

THE HAPPY



ISSUE
02

AUTUMN 2026

TOOLBOX PHONICS

PLAY • EDUCATION • RESEARCH
PEDAGOGY • CHILDHOOD

CLASSROOM

PLAY & PLANNING

Explore effective planning techniques
for powerful **play-based learning**

Play has an enormous role in early learning and young brain development – but play comes in many forms, and each type has a different job to do. Games and playful activities are intentionally designed, whereas genuine child-led play is different. It is spontaneous, unpredictable and multi-layered.

Understanding this distinction changes the way we think about planning.

PLAN THE GAMES AND ACTIVITIES

Games and playful activities turn learning into something children actively want to do.

Start with a clear learning objective, then combine **WHAT** children need to learn with **HOW** young children learn best – through enjoyment, participation and active engagement.

Keep games simple and familiar: if children are concentrating on complicated new rules, their attention is on the rules rather than the learning. A balance of simplicity, fun and learning is key.

THEN PROTECT THE PLAY

The mistake we can make is trying to plan the play that happens in continuous provision. Genuine play is child-led, spontaneous, unpredictable and multi-layered: children imagine, communicate, negotiate, problem-solve, experiment and regulate emotions, often all at once. When adults predetermine the learning and steer children towards it, we begin turning play into an adult-led activity.



SO HOW DO WE PLAN FOR PLAY-BASED LEARNING?

- 1. DROP THE LEARNING OBJECTIVE:** Child-led play isn't a lesson disguised as play. It doesn't need a curriculum objective hidden inside it. Protect play for play itself.
- 2. PLAN FOR RICHER PLAY:** Instead of planning backwards from an objective, start with the play and make it richer. Ask: What could I add, change or provide to make this play more interesting for children? A café – add loose pasta, water, serving trays, real cups and jugs, and a variety of toy food. A pirate ship – add maps, planks, dress-up clothes, treasure, pirate food supplies and telescopes. Richer play generates more interest, talk, ideas and problems to solve – creating multi-layered learning that the developing young brain has evolved to naturally seek out.
- 3. FACILITATE LEARNING:** Rich play naturally creates reasons to write, count, create, experiment and explore. Make sure the environment is ready – and stays ready – when those moments appear. Are the right resources available, practical and accessible? Continuous provision isn't about rotating planned enhancements; it's about developing the environment over time so it is ready for the unpredictable learning moments that rich play throws up.

The approach is simple: **PLAN** games, activities, stories, songs and experiences. **ENRICH** the play and **FACILITATE** the learning.

Learn more about **play-led planning** and the developmental science behind play in our subscriber training videos on the Toolbox Phonics website.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Education Updates — without the noise!

An overview of the key changes that came into effect from the last academic year to now, focusing specifically on those that affect **play**, **phonics** and **literacy**. We pick apart the key points, what they mean in practice and, importantly, what they don't mean.

PHONICS SCREENING



CHECK RESULTS

WILL FEATURE IN ISSUE 3!

THE WRITING FRAMEWORK

Let's pick apart the updated guidance – what it says, what it means in practice, and importantly, what it doesn't mean.

Published in **July 2025**, the DfE's Writing Framework provides **non-statutory guidance** for the teaching of writing from Reception through to Key Stage 2.

The guidance has a clear message: strong writers are built on strong foundations. The framework places emphasis on handwriting, spelling, sentence construction and composition, stating it begins from the start of Reception and develops progressively throughout school.

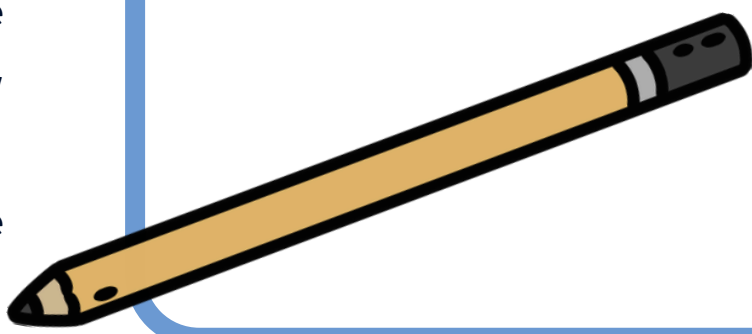
But starting early doesn't mean getting formal earlier. So, let's strip back some of the noise and look at what the guidance actually says – and what that can look like in practice.

AT A GLANCE

Published - July 2025

Status - Non-statutory guidance

For - Reception - KS2



SENTENCES

THE FRAMEWORK RECOMMENDS...

Build the foundations from Reception, getting it right at the start with progress then made throughout KS1 and beyond. Sentence structure starts with spoken language, oral composition and simple sentence writing before expecting children to write extended pieces.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

In Reception and Year 1, the focus is on transcription through short, simple dictated sentences, alongside generating ideas orally and modelling how ideas become sentences.

Through KS1, the focus remains at sentence level. In Year 2, children also begin orally narrating short experiences and learn to edit their written sentences with support.

KS2 builds these foundations into paragraphs and extended writing for different purposes and audiences, with increasing independence in editing and proofreading.

Throughout, talk, oracy and high-quality stories support children's understanding of how language and sentences work.

WHAT DOESN'T THIS MEAN?

Starting the foundations for writing in Reception doesn't mean children need to independently compose and write their own sentences, nor does it mean pushing KS1 children into lengthy writing before they are ready.

The framework is clear: quality over quantity.

Children need to secure basic sentence construction before moving on to extended writing.

HANDWRITING

THE FRAMEWORK RECOMMENDS...

Children should begin learning letter formation in Term 1 of Reception, with handwriting explicitly taught and developed throughout primary school.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

In Reception, teachers model correct letter formation and children learn the movements needed – including through air-writing – alongside regular opportunities to practise. The focus is on developing the physical and cognitive skills needed for correct formation.

In Year 1, children develop comfortable and correct pencil grip and posture, form lower-case letters in the correct direction, form capitals and digits, and learn handwriting 'families'.

By Year 2, children work towards consistent letter size and orientation, appropriate word spacing and, when ready, the strokes needed for joining.

Through KS2, the focus shifts towards legibility, consistency, fluency and speed – allowing children to record their ideas without handwriting becoming a barrier.

Handwriting should follow a consistent, school-wide approach, with adaptations and additional support where needed.

WHAT DOESN'T THIS MEAN?

Teaching handwriting from Reception doesn't mean formal handwriting lessons built around copying from the board or a book, or tracing dotted letters.

It also doesn't mean teaching cursive or lead-ins from Reception. The National Curriculum does not require lead-ins, and the framework recommends that joining is introduced only once print handwriting is secure.

SPELLING & GRAMMAR

THE FRAMEWORK RECOMMENDS...

A systematic, school-wide approach to spelling, beginning with phonics and progressively developing children's understanding of how written language works.

Grammar and punctuation should be taught progressively in line with the National Curriculum and connected to reading, writing and speaking.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

For spelling, systematic synthetic phonics provides the foundation. As children progress, teaching also draws on orthography – patterns of written English, such as where graphemes commonly appear in words – and morphology – understanding root words, prefixes and suffixes.

Children should receive regular, explicit spelling instruction, with opportunities to practise and apply what they have learnt.

For grammar – understanding develops first through talk, interaction and reading, with explicit teaching helping children to make deliberate choices in their writing.

In Reception, children can be introduced to capitals, full stops and spaces between words, but these do not form part of the Writing ELG assessment.

WHAT DOESN'T THIS MEAN?

It doesn't mean children are expected to use accurate punctuation from the start – these skills develop progressively, beginning with spoken language and transferring into writing.

Systematic spelling instruction also doesn't mean weekly word lists learnt by rote for a test. The emphasis is on teaching knowledge and patterns children can understand, apply and increasingly use independently.

OTHER KEY UPDATES . . .

Let’s dive into the highlights of some of the other changes – what it means, and what it doesn’t mean!

Whilst there were several other changes to the EYFS statutory framework and education guidance during the last 12 months – here, we are focusing specifically on the updates most relevant to **phonics**, **literacy** and **play**.

EYFS SCREEN-USE GUIDANCE: NEW FROM SEPTEMBER 2026

THE UPDATE: From September 2026, EYFS providers have a statutory requirement to ‘have regard to’ DfE guidance on screen use. Settings should consider **how** and **why** screens are being used and their impact on children’s learning, development and wellbeing.

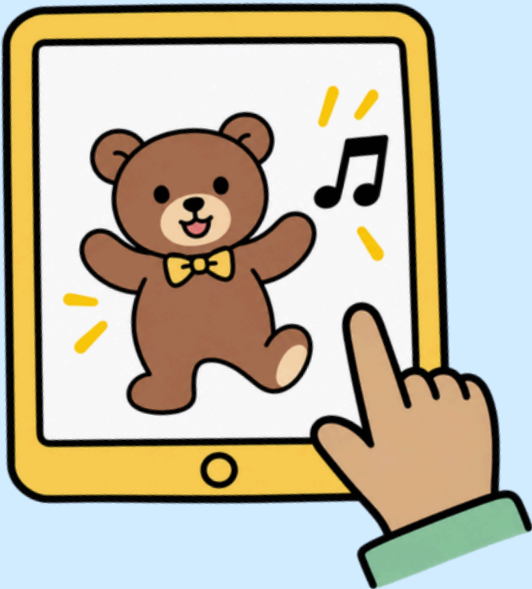
WHAT IT MEANS?

Take a considered look at screen use across your provision. Think about what the screen is adding, why it is being used and whether another experience such as talk, movement, exploration and play, could better support the child’s learning and development.

WHAT IT DOESN’T MEAN

It isn’t a screen ban. Tablets, interactive whiteboards and other digital resources have not been prohibited in the EYFS.

‘Have regard to’ means settings must consider the guidance and take it into account when making decisions.



UPDATED OFSTED INSPECTION TOOLKIT: NEW FROM SEPTEMBER 2026

THE UPDATE: The updated Ofsted toolkit continues to place a clear focus on secure foundations in communication and language, reading, spelling and handwriting. Systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) remains central for early reading, with schools having a rigorous, systematic and coherent approach to phonics that is implemented consistently and with fidelity. The DfE Writing Framework is also now included within the guidance underpinning the inspection toolkit – see further details on Page 2.

WHAT IT MEANS?

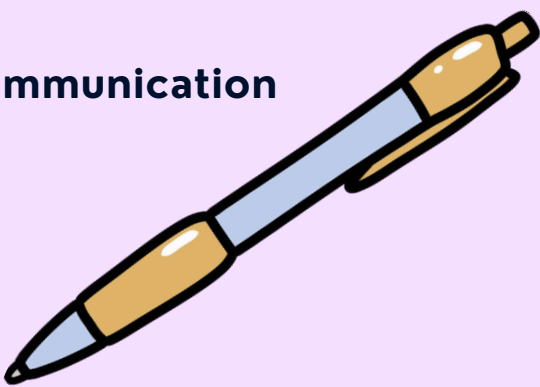
Regarding phonics, schools need a consistent SSP approach, understood and implemented by staff across the school.

Resources used to teach phonics (including reading books) should align with the GPC progression of that approach.

WHAT IT DOESN’T MEAN

It doesn’t mean schools must choose a programme from the DfE’s validated SSP list. There is no statutory requirement to do so, and Ofsted does not have a preferred phonics programme.

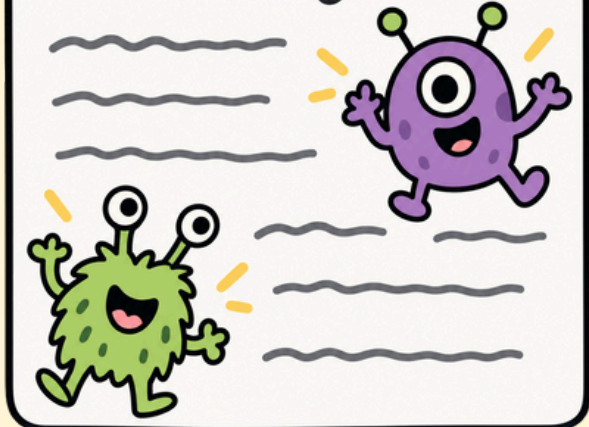
Fidelity applies to the systematic teaching of phonics – it doesn’t mean phonics can only happen within the discrete phonics lesson. Children can – and should – also have opportunities to practise and apply their phonics through books, talk, play and meaningful wider experiences, provided they complement rather than contradict the school’s SSP approach.



PHONICS SCREENING CHECK: For 2026–27... there isn’t one!

The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check continues in its familiar format: 40 words – 20 real words and 20 pseudo-words – specifically assessing children’s ability to apply their phonic knowledge to decoding.

2027 PHONICS Screening Check



WHAT IT MEANS?

Continue delivering high-quality systematic phonics teaching and giving children plenty of opportunities to practise and apply their decoding skills.

WHAT IT DOESN’T MEAN

It doesn’t mean teaching reading only to pass the Phonics Screening check.

The Phonics Screening Check assesses a very specific skill – **phonic decoding**. It isn’t an assessment of everything it means to be a reader.

See the Toolbox Phonics online training video **The Foundations of Reading** for a full understanding of the skills essential for reading and, importantly, reading with comprehension.



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.

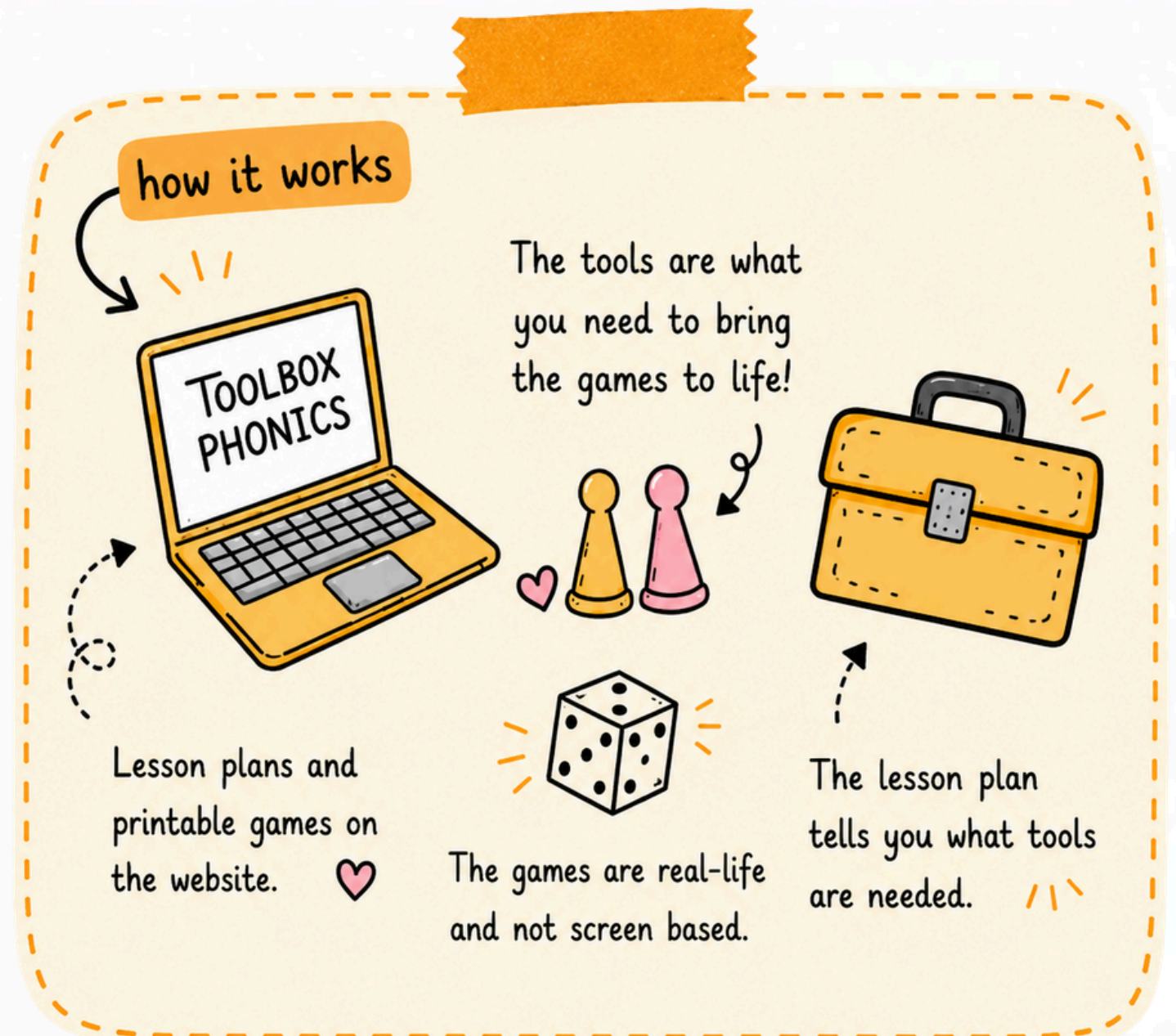
Instead of phonics becoming a morning sentence, a 30-minute carpet session, a follow-up adult-led activity and an intervention later in the year, **we teach phonics through five simple games each week.**

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.**

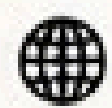
Teachers are free to focus on creating a rich learning environment, knowing the phonics has been taught. Play then provides countless opportunities for children to practise, apply and revisit their learning in meaningful ways.



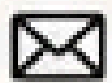
A PHONICS PROGRAMME THAT WORKS WITH **PLAY**, NOT AGAINST IT

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

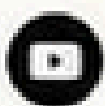
LET'S CONNECT



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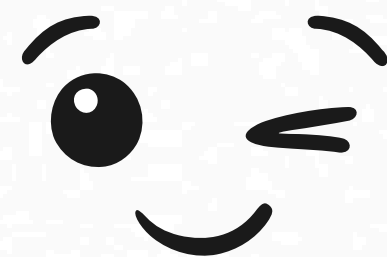
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IT'S A GAME-CHANGER



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