

Learning about letters, sounds and words

Students need to develop and use many understandings and skills to become successful readers and writers (see the supporting learning resources *Talking as you write*, *Learning about reading*, *Beginning to write*, *Talking about words*, *Supporting a beginning reader* and *How a child begins to read*). Learning letters and sounds is just one part of learning to read and write. Putting too much focus on learning letters and sounds and introducing letters/sounds too quickly or when a child is not ready/interested can cause students to:

- lose interest in and confidence to explore reading and writing
- think reading and writing is about ‘saying’ sounds rather than making sense of texts
- become confused as many letters look similar (e.g. j, i, l) and letters often make more than one sound.

Learning letters and sounds

Most students learn sounds and letters that are of personal interest quickly and easily (e.g. letters in family members’ names) because they want/need to use these letters (e.g. to write a note to Dad or name their work). The best ways to help students learn more about letters and sounds are to:

- make letters/sounds useful and personally interesting to them
- talk clearly about new letters/sounds when the student wants to read or write words for real purposes (e.g. read signs, logos, food packages or make a sign ‘Keep out!’).



More than just naming letters and sounds

It is important for students to understand:

- why knowing letters and their sounds can be helpful (e.g. Breaking words into sound parts or ‘segmenting sounds’ helps people to write — ‘ctrplr’ for ‘caterpillar’. Putting sounds together or ‘blending sounds’, helps people to read — e.g. ‘s-un’, ‘t-i-n’, ‘Mon- day’)
- when it is useful and when it is NOT useful to use letter–sound knowledge to read and write (e.g. Naming letters is useful for spelling out loud. Sounding out words is not useful when the sounds in words are not regular — such as in the word ‘one’)
- that letters/sounds are just small parts of words, which are parts of sentences, which are parts of texts, which are used to communicate (e.g. tell a story, share information, entertain) and share meanings.

Ways to help Prep students learn more about letters and their sounds include:

- playing games with sounds/letters (e.g. give letter/sound clues when playing games like 'I spy' or 'What/who am I?', singing songs, reading rhymes and repetitive books)
- talking about letters/sounds when the students need to use them (e.g. to find the correct package of cereal on a shelf, read a logo on a toy package, write an 'a' for 'apples' on a shopping list)
- talking informally and sharing ideas about letters/sounds rather than using repetitive 'drill and practice' activities (e.g. Ask questions while reading: *What do you think this letter might be/say? Why did you think that? What other information did you use?* For example, a memory or a picture clue. *Would 'dog' start with /d/? When have you heard that sound/seen that letter before? Is that the usual sound that letter makes?*)
- making sure the students know it is okay to make a mistake and that you will help them
- providing helpful feedback and praising the students for having a try. (e.g. *Great try! It does look like a 'd'. The letter 'b' is a bit like a flipped round 'd'. The picture shows a 'bike', so this is the letter 'b'. 'B' says /b/.*)

When playing games with letters that are not part of a text/real-life situation (e.g. using magnetic letters/alphabet games/a computer game), help students to feel and be more successful by:

- using only familiar letters the students know (to start games)
- keeping letters in order/familiar positions (e.g. alphabetical order)
- changing the order/position of familiar letters slightly as they gain confidence
- introducing only one/two new letters at a time (preferably in a real-life situation such as when reading a sign)
- using one/two new letters in games as well as some/all of the familiar letters
- gradually adding/using more letters and/or placing them in different orders/positions.