Robot Arms: Segmenting Words Into Sounds to Spell Them in Reception

A gentle guide to help your child in Reception learn how to break words down into individual sounds, a key step that helps them move from reading to writing.

What is segmenting?

Segmenting is the skill of breaking a spoken word down into its separate sounds. For example, if you say the word 'cat', segmenting is the act of hearing and saying the three individual sounds: 'c-a-t'. This is the opposite of blending, which is when children put sounds together to read a word. While blending helps children read, segmenting is what they need to do before they can spell a word and write it down. It is a core part of phonics, which is the method schools use to teach children the relationship between the sounds of spoken language and the letters of the alphabet.

What happens in the classroom?

In Reception (the first year of primary school for children aged 4 to 5), teachers use playful ways to make these invisible sounds feel real. You might hear about 'robot arms', where children move their arms like a robot, chopping the air for every sound they hear in a word. They might also use their fingers to count each sound, or use colourful counters to represent each part of the word. These physical actions help children separate the sounds clearly in their minds. Because every school may use a different phonics programme, the exact games might vary; feel free to ask your child's teacher which ones they use.

Why it matters for your child

For many children, segmenting is a bit harder than blending. It takes a lot of concentration to pull a word apart! Mastering this skill is a big milestone because it gives your child the confidence to try writing. Once they can hear the individual sounds in a word, they can match those sounds to the letters they have learned and write them on the page. This foundation is important for their early writing and dictation tasks long before they reach the phonics screening check in Year 1, which is a short check to see if children can read words by blending sounds.

Simple ways to help at home

You can support your child with short, playful moments throughout the day. There is no need for formal lessons or drilling. Try playing 'I Spy' but describe the object in sounds; for example, 'I spy with my little eye a c-u-p'. You can also try 'Robot Talk' while getting dressed or eating, asking your child to tell you what you mean by saying 'Put on your s-o-cks'. If your child finds it tricky, keep it light and positive. For children with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) or those learning English as an additional language, focusing on very short words with clear sounds is a great place to start.

Common questions

Parents often wonder why their child can read a word but cannot yet spell it. This is very common, as reading (blending) and spelling (segmenting) use different mental processes. You might also wonder if you should correct every mistake; the most important thing is to keep it encouraging and low-pressure. If

you are unsure which sounds your child is learning, or if you want to know the specific terminology their school uses, your child's teacher is the best person to ask. They can give you tips that align perfectly with the work being done in the classroom.

Sources

- Department for Education, 'The National Curriculum in England: Early Years Foundation Stage'
- GOV.UK, 'Phonics screening check'