

how do i write that sound?

By Mary Ashby-Green*

As a teacher analysing children's literacy levels, I came across many children who had good oral language skills and good comprehension, but the standard of their written work was way below their reading skill level. They had limited themselves to words they could spell, rather than using the more complex language they wanted to use. These children were frustrated at their underachievement, and it sent me on my own journey of study and discovery to find out what I could do to help learners who did not fit the 'normal' progressions.

To be fully literate, we need to be able to read and comprehend, and we also need to be able to competently express ourselves in written language. When we think of 'spelling', we generally see it as the ability to memorise a word and reproduce it accurately. Yet 'spelling' can offer us lots of practical ideas that will also assist with reading. There are many skills required for the brain to fully acquire the process of reading, and as these aspects interlink and become automatic, they provide a solid foundation for this ongoing and developing process.

Individual learning styles (ie, visual, kinesthetic/tactile, auditory, analytical) have their part to play in how easily a child spells (and it is usually the strongly visual child who finds it easiest), but by using techniques that best suit your child's individual learning style, we can help open their own pathways of learning.

When I'm working with children, their spelling ability gives me a clear indication of the way they are processing words. It will tell me if they are hearing each sound correctly; where they are confusing similar sounds, or not hearing them at all; or whether they are simply unable to find the letters to produce the sounds they can hear.

We think of spelling as just visual but, to be able to spell well, you must be able to hear the sounds, as well as see them. If your child is not spelling well, just copying out words seems to be the least effective method. Once you see the link between the skill of hearing the sound and writing it correctly, you'll be able to create some multi-sensory games and activities of your own.

It's easy to despair about the fickleness of the English language – and it's true, 13% of the words we most commonly use are irregular in their spelling. Take a look at these: come, said, was, you. However, the good news is that 87% are regular and do follow a set of rules. And from this, your child can build a solid foundation of how words work, as well as building up a 'sight word' vocabulary.

I also prefer to use a mini-whiteboard rather than pen and paper, so that errors can be wiped away with a finger. It's not just about getting the word 'right' – it's about practising the skill to apply to other words as well.

Here are some initial things for you to check. Can your child hear and identify the differences between the short vowel sounds (a, e, i, o, u)? Start with this sample list of words with those sounds in them.

<bat, bed, hid, log, rug>

Next, use magnetic letters, or prepare individual cards with a, e, i, o, u. Below are some words with these sounds in them, and the idea is for you to say them aloud and see if your child can hold up the corresponding letter. Common confusions are a/u, and e/i. You could also use sets of pictures so that the child is saying the word themselves.

<car, fed, sit, dog, bun>

The next area where children have difficulty is consonant blends, and many children need practice in saying and hearing sounds such as sl, sp, gr. We say them frequently, and some children just seem to pick them up, while others need to be specifically taught awareness of what the sounds and letters are.

What about older children who come home with their list of words each week? It's very disheartening to watch your child put so much effort into learning those words, remembering them at home, and then forgetting them on the day of the spelling test.

Here are a few tips to help your child see – and hear – the word in different ways.

- a) Cut it into syllables. It's important to be able to pronounce each syllable correctly, as it helps with spelling it correctly also.
- b) Saying each syllable aloud helps them to hear the word in chunks as they spell it. Spelling words letter by letter often causes them to miss out parts of the word and to lose their focus. This takes practice, and your child may be reluctant to do it, however it is only necessary until they learn to do it automatically (it's what good spellers do naturally).
- c) Get your child to take each word and write each syllable in a different colour, so that they can see that they have identified each chunk of sound.

Focusing on spelling can increase their confidence to tackle unknown words, and it helps them to learn to self-correct.

Here's a tip for you to use with children of all

Why is it that some children who read easily find it so hard to express themselves in writing? Is their spelling holding them back? Here are some ways to improve your child's spelling and help with their reading at the same time.



ages, when they call out to ask you how to spell a word. Rather than asking you how to spell it, get your child into the habit of asking, "How do I write that sound?" instead. It encompasses the link between speaking, hearing and writing.

If you feel your child has real difficulties in that area, and you can't help at home, consider contacting a professional who can do an assessment and tutoring for you. (Also, see our February/March issue for the article on APD - Audio Processing Disorder.)

** Mary is a former Acting Principal, who specialised in teaching children with learning and behavioural difficulties. Today, she trains teachers in Jolly Phonics, and she works individually with children who have anxiety about learning, using her NLP training. For more information, go to www.breakfreephonics.co.nz*

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