

Which Picture Goes With the Word? Matching Sounds to Objects in Reception Phonics

In Reception, children begin by learning single-letter sounds (like /s/ or /m/) and matching them to pictures or objects. This bridges the gap between saying sounds aloud and reading them on a page. It's a playful, important step that helps children connect what they hear to what things mean.

What it is

Matching sounds to pictures is an early phonics skill where children learn to hear a sound and point to or name the correct picture or object. For example, hearing the sound /c/ and choosing the picture of a cat. It happens before children read full words: they're learning that sounds connect to meaning. This skill builds on oral blending—where children already blend sounds together by ear (like /c/-/a/-/t/ for 'cat')—and helps them start connecting those sounds to written letters and words they'll read later.

What happens in Reception

Teachers introduce single-letter sounds one at a time, following a structured phonics programme (usually following Letters and Sounds or a similar scheme). Once children can say a sound, the teacher plays a matching game: 'Show me the picture of a cat when I say /c/.' Children point to the right picture or collect an object. These activities happen in play-based lessons, often with picture cards, toys, or real objects. Teachers move between whole class games, small group practice, and independent play to help children who find this step tricky.

What it means for your child

This skill shows your child is starting to understand that sounds have meaning—that /s/ isn't just a noise, it connects to 'sun' or 'snake'. It's a crucial step between speaking and reading. Some children find matching harder than blending, especially if they're still getting used to hearing individual sounds. It doesn't mean there's anything wrong; children develop at different speeds. A child might say the sound perfectly but need more time to make the connection to the picture. This is normal and will improve with gentle, playful practice.

How you can help at home

Keep it playful and short—just a few minutes during everyday moments. Play simple sound hunts: 'Can you find something that starts with /d/?' during lunch or a walk. Collect objects around the house and sort them: 'Which toys start with /b/?'. Sing sound songs or make sound effects together. Point to pictures in books and ask, 'What sound does that start with?' Play 'I spy' with sounds instead of letters. Let your child lead; if they're not interested, stop and try another day. The aim is to show them that sounds are fun and all around them, not to test them or drill them.

Questions parents often ask

****My child can say the sound but won't point to the picture—is something wrong?*** No. Matching requires a different kind of thinking than just saying the sound. Give it time and keep it fun. ****Should I teach the**



letter shape at the same time? ** Your child's school is doing this in the right order for them. Early on, focus on the sound itself. **How much should we practise? ** Little and often beats long sessions. Five minutes of playful activity is better than thirty minutes of drilling. **My child seems confused by letter names and sounds. ** That's common. Letter names come later; for now, just focus on the sounds letters make.

Sources

- Department for Education: Letters and Sounds: Principles and Practice of High Quality Phonics (2007)
- Department for Education: Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (current version)
- GOV.UK: English Phonics Screening Check information for parents