Tricky Words in Reception: Teaching 'the', 'I' and 'no' When Sounds Won't Help

A gentle guide for parents and carers of children in Reception explaining 'tricky words'—common words that cannot be sounded out using phonics—and how to help your child recognise them with confidence.

What are tricky words?

In Reception (the first year of primary school for children aged 4 to 5), children learn phonics. Phonics is a method of teaching reading by linking sounds to letters. Most words can be 'decoded', which means the child blends the individual sounds together to say the word. However, some words are 'tricky' or 'common exception words'. These are words like 'the', 'I', and 'no' that appear very often but do not follow the regular sound rules. Because they cannot be sounded out easily, children need to learn to recognise them by sight.

What happens in the classroom?

Your child's teacher will introduce these words alongside their regular phonics lessons. Instead of asking the children to blend the sounds, the teacher will encourage them to remember the word as a whole. These words are introduced early because they appear in almost every sentence in early reading books. By learning these high-frequency words quickly, children can focus their energy on decoding the harder words in a story. Every school may introduce these words in a slightly different order, so it is a good idea to ask your child's teacher which specific words they are focusing on this term.

What this means for your child

It can be a little frustrating for children when they try to sound out a word like 'the' and it doesn't make sense. It is important to reassure them that this is normal. Some words are just 'rule-breakers'. Once your child realises that some words are simply remembered by sight, they often feel more confident. For children with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) or those learning English as an additional language, these words may take a little longer to stick, and that is perfectly okay. The goal is steady, happy progress rather than speed.

Simple ways to help at home

You don't need formal lessons at home; short, playful moments are best. While reading together, you can play 'Spot the Word', asking your child to find 'the' or 'no' on the page. You could use simple flashcards for a quick game of 'Snap' or hide a few tricky words around the room for a treasure hunt. When you come across a tricky word in a book, you can simply tell them, 'This is a tricky word, we just have to remember it,' and then say the word clearly. Keeping it light and fun prevents the child from feeling pressured.

Common questions

Parents often ask why children can't just sound out every word. The answer is that English has many words that don't follow a predictable pattern, and teaching them by sight is the most efficient way for children to start reading fluently. You might also wonder if you should correct your child every time they make a mistake. It is usually best to be encouraging; if they get stuck on a tricky word, give them the

answer warmly so they can keep the flow of the story. If you are unsure about the phonics method your school uses, your child's teacher will be happy to guide you.

Sources

- Department for Education: The National Curriculum in England: Early Years Foundation Stage
- GOV.UK: Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework