Why 'A' Isn't Always a Letter's Name: Teaching Letter Names vs Sounds in Reception

A gentle guide for parents and carers of children in Reception explaining the difference between the names of letters and the sounds they make, and how to support your child's early reading and writing.

What are letter names and sounds?

In England, children in Reception (the first year of primary school, usually for 4 and 5-year-olds) start learning phonics. Phonics is a way of teaching children to read and write by matching the sounds of spoken words to the letters that represent those sounds. Most letters have both a name (like 'aitch') and a sound (like a soft breathy 'h'). While we use names to talk about the alphabet, children need the sounds to blend letters together to read words. For example, to read the word 'cat', it is much easier for a child to use the sounds 'c-a-t' than the names 'see-ay-tee'.

Why children sometimes get mixed up

It is very common for children to mix up a letter's name with its sound. This often happens because some letters have names that sound like their sounds, while others do not. For instance, the letter 's' sounds like its name, but the letter 'w' (named 'double-u') sounds nothing like the sound it makes in a word. You might find your child writing a letter because of its alphabet-song name, or saying the name of the letter when they are trying to sound out a word. This is a natural part of learning and is not a cause for worry.

What this means for your child

When children focus on the sounds first, they can start to decode words more quickly. If they rely on letter names, they may find it harder to 'blend' (pushing sounds together to make a word). Every child learns at their own pace, and children with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) or those learning English as an additional language may find this distinction particularly tricky. The goal is simply to help them recognise that the sound is the 'key' that unlocks the word, while the name is just what we call the letter.

Simple ways to help at home

You don't need to do any formal drilling or lessons. Instead, try short, playful moments. When you see a letter on a cereal box or a street sign, you can say, 'That's the letter M, and it makes a mmm sound.' If your child uses a letter name while reading, you can gently remind them of the sound: 'That's the letter A, but remember it says ah.' You can also play 'I Spy' using sounds instead of names. Because every school may use a slightly different phonics programme, it is a good idea to ask your child's teacher for the specific sounds they are learning in class.

Common questions

Parents often ask if they should stop using letter names entirely. The answer is no; letter names are useful for things like spelling or finding a page in a book. The aim is just to help your child understand when to use the sound and when to use the name. If you are unsure how to pronounce a specific sound, your

child's teacher or the school's headteacher (the person in charge of the school) will be happy to show you. Remember, the most important thing is to keep reading and talking with your child in a warm, encouraging way.

Sources

- Department for Education: The National Curriculum in England: Early Years Foundation Stage
- GOV.UK: Teaching reading