

# FACTSHEET: Ideas for parents ... supporting spelling, punctuation and grammar

## How to do it... spelling

### Learning set spellings

Children will often come home from school with lists of spellings to learn for the following week. Here are some ideas how you can support your child to learn their weekly spelling list:

**Encourage sounding out.** Regular words, those which follow phonic rules, can easily be sounded out. This is often the best strategy to begin with. Encourage your child to say the word slowly and sound out each letter.

**Writing and saying.** Ask your child to write the word several times, saying each letter sound as they write it.

**Writing in the air.** Some children may prefer to 'air write' the word, using their whole arm to make the letter shapes in the air. Again, saying the letter sounds as they write can help memory.

**Focus on the difficult bit.** Help your child to identify just the tricky bit of the word and focus on learning just that if the rest of the word can easily be sounded out.

**Use LACAWAC (Look and Cover and Write and Check).** Ask your child to look carefully at the word until they think they can remember it. Next they cover the word up and write it out. Then they check their version with the correct spelling, identifying any errors they have made.

**Vary the materials.** Children can easily become bored with writing so vary how they practise their spellings. Perhaps use a small whiteboard which they can wipe clean, ask them to make their spellings out of letter-shaped fridge magnets, or use any other materials which are to hand. Writing in a sand tray, using felt tips or finger paints, or writing the words with a stick in mud – all are different ways to practise the same spellings.

**Words within words.** Show your child smaller words hidden in the longer word (e.g. 'other' contains 'the', 'he', 'her'). This can help to build up a knowledge of spelling patterns and rules, as well as building confidence – they already know a good part of the word!

**Irregular words.** Some irregular words (often called ‘high frequency words’ or ‘common exception words’) are particularly difficult to learn as they do not follow a pattern and have to be learned separately. Some children enjoy using mnemonics to learn these. A mnemonic takes each letter of a word to create a sentence. Many children find a sentence easier to remember, especially if it is funny or unusual. Take this mnemonic for the word ‘because’:

- Big
- Elephants
- Can’t
- Always
- Use
- Small
- Exits

**Make it fun.** Many easy games can be used to practise spelling. Play hangman with the spellings from your child’s list, or use a computer to create a wordsearch containing these words – there are several free websites available which will transform a wordlist into a wordsearch or other activities.

### **General strategies to support spelling**

The strategies above can support your child to learn a set list of spellings. However, it can also be useful to play games and activities to support general spelling development. The suggestions below can all be adapted for children of different ages and are suitable for older children and teenagers too.

- Give a longer word (such as ‘establishment’) and see which player can make the most words from the letters contained in the word. You could give a set time limit for this game.
- Hangman is an easy game which can be played in just a few minutes using paper or a small wipe-clean board if you have one.
- Change one letter at a time. Begin with a word (such as ‘bear’, ‘hat’ or ‘cup’). The next player has to change just one letter to make a new word. Players take it in turns to change just one letter at a time. You may end up with a list such as:
  - bear
  - hear
  - heap
  - leap
  - lead
  - lend
  - bend
  - bond
  - fond

- ford
  - fore
  - core
  - cone
  - bone
- Try noughts and crosses with words. Play with a noughts and crosses grid but instead of simply filling a box with a 'nought' or 'cross', players have to write a word. You might choose a theme for each game, for example, words that contain 'sh', 'ch', 'ai' or other common combinations of letters.
  - Scrabble also supports spelling and vocabulary knowledge.

**Top tips for supporting your child with spelling:**

Remember that it is of limited use for children to learn spellings of words that they do not understand. They are more likely to remember the spelling if they also understand what the word means. Ensure that your child builds up a knowledge of the word. Ask your child to use it in a sentence and to draw a picture to illustrate the meaning. Discuss the meaning of the word and when it would be used.

It is far easier to learn groups of words which follow the same pattern, rather than trying to learn a group of random words (learning 'train', 'rain', 'brain', Spain' and 'chain' together will be easier as they all contain the 'ai' sound).

When writing lists of spellings, keep your own handwriting neat. Ensure your letters are evenly sized and that letters which extend above or below the lines are clearly higher or lower than other letters. This will help your child to see the 'shape' of the word and to develop a visual memory for it.

**Supporting older children with spelling.**

Once your child has developed a good knowledge of phonics and developed strategies to learn spellings, they will be able to spell many words correctly. However, they may not yet be completely accurate spellers, particularly for longer or irregular words. So, how can you continue to help the older child?

**Encourage your child to 'have a go' at spellings when writing.** Provide them with a small notebook, whiteboard or scrap of paper. Ask them to try the word, look at it and if it looks wrong, to try it again. They should do this as many times as they need to. Then they look across at their attempts and decide which one 'looks' the most correct.

**Teaching prefixes and suffixes can also be helpful.** A prefix is a group of letters at the beginning of a word (e.g. pre-, re-, anti-, in-, un-) and suffixes are groups of letters at the end of words (e.g. -ing, -ed, -ly). These small groups of letters can change the meaning of a word. Point out these prefixes and suffixes as it can help children to split longer words into more manageable chunks (unhelpful – un / help / ful).

**Encourage your child to tap out the syllables in longer words** (e.g. de/part/ment). Remind them to think about each syllable when they are spelling so that they do not omit part of the word.

**Remind your child of some common spelling rules.** Some examples are: 'Q' is always followed by 'u'. The 'a' sound is usually 'ay' at the end of a word. The 'k' sound at the end of a word is usually 'ck' if preceded by a vowel (black, click) and 'k' if preceded by a consonant (bank, pink).

**Teach dictionary use.** Encourage older children to become independent spellers by ensuring that they know how to use a dictionary or electronic spellcheckers effectively, to check both spellings and the meanings of words. To use a dictionary effectively children will need to know the order of the alphabet. Alternatively, phonetic dictionaries are also available. These are organised by how words sound, rather than how they are written. So the word 'philosophy', for example, would be found under 'f' as well as 'ph'. Apps and electronic versions are usually available as well as paper versions.

## How to do it... punctuation

Punctuation can be a difficult concept for children to understand as it does not occur in spoken language – rather we use pauses, intonation or tone of voice to express the same meaning.

**Read.** Reading is probably the best way for children to become familiar with correctly used punctuation. Occasionally draw attention to punctuation and why it has been used when reading with your child. Do not do this too often as reading will become boring! Vary your intonation when you come to exclamation marks and question marks and encourage your child to do the same when they are reading. Pause at commas and full stops and do different voices for different characters when you encounter speech marks. When children are using punctuation marks to read with more expression, they will see the importance of using them in their own writing.

**Build sentences.** Understanding what constitutes a sentence can be particularly tricky for some children. A sentence has to make sense on its own and has to contain a subject (often a person or a thing) and a verb ('I am playing.' 'He swam.' 'The shops were very busy'). To begin with children may be taught that each sentence contains one 'idea'. If your child does not yet write in sentences, encourage them to read their writing aloud and use full stops after each 'idea' which makes sense on its own (e.g. 'I played football in the park my team scored a goal I made a good pass' would become 'I played football in the park. My team scored a goal. I made a good pass.'). Once children understand the idea of a simple sentence, they can begin to join these with connectives (such as 'because', 'and' or 'although') to create longer sentences.

**Read aloud.** Children and young people will eventually learn to use punctuation as they are writing. Before they reach that point, they may need to read over their work once

finished and add in the punctuation they have omitted. Encourage your child to read their writing aloud as this may help them to identify where the punctuation should go.

**Comic strip.** If your child struggles to identify direct speech, draw a quick storyboard of their story. Draw speech bubbles and ask your child to write in the speech bubbles just the words each character says – these are the words which will need to go inside the speech marks.

## How to do it ... grammar

Many children will not have too many difficulties with using correct grammar in their writing, although it may be more difficult for those with speech and language difficulties, those who speak English as an additional language, or those who speak with a strong regional dialect. Children and young people with specific language difficulties or English as an Additional Language may need specialist input, but here are some general strategies which can be practised at home:

- Proofreading. Some children will benefit from reading their written work aloud, or having it read aloud to them. This can sometimes be enough for them to recognise and amend grammatical errors they have made such as muddled tenses or missed word endings.
- Draw attention to differences between written and spoken language. Structures that we use in spoken language are often not used in standard written English. For example, we say 'I should of left earlier', but write 'I should have left earlier'. In some geographical areas 'Her is a gentle dog' is common in spoken language; 'She is a gentle dog' would be the standard written version.
- Try playing a game to support your child to use different tenses and sentence structures. Use a collection of pictures (cut out of magazines, printed, drawn, or use ready-made cards) and make some small cards with the following words: statement; question; negative; past tense; present tense; future tense; conditional tense. Players take it in turns to pick up a picture and a card. They then have to say a sentence describing the picture, using the sentence structure they have chosen. So a picture of a reading book and the 'conditional tense' may create 'If I had lots of time, I would read more books'. A picture of a tennis court and the 'negative' structure may lead to 'Daddy doesn't like playing tennis'. This game can be played orally to practise different sentence structures.
- Extending sentences. If your child writes very short sentences, try providing them with a visual reminder of some key words: who, what, where, when, how, why. If they have written '*I played football*', for example, you might encourage them to look at the list and add a 'when' and 'who' to extend their sentence. It may then become '*On Saturday I played football with my brother.*'