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# Use Phonics Activities to Motivate Learners With Difficulties

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Teaching and learning phonics is an important part of a balanced literacy program for all learners and particularly for those with learning difficulties. In establishing a literacy program, teachers must first gain a thorough knowledge of the abilities, needs, and interests of their learners and then use this knowledge in program planning to ensure that learners will be motivated to learn. Implementing multifaceted approaches and activities that are relevant and meaningful to the learners help heighten and maintain their motivation to participate, persist, and learn.

We have outlined a variety of activities that may be used to teach phonics to learners with difficulties. The application, presentation, and use of the activities will vary depending on the interests, needs, and abilities of each learner and the dynamics of small groups. Activities may be introduced in any order, mixed, matched, and used in other areas of literacy as needs would indicate.

## 1. Concrete Cuisine Themes

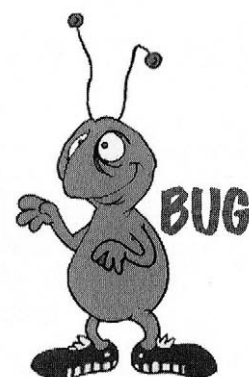
Beginning with concrete or real-world materials based on learners' interests is a great way to spark motivation. By using their knowledge, familiarity, and expertise with concrete materials or real-world experiences, links can be established between existing and new knowledge as it is extended and generalized to phonics and other areas of literacy. For example, to teach the sound-symbol relationship of the letter "p" to a learner interested in the theme of food, the teacher could combine concrete cuisine by cooking popcorn, creating and saying popcorn rhymes, listening to the popping sounds and linking these to the sound that the letter makes by placing popcorn on items that begin with the letter "p" like paper, plate, plant, picture, pumpkin.

## 2. Sound-Scene Setting

A classroom can easily be transformed into a stimulating phonics environment by "setting the scene with sounds."

Again, concrete materials and stimulus pictures are used and linked to learner interests. For example, if learners are interested in the beach, the letter/sound "b" can be discovered from the items set within the room, such as a bucket, boogie-board (like a small surf board), blanket, bikini, beach bag, and posters displaying beach-related pictures.

The scene can also be set by creating a sound trail to promote discovery of other phonics elements. For example, if focusing on sound families, rhyming words, blends, or phonograms, a trail of objects ending with the same sound can be laid out for the learners to follow and discover the links among the items or pictures.



## 3. Sound Signs

Help learners make large signs or charts for individual letters to be used as a wall display that the learners can refer to often. The sign should show the letter in both upper and lower case—Aa.

Following discussion of the chosen letter's name and sound/s and brainstorming for words that begin with those sounds, help learners find pictures in magazines that represent this initial letter and sound. Cut and glue the pictures onto a large piece of colored cardboard, label each picture using all lower-case letters (except when using proper nouns), and highlight the focus letter/sound in a different color. This can also be used for other phonic elements such as blends and phonograms.

The Sound Signs can also be displayed as sound mobiles with the pictures hanging from a coat hanger or on the sides of colorful cubes, with the letter, blend, phonogram, or ending clearly marked above.

#### 4. Phonics File

In the same manner described for the Sound Signs, learners can make phonics files based on the interests of the individual or group. For example, if the learners are interested in current music artists or movies or television shows, look for pictures or use photographs that represent these interests and glue them onto the appropriate page. Words may also be written or cut from magazines or newspapers.

For example: Aa—Abba; Bb—Backstreet Boys; Hh—Harry Potter, Hogwarts; Ll—Lord of the Rings

#### 5. Tactile Letters

Make “tactile” letters using sand, felt, cotton wool, pasta, seeds, buttons, sandpaper, velvet, and so forth. Use different colors for different letters. Have learners trace the letters with their fingers in the same way as they would be written while saying the letter’s name and sound. This helps learners develop and remember the “shape” of each letter, as well as its name and sound. The letters can be hung with pegs on wire across the room as a bright, visual display (also shows alphabetical order) and taken down for use as required.

#### 6. Phonics Keyboard Cards

Make two sets of phonics cards: one showing the alphabet in lower-case and one in upper-case letters. Make a large diagram of a computer keyboard so that lower-case phonics cards can be matched and placed over the upper-case keyboard letters to aid in basic keyboard literacy.

These phonics cards may be used in a wide variety of ways and within many other phonic activities. Cards showing blends, phonograms, and word endings may also be made.

#### 7. Phonics Picture Cards

Make a set of four picture cards for each target sound. Target sounds could include initial letter/sounds, medial vowel sounds, final letters/sounds, blends, phonograms, rhyming words, and word endings. For example, the pictures for the letter/sound Aa in the initial position might be—ant, apple, axe, arrow.

##### Phonics Picture Card Activities

- Matching letter cards to picture cards.
- Sorting (e.g., putting all “Aa” pictures together).
- Odd one out—put three “same-sound” pictures together with one “different-sound” picture. For example, ant, apple, axe, ball. Learners select the “odd one out.”
- Sound hunt—Hide the picture cards. Give the learners a letter card and have them physically search for the matching picture cards and/or real objects. Alternatively, give the learners the picture cards and/or

real objects and have them search for the matching letter cards.

#### 8. Physical Phonics Maze

Make a large-scale “physical maze” using same-sound picture cards or objects beginning with the target sound for learners to physically follow. Put in some false paths by using letters/sounds or objects that the learners should not follow.

#### 9. Phonics Picture Bingo

Make double-sided bingo boards with one side showing pictures and the other letters. The game may be played in two ways:

Game 1—Letter side of the board:

The caller names an object, for example, “fish.” The players place a marker on the matching initial letter, “Ff.”

Game 2—Picture side of the board:

The caller names a letter, for example “Bb,” and may also pronounce the sound that the letter makes. The players place a marker on the picture that begins with this letter/sound.

Both games continue until the board is covered.

#### 10. Sound Games

Sound games can be made up of any number of letters, pictures, or combinations of both, with the game board being in any shape, pattern, size, or form.

The object of the game is to roll die and move the number of spaces indicated. Once landing on a letter, the player must name the letter, give its sound, and think of something that begins with that sound. If landing on a picture, the player must give the matching letter name and sound.

Play continues until a player reaches the end of the game board. Rules can be added as necessary and varied to cater to the needs of individual learners or groups.



#### 11. Phonics Hopscotch

You will need a plastic indoor hopscotch mat or chalk if playing outside.

Select the target letters/sounds and print them in washable marker (indoor) or chalk (outdoor) in each section of the hopscotch grid. (Print in lower case.)

You may have more than one letter/sound in each section and allow learners to choose which letter/sound to play. Different-colored letters/sounds for each learner may also be used. The game is played as regular hopscotch (with allowances and modifications made as necessary for any physical disabilities), except that the learner must name the letter in the section where the stone has landed, give its sound, and think of something that begins with that sound before being permitted to move. If the learner cannot answer, the letter name and sound are provided. The learner is then helped to think of something beginning with the sound and after repeating the letter name, sound, and an object, is permitted to move.

## 12. Phonics Footprints

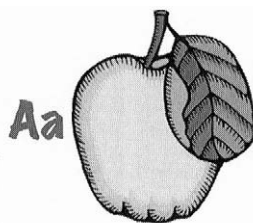
Make cardboard footprints and stick these to the floor in a trail. Each footprint is printed with a letter (blend, phonogram, etc.), picture, or both. As the learners follow the trail, they name the letters, giving their sounds and words that begin with (or contain) those sounds.

## 13. Phonics Feely Box

This may be used in two ways:

1. Place cut-out, cardboard, or tactile letters in a box. Learners feel and select a letter that they then attempt to identify by feeling its shape. After drawing the letter out of the box, learners name the letter, give its sound, and name something that begins with that sound.

2. Place different objects of interest to the learners in the box. Learners feel an object and identify it by feeling its shape. Then they take the object out of the box and provide the name and sound of the letter that the object begins with.



## 14. Phonics Exploration

While exploring indoor or outdoor environments

- Provide learners with many different letters and have them find objects that begin with the letters.
- Have learners place the letters onto the matching objects.
- Provide learners with copies of the same letter and have them find different objects that begin with the same letter/sound. Again, stick the letters onto the matching objects.

## 15. Phonics Blending Dice

These can be made for specific needs and may be used in a variety of ways. Make two cardboard cubes (to serve as die) and tape to each side a clear plastic sheet, leaving one plastic edge open (overhead transparency sheets work

**Table 1.** Examples for Using Phonics Blending Dice

First die	Second die	Third die
r	at	
bl	ob	
sh	ip	
f	oo	t
wh	ea	t

well). Cut 12 pieces of thin cardboard slightly smaller than the plastic squares. Onto 6 of these, write the required initial letters. On the remaining 6, write the required endings. (A third die containing medial vowels or phonograms can also be used as required.) The different word parts may be color coded. Both die are rolled and the learners blend the sounds together (see Table 1).

## 16. Phonics Frenzy

This activity can be played either orally or graphically through writing or drawing. The teacher or a learner says a letter and gives its sound. An egg timer is now turned. The other learners have to think of as many words that match the given letter/sound in the time determined by the timer. Words may be given orally and written on the board by the teacher or be thought of and written secretly by each individual. Alternatively, pictures representing the words may be drawn. The person with the most correct words/pictures wins. If played as a whole group, the aim is to beat the group's previous high score. This game can also be played for blends, phonograms, word endings, and rhyming words.

## 17. Blends and Ends

Make two sets of cards. One set contains initial blends, and the other contains word endings. The blends and ends should be written in different colors. The cards may be made up in three different ways:

1. as plain cards to be used in simple matching activities where the blends are matched to the ends, with each sound group being said separately and then put together and the new word read as a whole;
2. as domino cards so that matching becomes a fun game to be played in pairs or small groups; or
3. as puzzle pieces where specific blends and matching ends cards are cut to fit together.

## 18. Phonics Flips

These phonic flip books are made to blend sounds. They can contain two or three "flip sections" cut from the bottom of the page toward the top to make flaps that can be



flipped up and over. They can be made to address a variety of phonic needs:

- blend single initial sounds with word endings
- initial consonant blends and digraphs with word endings
- initial sounds and/or blends with medial phonograms and word endings
- a combination of phonic elements

### 19. Slippery Sounds

These are sound cards that have moveable (sliding) parts. They may have one or two sliding parts.

#### *One sliding part*

Initial sounds, blends, or digraphs are printed on the left side of the card. The right side of the card has two horizontal slits cut into it. The slits are approximately the width of two or three letters and are cut one above the other and separated with a space that is about the size of a capital letter.

Word endings are printed on a separate, vertical strip of card—one below the other. The strip of card is woven through the slits on the sound card so that the ends protrude from the back. A word ending will now appear next to the initial sound, blend, or digraph. The learner blends the initial sound/s with the word ending and reads the whole word. The strip is then pulled up or down to reveal the next word ending.

#### *Two sliding parts*

The middle sliding part has medial vowels and/or phonograms printed on the sliding strip and the third

part contains the word endings. Learners can use the slippery sounds to practice blending and to aid in decoding new words.

### 20. Goat in a Boat

This is a concrete activity to help learners understand the concept of rhyming. Two sets of big, bright picture cards are made. The pictures should be simple and cut out from the card. One set of pictures contains animals. The other set contains objects that rhyme with the animals' names (e.g., a goat in a boat, a duck on a truck, a bug in a mug). The object cards have a slit cut into them. Learners select an animal, say its name, and then try to find the object that sounds the same. When successful, the animal card is slotted into the object card so that the learners can clearly see that, for example, the goat is in the boat. The animals' names and the names of the objects are also printed on their pictures. The "rhyming part" of the word is highlighted in a different color. It is, therefore, important to include objects that not only sound the same as the animal name but that also have words where the "rhyming part" is spelled the same.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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