

Growing the Tricky Word List: Why Some Year 2 Words Just Won't Sound Out

A gentle guide to 'common exception words' in Year 2—words that don't follow the usual rules of phonics and need to be learned by sight.

What are common exception words?

In Year 2, children learn phonics, which is the method of teaching reading by matching sounds to letters. Most words can be 'sounded out' using these rules. However, some words are called 'common exception words'. These are words that appear often in books and speech, but they don't follow the regular phonics patterns children have learned. Because they don't follow the rules, they are sometimes called 'tricky words'. Examples include 'because', 'people', and 'different'. These words are a normal part of the National Curriculum, which is the official map of what children should learn in state schools in England.

Why some words won't sound out

It can be frustrating for a child when they try to blend sounds together—the process of pushing individual sounds into a whole word—only to find the word doesn't sound right. This happens because English is a complex language with many influences. Some words have 'irregular' spellings where a letter makes a sound that is unusual or unexpected. It is important to remember that when a child struggles with these words, they aren't failing at phonics; rather, the word itself is the exception to the rule. These words simply need to be recognised by sight rather than decoded using sounds.

What this means for your child

If your child pauses or gets stuck on a word like 'friend' or 'school', please reassure them that this is completely normal. Every child encounters these tricky words. For children with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) or those learning English as an additional language, these words can feel even more puzzling. The goal is not perfection, but gradual familiarity. Your child is still using their blending skills for most of their reading; these exception words are just a small, special group that requires a different approach. If you are worried about your child's progress, your child's class teacher is the best person to speak with.

Simple ways to help at home

You can help your child feel confident with these words through short, playful activities. Try 'spotting the tricky bit': look at a word together and find the part that doesn't follow the rules (for example, the 'o' in 'people' sounds like an 'ee'). You could highlight this part with a colourful pen. Using simple flashcards for a few minutes a day can also help, or you could go on a 'word hunt' in a favourite storybook to see if you can find any of their tricky words. Keep it light and fun; there is no need for drilling or pressure.

Common questions

Parents often ask if their child should keep trying to sound out these words. While blending is great for most words, for common exception words, it is more helpful to point out the 'tricky' part and encourage them to learn the word as a whole. You might also wonder how many words they need to know. The list of



words varies slightly between different schools and the phonics schemes they use. If you would like to know exactly which words your child is focusing on this term, a quick message to the teacher or a look in the school newsletter is the best way to find out.

Sources

- Department for Education, National Curriculum in England: Framework for Teaching English
- GOV.UK, National Curriculum in England: English programmes of study