Five-Minute Phonics Starters: Quick Activities for Reception Teachers

A guide to the quick, playful phonics warm-ups your child's teacher may use in the classroom to help them get ready for reading and writing.

What are phonics starters?

Phonics is the method schools use to teach children how to read and write by linking sounds (phonemes) to letters (graphemes). In Reception—the first year of primary school for children aged 4 to 5—teachers often use 'starters'. These are very short, five-minute activities done as a group on the carpet. They are designed to wake up the brain and get children thinking about sounds before they move on to their main learning. These activities are fast, fun, and require no special equipment, making them a gentle way to start a lesson.

What happens during these activities?

During these quick games, children might do 'odd-one-out' listening, where they hear three words and have to spot the one that starts with a different sound. They might use 'sound buttons', where they imagine buttons under a word and press them to say each sound. They also practice blending, which is pushing sounds together to make a word, and segmenting, which is breaking a word down into its individual sounds. Because these are playful fillers, they happen quickly and keep the children engaged through movement and listening.

What this means for your child

These short bursts of practice help your child build confidence with sounds in a low-pressure way. By repeating these sounds daily, children become more familiar with the patterns of English. This supports their overall progress in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), which is the curriculum framework for children from birth to age five. It helps them feel more comfortable when they eventually move on to reading books or writing their own letters, as the basic building blocks are becoming second nature to them.

How you can help at home

You don't need any special tools to support your child; you can keep it playful and light. Try 'I spy' using sounds instead of letters (for example, 'I spy something starting with /s/'). While you are out and about, you might point to a sign and see if they can hear the first sound in a word. The goal is to keep it short and happy, rather than a formal lesson. Every child learns at their own pace, including those with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) or those learning English as an additional language.

Common questions

Parents often ask if they should be doing these specific games at home. While these activities are designed for a classroom setting, the most important thing is that your child enjoys playing with sounds. You might wonder how your child is getting on with their phonics; since every school follows a slightly different programme, the best person to ask for an update is your child's class teacher. They can tell you which sounds your child is currently learning and how they are doing with their blending.

Sources

- Department for Education, Development Matters