Strengthening Children’s Phonic Knowledge and Skills

Experiencing an effective, systematic phonics programme is important for all children learning to read. However, despite high quality whole class teaching, there is likely to be a small number of children who are struggling with reading. It is absolutely critical that these children receive additional systematic teaching that addresses their particular needs and difficulties.

Teaching phonics to struggling readers

1. Breaking spoken words down into their constituent phonemes, and showing children how to blend those sounds together to make the whole word, will be a breakthrough for some children. It is a simple activity that doesn’t require any resources: for instance, the teacher could say, ‘Can you work out the word I’m saying? Listen: t/ai/n/ - train. Listen again …’. Practising this oral blending regularly with children will strengthen their ability to blend phonemes together in printed words when they’re decoding.

2. Give the children opportunities to revise grapheme-phoneme correspondences (or GPCs) until they are secure. Include many digraphs and trigraphs (sounds or phonemes that are written with two or three letters e.g. /igh/).

3. Whichever phase or stage of their phonic programme children have reached, it’s not enough just to recognise GPCs in isolation – they need to be able to use and apply that knowledge while they are reading. An important aspect of this is making sure they blend all the phonemes in each word, from left to right, not just the initial sounds.

4. Teaching children to run their finger or a pointer from left to right under the words will help those who have difficulties with directionality, or in paying attention to all parts of the word.

5. Counting off the phonemes in a word on their fingers: /sh/ou/t/i/ng/ helps children to focus on the ‘chunks’ in words, which benefits both their reading and their spelling by making them more confident at recognising and manipulating phonemes.

6. The importance of clear enunciation of phonemes can’t be overstated, and it is especially important for children who are having difficulties. The individual sounds must be articulated cleanly and clearly.

7. Choose an intervention that develops and secures the children’s phonic knowledge and skills, but make sure it also enables them to enjoy and understand what they are reading.