Blending CCVC and CVCC Words: The Next Step After CVC in Year 1 Phonics

Blending means joining the sounds in a word together so that a child can read it. Once children can blend simple three-sound words such as 'cat', many move on to four-sound words that contain a consonant cluster, such as 'frog', 'stop' or 'must'. This is a normal step up in Year 1 phonics, and this guide explains what changes, why it can feel harder, and small, playful ways you can support your child at home.

What it is

Blending is the skill of pushing the separate sounds in a word together until it can be read. Children first learn to blend simple words with three sounds, such as 'cat' (c-a-t) or 'dog' (d-o-g). When that feels secure, teachers introduce words with four sounds. Some of these contain a consonant cluster, which is two consonants that sit side by side and each keep their own sound. In 'frog' the 'fr' is a cluster at the start, in 'stop' the 'st' sits in the middle, and in 'must' the 'st' comes at the end. Phonics is the approach to reading in which children learn how letters and groups of letters match sounds. Year 1 is the school year for children aged about five to six. Schools in England use different phonics programmes, so the exact order and methods vary from school to school.

What happens

In a small group, a teacher will usually start with a word the children can already read and then slowly introduce four-sound words. Many classrooms use a few simple, playful strategies. Children may count the sounds on their fingers, so that 'frog' gives four fingers, which helps them see how many sounds to blend. They may also use 'robot arm' blending, where the word is said slowly with each sound pushed out separately, like a robot moving its arm, before the sounds are joined and the word is said faster. The aim is to build confidence first and speed later. The Department for Education's reading framework describes this kind of systematic phonics, where sounds are taught in a planned order. Children will move at different speeds, and the teacher decides when each child is ready to move on.

What it means for your child

If your child finds words with consonant clusters tricky, this is very common. Two consonants together are harder to hear separately and harder to say smoothly, so a word that sounds simple to an adult can feel like a real puzzle. Finding this stage hard does not mean your child is behind or will struggle for ever. It is a known point where many children need a little extra practice and time. Some children, including those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or those learning English as an additional language, may need more repetition or a different approach, and their teacher can explain what support is available. Towards the end of Year 1, most children in England take the phonics screening check, a short, statutory check of their decoding skills. Your child's teacher can tell you how they are getting on.

How you can help at home

Short, relaxed moments work best, perhaps five to ten minutes at a time. You could play a sound-counting game: pick up a few objects, such as a 'frog' toy, a 'stamp' or a 'lamp', and ask your child to tap or count the sounds on their fingers. Try robot arm blending at bath time or during a walk, pushing out each sound slowly and then saying the word faster. Share picture books and point out words with clusters, and let your

child read them to you. Keep praise specific and warm, for example 'You blended that all by yourself', so that learning feels like a game rather than a test. Check with your child's teacher which method the school uses so that you can follow the same steps at home. If English is not the main language at home, talking about sounds and words in that language can also help build your child's understanding.

Questions parents often ask

Is my child behind if they find these words hard? Not necessarily. Four-sound words are a known step up, and children reach it at different speeds, so please talk to your child's teacher if you have concerns. Why does my child say the sounds separately? Saying each sound slowly, the robot arm method, is a stepping stone to blending smoothly. Speed comes later, once the sounds are secure. Do I have to use the same method as school? It helps to use the same approach, because children are often more confident when home and school match. Ask the teacher what they use. What is the phonics screening check? It is a short check, usually taken in Year 1, that shows how well your child can read words using their phonics skills. It is a routine part of Year 1 in England, not a test to worry about, and your child's teacher will explain how it works in their school.

Sources

- Department for Education, 'The reading framework: teaching the foundations of literacy' (July 2023), GOV.UK. Describes systematic synthetic phonics and the planned teaching of sounds and blending. Check GOV.UK for the latest version.
- Department for Education, 'National curriculum in England: English programmes of study' (2013), GOV.UK. Sets out the Key Stage 1 requirements for word reading and phonics. Check GOV.UK for any updates.
- Department for Education, 'Phonics screening check' guidance collection, GOV.UK. Explains the statutory check taken in Year 1 in England. Check GOV.UK for the current year's guidance.