Alliteration Explained: Spotting Matching Starting Sounds in Reception

Alliteration means words that start with the same sound, like 'big bouncy ball' or 'silly snake'. In Reception, children learn to hear and spot these matching sounds through play and listening games. This is an important early skill that helps them listen carefully and prepares them for phonics, the method teachers use to teach reading. The guide explains what alliteration is, how teachers introduce it in Reception, why it matters, and simple ways you can practise at home.

What is alliteration?

Alliteration is when two or more words in a row start with the same sound. 'Purple pig', 'funny frog' and 'silly snake' are all alliteration. It's important not to mix this up with rhyme, which is when words sound the same at the end—like 'cat' and 'bat'. Children in Reception often meet both, but they're different skills. Alliteration focuses on the sounds at the *start* of words. Hearing these patterns is called phonological awareness—it's about noticing sounds in spoken language before children learn letters. This listening skill is a building block for phonics, which teachers use to teach reading. Alliteration shows children that words are made of separate sounds, and that helps them understand how letters represent those sounds later on.

What happens in Reception?

In Reception classrooms, teachers help children spot and play with alliteration through games and fun activities. They might read picture books with lots of alliteration, like 'Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers', and ask children which words sound the same at the start. Teachers often do sorting games where children sort pictures of objects into groups by their first sound—all the things starting with 's' together, then 'b' words, and so on. Tongue twisters are popular too: saying 'silly Sally sells seashells' quickly (or slowly!) makes children giggle and listen hard to the sounds. These activities happen regularly but briefly—Reception teachers keep learning playful and short. Children aren't expected to name the sounds or sit still for long periods; it's all about listening, noticing, joining in and having fun together.

What does this mean for your child?

Learning to spot alliteration shows your child is developing listening skills and starting to notice how language works. This is exactly what Reception teachers are working towards. Being able to hear that 'big', 'bouncy' and 'ball' start the same way is a sign your child is tuning into sounds—a skill that makes learning phonics much easier later on. When children understand that words are made of sounds, they find it simpler to blend sounds together to read and to separate sounds to spell. Children develop these skills at their own pace, and not every child will notice alliteration at the same time—that's completely normal. Some children are natural language explorers from the start; others need more time and practice. By the end of Reception, most children will be able to hear obvious alliteration and join in with games, which is a great foundation for phonics in Year 1.

How you can help at home

The best way to help is to have fun with sounds together, with no pressure. When you're out and about or during everyday routines, you can play simple games: 'I spy with my little eye something starting with 's', then look for things together. Try silly sentences at bath time or in the car: 'Can a cat catch a cold?', 'Does

a dog dig deep?' and let your child giggle at the sounds. Read picture books aloud and pause before the rhyme or repeated word—let your child join in. Tongue twisters are brilliant: say 'Peter Piper' slowly, then faster, and laugh together. You could collect toys that start with the same sound and line them up. The key is to keep it short and playful; if your child looks bored or asks to stop, that's fine—a few minutes now and then is plenty. Your child will learn most by listening to you read aloud and chat naturally with lots of language around them.

Questions parents often ask

Is alliteration the same as rhyme? No. Rhyme is about the *end* sounds (cat, bat, mat), and alliteration is about the *start* sounds (cat, can, cake). Both are important, but they're different. **When should I worry if my child doesn't notice alliteration yet?** Reception children are all different. Some will spot patterns early; others need time. If your child is hearing and enjoying language—laughing at silly words, listening to stories, playing with sounds—they're on the right track. Talk to their teacher if you're concerned. **Does this mean my child is ready for phonics?** Phonological awareness (like spotting alliteration) is one building block. Teachers also look at whether children can focus, follow instructions and have a good vocabulary. The Reception teacher will introduce phonics when they judge the class is ready. **Can I teach my child the 's' sound means the letter 's'?** Better not yet. In Reception, children learn to hear and play with sounds first; the letter-to-sound link (phonics) comes next as part of structured teaching. Mixing them can confuse children.

Sources

- Department for Education, 'Statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage', 2021
- GOV.UK, 'Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)', Department for Education
- Department for Education, 'Letters and Sounds: Phase 1 activities' (phonological awareness guidance)