

THE HAPPY



ISSUE
01

SUMMER 2026

TOOLBOX PHONICS

PLAY • EDUCATION • RESEARCH
PEDAGOGY • CHILDHOOD

CLASSROOM

PLAY – WE'RE DOING IT WRONG!

Walk into a Reception classroom and you'll see children completing challenges and rotating around activities. These are often described as "play-based learning" – but are they really play?

Whilst playful activities are better than boring ones, they are not the same as play. Play is something children choose. It's instinctual and is driven by imagination and exploration.

When children are given the freedom to play, they naturally create, and solve problems and make sense of their world. A child can turn a cardboard box into a pirate ship or a stick into a magic wand. Adults don't need to invent the play – children already know how to do that.

The teacher's role is therefore not to plan the play, but to respond to it. They enter the world of play for the play itself – becoming a character in the fantasy the children have created. The skilled teacher spots the moment when it happens: a reason to write, count, read, measure, explain or question. They are ready to prompt, model and guide the learning. They don't force the play to fit the learning; they use the play to make the learning meaningful.



From this, the adult reflects on how well prepared they and the provision were for the learning moments that emerged. They then respond by enhancing the environment ready for next time. Perhaps they add a map and landmark photographs to the construction area, or chalk and painted planks to the mud kitchen, ensuring the classroom is continually ready for future learning opportunities. For young children, play is how learning happens.

So where does directed teaching fit into all of this?

PHONICS CHECK data from 2025

2026 data released in Autumn

20% of children
1 in 5 children

did not meet the expected standard in Year 1

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- ★ Play-Based Learning
- ★ SSP Explained
- ★ Research Round-Up
- ★ DfE Accreditation: Myth-Busting
- ★ Phonics Screening Check Data & Insights
- ★ Toolbox Phonics in Action

ARTICLE ONE

SYSTEMATIC SYNTHETIC PHONICS – KEEP OR BIN?

Before we answer that question, let's start with another one: what is phonics?

Phonics is the teaching of early reading and spelling. It helps children learn the sounds that make up words and their spelling patterns.

Systematic Synthetic Phonics takes this one step further. It introduces sounds and spelling patterns in a carefully planned sequence, allowing children to revisit, practise and apply new learning step by step. Phonics skills are taught in a logical order so that each new piece of learning builds on what came before.

This structure matters. A well-sequenced phonics programme helps teachers introduce sounds efficiently, maximises the number of words children can read each week and provides a secure foundation for future literacy.

So what's the problem?

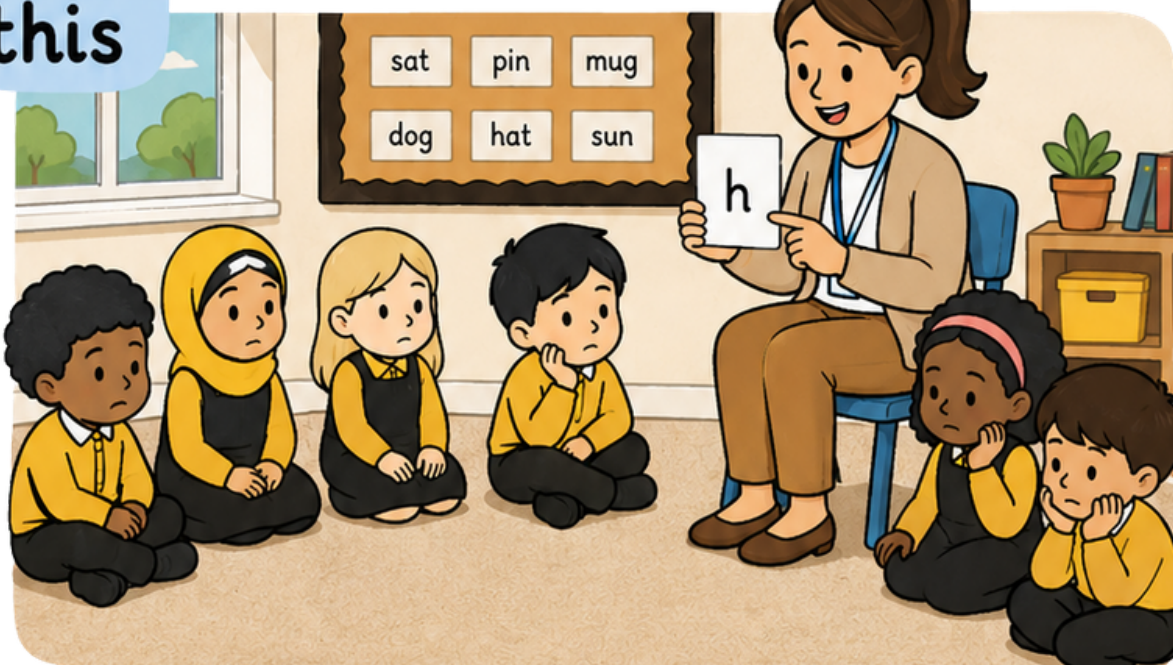
The issue isn't the system itself. The issue is how the system is often delivered.

Too often, phonics has become little more than a memory test, at the expense of **engagement**, **enjoyment** and **learning**. The subject knowledge is there, but the pedagogical knowledge is missing.

Teachers can find themselves concentrating more on what they are teaching rather than on how children learn.

It's not that we bin the system – it's time we fix it.

From
this



to this



ARTICLE TWO

PHONICS SCREENING DATA – INSIGHTS

-  1 in 5 children did not meet the expected standard in Year 1
-  Almost 1 in 4 boys did not meet the standard
-  27% of August-born children did not meet the standard
-  57% of pupils with SEND did not meet the standard
-  In England's lowest-performing regions, 22% of children did not meet the standard



What does this tell us?

Despite over a decade of national phonics testing, results have remained broadly stable in recent years, with around 1 in 5 children still not meeting the expected standard in Year 1.

This raises an important question:

Should the conversation focus solely on what we teach, or also on how we teach it?

ARTICLE THREE

MYTH BUSTER



Myth: Schools must use a DfE-accredited phonics scheme.

Not quite.

What is statutory is the requirement to teach **Systematic Synthetic Phonics**. The DfE has only recommended the use of a DfE-validated phonics programme. Yet, the vast majority of primary schools use commercial schemes to deliver their phonics teaching.

However, the window for new phonics programmes to apply for validation closed in 2023, meaning that newer programmes can no longer receive the DfE's "green tick" regardless of their effectiveness- and as a result are often not chosen by schools.

It's not uncommon to hear teachers complain about the prescriptiveness of many commercial schemes and losing the flexibility to respond to the individual needs, interests and developmental stages of the children in front of them.

This is particularly important in the Early Years, where learning is rarely linear and children often require responsive and personalised approaches.

But let's not swing the pendulum too far the other way.

When teachers are expected to plan everything from scratch, the workload can quickly become unmanageable. Teachers are between a rock and a hard place - either do it all yourself or surrender to the scheme. **Choose burnout or boredom.**

It doesn't have to be this way.

A well-designed scheme should be a starting point. It should provide the sequence, resources and subject knowledge, while allowing teachers to become the **editors** - enhancing and personalising learning for the children in front of them. Like a cookbook, a scheme provides the recipe. Great teachers still add their own seasoning.

However, schools are currently expected to teach their chosen scheme with fidelity. And so we must ask ourselves: why choose a scheme without a strong pedagogical foundation in the first place?

ARTICLE FOUR



RESEARCH ROUND-UP



Play -
What's the
best that
could happen?

Research found that children in **play-based kindergarten** programmes showed stronger long-term academic and social outcomes than children in more direct-instruction programmes.

Source: Marcon (2002)

Reference: Marcon, R.A. (2002). Moving Up the Grades: Relationship Between Preschool Model and Later School Success.

TOOLBOX PHONICS

Toolbox Phonics provides everything you'd expect from a Systematic Synthetic Phonics programme. Sounds and skills are mapped out in a clear, progressive order, supported by lesson plans, printable resources and assessment tools.

The difference is how we teach it.

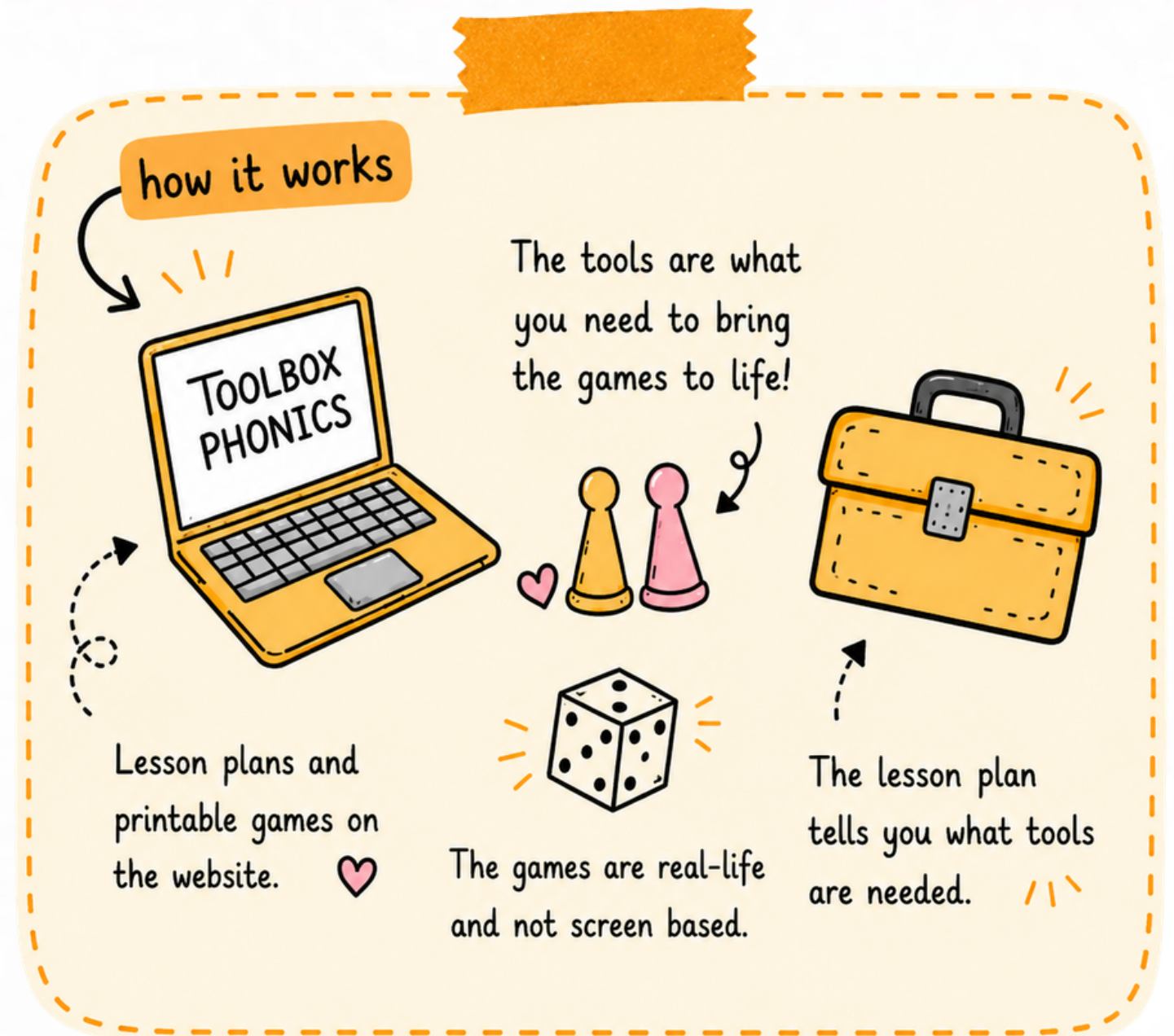
Instead of phonics becoming a morning sentence, a 30-minute carpet session, a follow-up adult-led activity and an intervention later in the year, **we teach phonics through five simple games each week.**

The phonics stays.

The lengthy adult-led practice doesn't.

Children learn the sounds and skills they need, then return to what young children do best: **play.**

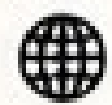
Teachers are free to focus on creating a rich learning environment, knowing the phonics has been taught. Play then provides countless opportunities for children to practise, apply and revisit their learning in meaningful ways.



A PHONICS PROGRAMME THAT WORKS WITH **PLAY**, NOT AGAINST IT

**WE PROVIDE
THE TOOLS.
PLAY DOES THE
CEMENTING.**

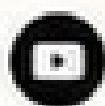
LET'S CONNECT



www.toolboxphonics.com



info@toolboxphonics.com



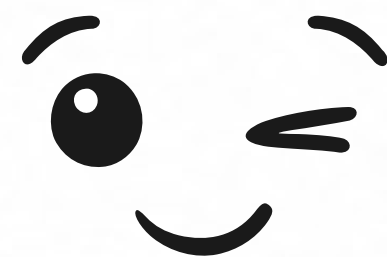
@toolboxphonics



LOVED BY TEACHERS

“

IT'S A GAME-CHANGER



”

