are spending time in phonics sessions on activities that are unconnected to teaching GPCs and the skills of blending (and segmenting to spell) so that pupils do not learn enough in the time available.

Do the pupils have a chance to apply their decoding knowledge and skills to decodable books? These allow pupils to feel that they are successful at reading and they learn to use phonics as their first strategy for decoding unknown words without needing to guess.

During the dedicated phonics sessions we use phonics-specific books on the syllabus of our programme.

– Langton Green Primary School

If your teaching of blending has been effective, most pupils should have had no problems with reading the pseudo-words.

Tackling unknown words

If many of your pupils, including some fluent readers, did not meet the expected standard, you need to look seriously at the messages you give to pupils about how they approach unknown words.

– Do the pupils know that phonics should be their prime strategy for working out words they don't know?

– Are your pupils regularly practising blending sounds, in order, from left to right, all through the word?

'Reading real words well but struggling with pseudo-words'

If your pupils did well on reading the real words in sections 1 and 2 but most of them struggled to read the pseudo-words, this suggests that they might not be using phonics as their first approach to unknown words. It is vital that all pupils can decode swiftly and accurately, including your good readers. Pupils who rely on recognising words on sight often struggle later when they come across words in their reading that are not in their spoken vocabulary because they don't have a strategy to decode them.

It is not necessary to practise pseudo-words, if your pupils did not do well on them. The knowledge and skills pupils need to decode them are exactly the same as they need for any unfamiliar word. Pseudo-words, however, are useful for assessment which is why you will find them in systematic, synthetic phonics programmes, as well as in the screening check.

If the phonics screening check is truly a check of phonic awareness, we'd actually support it being all pseudo-words. It makes sense to check words children have never seen before to make sure they're really decoding and not relying on sight memory.

– Beaver Road Primary School

Regular, real words that pupils have not heard (e.g. brock, hoax, squib, vending, carnival) are a good way of increasing their confidence in decoding. Make sure you talk about the meaning of each one so that you are increasing the store of words they know.

If it was only individual pupils who struggled with pseudo-words, reinforce their knowledge of GPCs and their blending skills.

Section 3: 'Some pupils will need further support'

Unexpected outcomes

If you are sure your approach to phonics teaching is systematic and a pupil has not met the standard of the check, think about whether the outcome was what you expected. Was there something about his or her performance on the day that did not reflect the assessments you have made during the year? Was there a pattern of errors that indicated specific knowledge gaps? Was the pupil finding it difficult to blend the sounds together, even though he or she could say them? This might indicate that the pupil needs some specific one-to-one support to catch up before Year 2.

Pupils with special educational needs

It may be that the outcome was what you expected and that you already knew – or suspected – that the pupil has special educational needs (SEN). However, before going down that route, remember that Ofsted commented on 'schools that identified pupils as having special educational needs when, in fact, their needs were no different from those of most other pupils. They were underachieving but this was sometimes simply because the school's mainstream teaching provision was not good enough, and expectations of the pupils were too low'.²

If you are confident that the pupil has had good phonics teaching and has not been absent, consider the questions below:

Does the pupil understand concepts of print?	When pupils are struggling with phonics, it is important to check that their basic understanding is secure: that print carries meaning; the difference between a 'word' and a 'letter'; that we read from left to right in English, and so on.
Have the pupil's hearing and sight been checked?	These are basic checks if you have any concerns.
What is the level of the pupil's phonemic awareness? ³	Pupils with difficulties in this area will need repeated, supported practice in blending sounds to read and in hearing the sounds in order to spell. They may find it easier to work first on blending long vowels than short vowels. Experienced teachers find that pupils who have reading difficulties find short vowels harder to discriminate. But remember to make sure the pupil's hearing has been checked. For example, can he or she hear whether two phonemes are the same or different? Can the pupil segment the phonemes in words or exchange the first phoneme of a word to make a new one (p/at >s/at)?

² Ofsted (2010). The special educational needs and disability review: a statement is not enough (090221).

³ Phonemic awareness is specifically about recognising and manipulating phonemes. It is a subset of wider phonological awareness.

Are the pupil's speech, language and communication at age-appropriate levels?	The pupil might have underlying difficulties with processing sounds and with understanding what you are saying, indicating more significant needs that go beyond phonics.
Does the pupil find it difficult to concentrate and pay attention?	Some pupils may find it hard to concentrate and may need one-to-one teaching in an environment that does not distract them. They might also benefit from explicit support for listening and attention skills. Such problems may be associated with speech, language and communication needs or ADHD.
Does the pupil find it difficult to recall GPCs?	Multisensory approaches could be beneficial: using magnetic letters; writing the letter at the same time as saying it; using mnemonics that help him or her to recall the sound, such as a hissing snake for the sound /s/. The pupil may also benefit from practising GPCs beyond the point at which they appear to have been mastered. In fact, revision is helpful for all pupils.
What do you know about the pupil's learning of 'tricky' words? ⁴	Although the check does not cover 'tricky' words, if you know that the pupil has been learning these words successfully, this might indicate that he or she needs more specific help with applying phonic knowledge and blending skills to decoding phonically regular, real words and pseudo-words.
Does the pupil struggle to hold a sequence of sounds in his or her mind in order to blend them?	This suggests difficulties in short-term memory. If the pupil cannot hold more than, say, three phonemes in mind, he or she should be encouraged to sound and blend no more than three at a time to reduce the load on memory, e.g. blending /s/ /t/ /a/ in 'stand', then adding the /n/ then /d/.
Can the pupil understand a story that he or she hears read aloud?	If the pupil cannot follow a story, this may indicate language difficulties that go beyond difficulties with phonics.

If your findings give you any cause for concern, discuss them with your literacy co-ordinator or SENCO. If the pupil has a visual and/or hearing impairment (including intermittent hearing loss as a result of 'glue ear'), it is advisable to discuss your findings with a specialist teacher of children with sensory impairment.

⁴ 'Tricky' words are also referred to as phonologically irregular words or 'exception' words, that is, there is not a regular correspondence between the spelling of a word and the way it is pronounced.

For most pupils who have SEN, effective interventions are similar to those for lower-attaining pupils, that is:

- time-limited programmes with clear entry and exit criteria;
- accurate and continuing assessment of phonic knowledge and skills – and use of assessment to inform the next steps;
- any additional, specific interventions or resources to meet the pupil’s particular needs; and
- support from parents where this is possible.

Research suggests, however, that some of these pupils will need more sustained intervention than can be provided by time-limited programmes in order to give them the solid foundations they need.

Pupils with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)

For phonics teaching to be effective, pupils must have developed the full range of auditory skills to be able to listen to, understand and interpret sounds. Pupils with SLCN may not be able to process the sounds that make up words – essential for acquiring phonic knowledge and skills. Interventions for them may also require a broader focus than just support for phonics, since they will generally have significant difficulties with attention and listening; remembering sounds and words; discriminating between sounds; recall; and phonological awareness.

The organisations listed on the next page can provide additional information.

Further advice and support

The Department for Education is grateful to many of the following organisations for their advice as the phonics screening check was developed. These organisations can provide advice and specialist support for schools.

Some of the organisations have produced specific guidance for phonics teaching.

- Communication Trust
<http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/schools/phonics.aspx>
- British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD)
<http://www.batod.org.uk/index.php>
- British Stammering Association
<http://www.stammering.org/phonics.html>
- Dyslexia-SpLD Trust
<http://www.thedyslexia-spldtrust.org.uk/4/resources/17/resources-for-schools>
- Ewing Foundation
<http://www.ewing-foundation.org.uk>
- National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS)
http://www.ndcs.org.uk/professional_support/news/get_our_updated.html
- Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists
<http://www.rcslt.org>
- Special Educational Consortium (SEC)
<http://www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk>

Other organisations that are able to provide advice and sources of specialist support include:

- Afasic England
<http://www.afasicengland.org.uk>
- Aspraxia-KIDS
<http://www.apraxia-kids.org>
- Autism Education Trust
<http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk>
- CLAPA (Cleft Lip & Palate Association)
<http://www.clapa.com>
- Down's Syndrome Association
<http://www.downs-syndrome.org.uk>
- Dyspraxia Foundation
<http://www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk>
- ICAN
<http://www.ican.org.uk>
- Nuffield Language for Reading Project
<http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org>
- VIEW (Vision Impairment: Education and Welfare)
<http://www.viewweb.org.uk>