

PHONICS · AGES 4-8

Phonics vs Sight Words — What Actually Works

PRINTABLE ARTICLE

Parents ask me this more than almost anything else: should I be teaching sounds, or should I be teaching whole words? The honest answer is that this isn't really an either/or question — but the two methods do different jobs, and knowing which one to reach for saves a lot of frustration.

What phonics actually does

Phonics teaches your child that letters represent sounds, and that sounds blend together to make words. "C-A-T" becomes "cat" because your child has learned what each letter sounds like and how to string them together. This is what lets a child sound out a word they've never seen before.

The tradeoff: English spelling is inconsistent. Phonics explains "cat" and "sit" beautifully. It struggles with "said," "the," and "once."

What sight words actually do

Sight words are the common words — "the," "was," "said," "you" — that a child memorizes by sight rather than sounding out. Memorizing the 100 or so most common sight words gets a huge amount of everyday text within reach quickly.

The tradeoff: memorization doesn't transfer. Knowing "said" by sight doesn't help your child read "paid," even though they look similar.

Why the fight between the two methods is mostly pointless

Nearly every strong early-reading approach actually uses both, just without labeling it. Your child needs phonics to decode new words, and a working set of memorized sight words to handle the common irregular ones without getting stuck every other sentence.

A simple rule of thumb: if a word follows normal spelling patterns, sound it out together. If it's one of the very common irregular words ("the," "was," "of"), just tell your child what it says and move on — repetition will do the memorizing for you.

What this looks like at home, practically

- **Sound out regular words together.** Help them sound each letter and blend it, rather than just telling them the word.
- **Just tell them the irregular ones.** Don't make your child struggle to sound out "said." Say it, move on.
- **Read the same books repeatedly.** Repetition is how sight words actually get memorized — not flashcard drilling.
- **Don't quiz mid-story.** Stopping every page to test recall turns reading into an exam.

When to worry, and when not to

It's completely normal for a five- or six-year-old to mix up similar-looking sight words, or to need several attempts at sounding out a longer word. What's worth watching for is a child who seems to have no strategy at all after months of regular reading time — that's a reasonable moment to loop in a teacher or tutor for a second opinion.