



Cost

£££££

Evidence strength



Impact (months)

+5

Effect size

0.42

What is it?

Phonics is an approach to teaching some aspects of literacy, by developing pupils' knowledge and understanding of the relationship between written symbols and sounds. This involves the skills of hearing, identifying and using the patterns of sounds or phonemes to read written language. The aim is to systematically teach pupils the relationship between these sounds and the written spelling patterns, or graphemes, which represent them. Phonics emphasises the skills of decoding new words by sounding them out and combining or 'blending' the sound-spelling patterns.

Key Findings

1. Phonics has a positive impact overall (+5 months) with very extensive evidence and is an important component in the development of early reading skills, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
2. The teaching of phonics should be explicit and systematic to support children in making connections between the sound patterns they hear in words and the way that these words are written.
3. The teaching of phonics should be matched to children's current level of skill in terms of their phonemic awareness and their knowledge of letter sounds and patterns (graphemes).
4. Phonics improves the accuracy of the child's reading but not necessarily their comprehension. It is important that children are successful in making progress in all aspects of reading including comprehension, the development of vocabulary and spelling, which should also be taught explicitly.

How effective is the approach?

The average impact of the adoption of phonics approaches is about an additional five months' progress over the course of a year.

Phonics approaches have been consistently found to be effective in supporting younger pupils to master the basics of reading, with an average impact of an additional five months' progress. Research suggests that phonics is particularly beneficial for younger learners (4-7 year olds) as they begin to read. Teaching phonics is more effective on average than other approaches to early reading (such as whole language or alphabetic approaches), though it should be emphasised that effective phonics techniques are usually embedded in a rich literacy environment for early readers and are only one part of a successful literacy strategy.

While there have been fewer studies examining phonics with older readers, there is evidence that it can be a positive approach. With any reading intervention, careful diagnosis is required on the difficulties that the reader is experiencing, regardless of age. If an older reader is struggling with decoding, phonics approaches will still be appropriate. Where readers are struggling with vocabulary or comprehension, other interventions may be more appropriate.

There is some variation in impact between different phonological approaches. Synthetic phonics approaches have higher impacts, on average, than analytic approaches. Analytic phonics approaches has also been studied less overall (only 9 studies). The small number of analogic phonics approaches identified in this review (6 studies) have a negative impact on average.

The linguistic distance between the formal (Modern standard Arabic) and spoken language that makes it hard for children to rely on the phonologic representations they have for the words in the spoken language. Research within Arabic speaking countries suggests that improving phonological awareness skills in Arabic language is associated to the improvement of learners' reading abilities. A study of government schools within the UAE found that in classes where direct instruction was used to raise phonological awareness, learners became more aware of the relationship between the letter sounds and the written spelling patterns, or graphemes, which represent them and also gain the ability to decode news words by sounding them.

However, the existing literature around the importance of phonological and morphological awareness as a predictor of a strong reading skills is still incomplete. Research in the Arab world lacks longitudinal studies that could determine developmental patterns and ways to improve reading performance in Arabic during formal schooling.

Behind the average

The majority of studies have been conducted in primary schools, though there are a number of successful studies with secondary age pupils with a similar overall impact (+5 months)

Most studies of phonics are of intensive support in small groups and one to one with the aim to supporting pupils to catch up with their peers. The effects of one to one tends to be a little higher (+5 months) compared with small group interventions (+4 months), but this needs to be offset by the number of pupils who can receive support.

Approaches using digital technology tend to be less successful than those led by a teacher or teaching assistant. Studies of intensive support involving teaching assistants show slightly lower overall impact (+4 months) compared to those involving teachers. This indicates the importance of training and support in phonics for interventions led by teaching assistants.

Synthetic phonics approaches have higher impacts, on average, than analytic phonics approaches.

Studies have been conducted internationally (7 countries), mainly in English-speaking countries. Those conducted outside of the USA have typically shown greater impact.

Closing the disadvantage gap

Studies in England have shown that pupils eligible for free school meals typically receive similar or slightly greater benefit from phonics interventions and approaches. This is likely to be due to the explicit nature of the instruction and the intensive support provided.

It is possible that some disadvantaged pupils may not develop phonological awareness at the same rate as other pupils, having been exposed to fewer words spoken and books read in the home. Targeted phonics interventions may therefore improve decoding skills more quickly for pupils who have experienced these barriers to learning.

How could you implement in your setting?

Phonics approaches aim to quickly develop pupils' word recognition and spelling through developing pupils' ability to hear, identify and manipulate phonemes (the smallest unit of spoken language), and to teach them the relationship between phonemes and the graphemes (written letters or combinations of letters) that represent them. Successfully implementing a phonics might involve:

- Using a systematic approach that explicitly teaches pupils a comprehensive set of letter-sound relationships through an organised sequence
- Training staff to ensure they have the necessary linguistic knowledge and understanding

- Carefully monitoring progress to ensure that phonics programmes are responsive and provide extra support where necessary
- Carefully consider any adaptations to systematic programmes that might reduce impact

Good implementation of phonics programmes will also consider pupils wider reading skills and will identify where pupils are struggling with aspects of reading other than decoding that might be targeted through other approaches such as the explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies.

Where phonics is delivered as an intervention targeted at specific pupils, regular sessions (up to four times a week), of 30 minutes or so over a period of up to 12 weeks appear to be the most successful structure.

When introducing new approaches, schools should consider implementation. For more information see [Putting Evidence to Work - A School's Guide to Implementation](#).

What does it cost?

Overall, the median costs of implementing a phonics intervention are estimated as very low. The costs associated with teaching phonics arise from the need for specific resources and professional training, the majority of which are initial start-up costs paid during the first year of delivery.

Whilst the median cost estimate for phonics programmes is very low, the range of prices between available programmes and the option to purchase additional ongoing training and support for teaching staff means that costs can range from very low to low. Evidence suggests that the effectiveness of phonics is related to the pupil's stage of reading development, so it is important that teachers have professional development in effective assessment as well as in the use of particular phonics techniques and materials.

These cost estimates assume that schools are already paying for staff salaries to deliver interventions, facilities to host lessons, and basic stationary materials for staff and pupils. These are all pre-requisite costs of implementing a phonics intervention, without which the cost is likely to be higher.

How secure is the evidence?

The security of the evidence around phonics is rated as very high. 121 studies were identified that meet the inclusion criteria of the Toolkit.

As with any evidence review, the Toolkit summarises the average impact of approaches when researched in academic studies. It is important to consider your context and apply your professional

judgement when implementing an approach in your setting.

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