Initial Sounds: Why 'I Spy' Games Build Reception's First Phonics Skill

A gentle guide for parents and carers of children in Reception explaining how listening games like 'I Spy' help children recognise the first sounds in words, creating a vital foundation for reading and writing.

What are initial sounds?

Before children start matching letters on a page to sounds, they need to develop their listening skills. This is often called 'phonological awareness'. A big part of this is recognising 'initial sounds'—the very first sound you hear when a word is spoken. For example, in the word 'dog', the initial sound is 'd'. In Reception (the first year of primary school for most children), pupils begin their journey with phonics, which is a way of teaching children to read and write by breaking words down into small sounds. Learning to hear that first sound is a natural first step that happens before children are expected to read letters.

What happens in the classroom?

In school, your child will engage in activities that encourage them to listen carefully to the sounds around them. This is part of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), the curriculum that sets the standards for learning and development for children from birth to age five. Teachers use playful methods to help children notice that words are made up of individual sounds. They might play games where they group objects by their starting sound or use songs and rhymes. This stage is designed to be light and fun, ensuring children feel confident with their hearing and speaking skills before they move on to formal letter-sound teaching.

Why this matters for your child

You might wonder why your child isn't 'reading letters' yet. It is because hearing sounds is the foundation that makes later reading 'click'. Once a child can identify the first sound in a word, it becomes much easier for them to blend (pushing sounds together to make a word) and segment (breaking a word apart into sounds). This listening stage isn't a delay; it is a necessary building block. By focusing on the sounds first, children develop the confidence they need to tackle the more complex task of matching those sounds to written letters later in the school year.

Simple ways to help at home

You don't need any special equipment to help your child; you can turn everyday moments into short, playful games. Try a game of 'I Spy' using sounds instead of letters—for example, 'I spy with my little eye, something beginning with sssss' for a spoon. You could also try a 'sound hunt' in the kitchen, asking your child to find something that starts with 'b' (like a banana). Keep these activities very short and stress-free. The goal is to make listening feel like a game rather than a lesson. If you are unsure which sounds your child is focusing on, your child's teacher can let you know.

Common questions

Many parents ask if their child is falling behind if they aren't reading books yet. Please be reassured that every child develops at their own pace, and focusing on listening skills is a standard part of the Reception year. You might also wonder if you should use the names of the letters (like 'ay' for A) or the sounds (like

'ah'). In phonics, the focus is on the sound the letter makes. If you are ever unsure about the best way to support your child's specific needs, including children with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) or those learning English as an additional language, your school's teacher is the best person to ask for guidance.

Sources

- Department for Education: Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage
- GOV.UK: National curriculum in England: early years foundation stage