

The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check: A Parent's Plain-English Guide

Every June, children in Year 1 (the school year for children aged 5 to 6) take the phonics screening check: a short, one-to-one reading task that checks how well they can sound out words. It isn't a test to revise for or worry about — it simply shows school and parents how phonics (the way children learn to match letters to sounds) is coming along, so any extra support can be put in place early.

What it is

The phonics screening check is a statutory (required by law) check that nearly all children in Year 1 take in England, usually in June. It's published by the Department for Education, the government department responsible for education in England, and is designed to check one specific skill: decoding, which means using phonics knowledge to work out a written word by sounding it out. It isn't a general reading test, and it doesn't check whether your child understands or enjoys what they read — just whether they can apply their phonics skills to turn letters into sounds and blend them into words. Some children who don't meet the expected standard get extra support and take the check again in Year 2 (the following school year). It's a routine part of school life, not an exam, and most children simply experience it as one more activity with their teacher.

What happens

A teacher sits one-to-one with your child, somewhere quiet and familiar, and asks them to read 40 words aloud. Some are real words; others are made-up words, often called pseudo-words (schools sometimes call them 'alien words'), usually shown next to a picture of an imaginary creature so children know it's fine that the word isn't real. This mix lets the check focus purely on decoding skills, because made-up words can't be guessed or remembered — they have to be sounded out. There's no time limit and no pass or fail announced to the child; it's designed to feel low-key, often fitting into normal class time. The Department for Education sets the standard needed each year, based on its published assessment framework, and schools follow official guidance on how to run the check fairly and consistently for every child.

What it means for your child

You'll usually be told the results with your child's annual school report, and the school will let you know whether your child met the expected standard. If they didn't, this isn't a sign anything is wrong — many children simply need more time, and they'll keep building their phonics skills with extra support, then take the check again in Year 2. The check looks at one narrow skill (decoding) at one point in time, so it doesn't capture everything your child can do as a reader, especially if English is an additional language they're learning, or if they have SEND (special educational needs and disabilities). How schools support individual children around the check can vary, so if you have any questions or concerns about your own child, their class teacher is always the best person to ask.

How you can help at home

The best preparation is simply continuing the everyday phonics activities your child's school already encourages — there's no need for extra drilling or practice tests. Keep reading together often, for enjoyment as much as anything else, and let your child sound out unfamiliar words at their own pace

without rushing to correct them. Playful activities work well: spotting letter sounds on signs during a walk, playing simple games with sounds and rhymes, or enjoying made-up silly words together, since this mirrors the pseudo-words in the check in a fun way. If your child brings home phonics books or sound cards from school, a few relaxed minutes together is plenty. Most importantly, keep the tone light — children pick up on anxiety, and a calm, curious approach to reading matters far more than any single check.

Questions parents often ask

Can my child fail? No — it's a check, not a pass/fail exam in the usual sense; children who don't meet the standard simply get more support and try again the following year. Does my child need to revise? No, there's no need for formal practice; everyday phonics activities and reading together are enough. Will my child know they're being tested? Schools aim to keep it low-key, often presenting it as normal reading time with their teacher. What if my child is anxious or has SEND? Arrangements can vary by school, so speak to the class teacher, who can explain what support is in place. Where can I see real examples? The Department for Education publishes sample materials on GOV.UK, which can be a reassuring way to see exactly what the check looks like.

Sources

- Department for Education / Standards and Testing Agency (GOV.UK): 'Phonics screening check: assessment framework'
- Department for Education / Standards and Testing Agency (GOV.UK): 'Year 1 phonics screening check: administration guidance for headteachers and teachers'
- Department for Education / Standards and Testing Agency (GOV.UK): 'Phonics screening check materials' (published sample/specimen check materials)