

Helping Your Child When English Feels Hard

A practical guide for parents and carers of
children aged 4-14

- 1) **Why English Matters** — what children need vs. what parents don't need (side-by-side tables)
- 2) **Reading Aloud** — how to do it effectively, plus a full age-by-age book recommendation table
- 3) **Vocabulary Building** — word-rich activities, word games, and the 3-Tier Vocabulary Framework
- 4) **Reading Comprehension** — the VIPERS framework with ready-made questions parents can ask
- 5) **Writing at Home** — real-world ideas, creative prompts, and how to give feedback without crushing confidence
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- 10) **Final Word + Resources** — free online tools and recommended books for parents.

Why English Matters and Why You Matter Most

English is far more than just a school subject. It is the foundation for almost everything your child will ever learn. Strong reading and communication skills open doors to science, history, maths problem-solving, and every career imaginable. Yet many children find aspects of English difficult and that is completely normal.

Research consistently shows that parental involvement is one of the single biggest factors in a child's literacy development. You do not need to be a grammar expert. You do not need to buy expensive resources. What matters most is time, interest, and a warm, low-pressure environment.

What children need most:

- Someone who reads with them- not just to them
- Conversations that stretch their vocabulary
- A reason to care about stories and words
- Permission to make mistakes
- Encouragement without pressure

What you do NOT need:

- A degree in English
- Hours of structured homework time
- Flashcards and drilling
- To correct every single mistake

Did you know?

Children who are read to for just 20 minutes a day are exposed to over one million words per year — dramatically increasing their vocabulary, comprehension, and understanding of grammar — all without a single worksheet.

TEACHES

Reading Aloud: The Single Most Powerful Thing You Can Do

Reading aloud to your child, even well into secondary school, is arguably the single most evidence-backed literacy strategy available to any parent. It builds vocabulary in context, models fluent reading, develops comprehension, and makes books feel safe and enjoyable. It is not just for young children.



How to Read Aloud Effectively

1. **This stretches vocabulary without the frustration of having to decode every word alone.**
2. **Slow down, change pitch, pause before exciting moments. You are performing, not just reading.**
3. **Ask 'What do you think will happen next?' or 'Why did she do that?' This builds comprehension.**
4. **Reading aloud is a pleasure activity. Avoid comprehension quizzes straight after.**
5. **Engagement matters far more than the 'right' book. Comics, graphic novels, and funny books count.**
6. **Older children benefit enormously from hearing rich, complex texts read aloud.**

What to Read

There are no wrong choices. The goal is to find something your child wants to hear. Here are some starting points by age:

Age	Great read-aloud suggestions
4-6	The Gruffalo, Paddington, The Tiger Who Came to Tea, Hairy Maclary, Elmer, Whatever Next!
6-8	Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, The BFG, Mr Gum series, Flat Stanley, The Owl Who Was Afraid of the Dark
8-10	The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe, Roald Dahl complete works, Diary of a Wimpy Kid, Tom Gates, Harry Potter (Books 1-2)
10-12	The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, Wonder, Holes, The Curious Incident, Coraline, Percy Jackson
12-14	Private Peaceful, Skellig, His Dark Materials, The Maze Runner, The Outsiders, Noughts and Crosses



Building Vocabulary Without Worksheets

Vocabulary is one of the strongest predictors of reading comprehension and academic success. The good news? You build vocabulary through conversation- not drilling lists of words.

The Power of Conversation

Children learn new words most effectively when they hear them in meaningful, real-life contexts — and when adults use rich, varied language in everyday speech. Try to:

- Use 'grown-up' words in conversation. Don't always simplify
- When you use a new word, briefly explain it: 'The weather is quite ominous today- that means it looks dark and threatening'
- Ask open questions that need more than a yes/no answer: 'What was the most exciting part of your day?'
- Discuss the news, TV programmes, films — talk about them as if ideas matter
- Play word games: Wordle, Scrabble, 20 Questions, 'I Spy' with adjectives

Word-Rich Activities

- Cooking together — read recipes, talk about ingredients
- Shopping — read labels, compare prices in writing
- Building or crafting — follow instructions together
- Watching nature documentaries and discussing them
- Looking up the meaning of unfamiliar words together
- Visiting museums and reading every exhibit sign

Word Games to Try

- The Dictionary Game — make up fake definitions
- Word Tennis — take turns adding to a theme
- Story Consequences — each person adds a sentence
- Would You Rather? — with reasons required
- Describe-It! — describe an object without saying its name
- Synonym challenge — find 5 words for 'happy'

The 3-Tier Vocabulary Framework

Teachers often think about vocabulary in three tiers. Understanding these helps you know which words to focus on:

Tier	Examples	Parent Action
Tier 1 — Basic	Cat, run, happy, house	These are learned naturally. No action needed.
Tier 2 — Academic	Analyse, significant, infer, contrast	Most important to teach! Found in books and exams. Discuss these actively.
Tier 3 — Subject-specific	Metaphor, sonnet, protagonist, alliteration	Help your child collect these in a personal glossary book.

Supporting Reading Comprehension at Home

Being able to decode words (read them aloud) is very different from being able to understand them. Many children who read fluently still struggle with comprehension — understanding characters, themes, inferences, and author intent. This is where parental support makes a huge difference.

The VIPERS Framework (Used in Many UK Schools)

VIPERS is an acronym used by many primary schools to cover the key reading comprehension skills. Understanding this helps you ask the right questions:

Letter	Skill	Question to ask at home
V	Vocabulary	What do you think this word means? Why did the author choose this word?
I	Inference	Why do you think the character felt that way? What does this suggest?
P	Prediction	What do you think will happen next? What clues tell you that?
E	Explanation	Why did the author include this part? What is the message here?
R	Retrieval	Can you find the part where...? What happened when...?
S	Summarise	Can you tell me what happened in three sentences? What was the key idea?

Independent Reading Habits

Beyond reading together, helping your child build an independent reading habit is one of the greatest gifts you can give them. Here's how to make it stick:

- Create a dedicated 'reading time' — even just 10 minutes before bed
- Let them choose their own books — even if you disagree with the choice
- Visit the library together and let them browse freely
- Never use reading as a punishment ('go to your room and read a book')
- Read yourself — children who see adults reading are more likely to read
- Create a cosy reading space — a beanbag, good lighting, no screens nearby
- Ask about their book as a normal conversation, not a comprehension quiz

Writing at Home: Building Confidence and Creativity

Many children find writing hard — not because they lack ideas, but because getting thoughts onto paper feels difficult. Handwriting, spelling, punctuation, and composing ideas simultaneously is genuinely challenging. The key is to separate these challenges and make writing feel purposeful and achievable.

Real-World Writing Opportunities

Children write much more willingly when there is a real audience or purpose. Try these ideas:

Creative Writing Ideas	Functional Writing Ideas
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Write and illustrate their own picture book• Keep a personal diary or travel journal• Create a comic strip or graphic novel• Write a film or book review• Invent a board game and write the rules• Write a speech for a pretend award ceremony• Create a recipe book from family favourites	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Write a letter to a relative (send it!)• Email a company with a real question or complaint• Write a shopping list or a 'to do' list• Leave notes and messages around the house• Write a review on a children's book website• Create a neighbourhood newsletter or blog• Write a petition for something they care about

How to Give Feedback on Your Child's Writing

The way you respond to your child's writing matters enormously. Here is a simple approach:

7. **Find something specific to celebrate: 'I loved how you described the forest — I could really picture it.'**
8. **Instead of marking errors, ask: 'I wondered what the character was feeling here — could you add more?'**
9. **Spelling and punctuation matter, but not more than the joy of expression.**
10. **Children often self-correct when they hear their own writing read back.**
11. **Suggest an improvement, ask if they can find a way to make it better, then let them do it.**
12. **Writing is vulnerable. Acknowledge that it takes courage to put ideas on paper.**

A Note on Spelling

- Don't worry too much about spelling in early drafts — it stifles creativity
- Do gently address persistent errors once a piece is finished
- Look-Cover-Write-Check is still one of the best spelling methods
- Encourage your child to have a 'have a go' book for tricky words
- Playing Scrabble, Bananagrams or doing word searches builds spelling naturally



Phonics, Spelling and Grammar — What Parents Need to Know

Understanding Phonics (Ages 4–7)

Phonics is the method used to teach children to read and write by linking sounds (phonemes) to letters or groups of letters (graphemes). If your child is in Key Stage 1 (ages 5–7), they will be following a structured phonics programme at school.

As a parent, you do not need to teach phonics — but you can support it hugely:

- Ask the teacher which sounds your child is currently learning
- Read their phonics reading books together every day — even for just 5 minutes
- Play 'I spy' using sounds not letter names ('I spy something beginning with /sh/')
- Point out letters and words in the environment — road signs, food packaging, etc.
- Celebrate every reading breakthrough, however small
- Never skip the school reading book even if it seems too easy — it builds fluency

Spelling at Home (Ages 6–14)

The most effective spelling strategies go beyond just writing words repeatedly. Try these proven approaches:

Strategy	How to do it
Look-Cover-Write-Check	Look at the word, cover it, write it from memory, check. Repeat 3 times.
Syllable clapping	Break long words into syllables and clap each part: to-ge-ther, mis-un-der-stand.
Word families	Group words by root: act, action, react, reactive, actor, inactive.
Mnemonics	Create memorable phrases: 'Big Elephants Can Always Understand Small Elephants' (BECAUSE).
Personal spelling journal	Your child keeps their own book of tricky words to revisit regularly.
Tracing and rainbow writing	Trace the word in different colours — kinesthetic learners find this very effective.

Grammar — Keeping It Natural

Children learn grammar most effectively through reading widely and hearing language used well. Formal grammar teaching starts in Year 2 (age 6–7) and continues through primary and secondary school. You do not need to teach grammar rules at home, but you can:

- Model correct grammar in your own speech and writing
- Gently repeat back a correct version if your child says something grammatically odd ('I went, did I? Tell me more!')
- Point out interesting sentences in books you read together
- If your child asks about punctuation, use their own writing as the example

Age-by-Age Guide: What to Expect and How to Help

Every child develops at their own pace. This guide gives general benchmarks and strategies — if you have concerns about your child's progress, always speak to their teacher.

Age	Typical English Skills	How to Help at Home
4–5 (Reception)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognises most letters • Blending simple 3-letter words • Enjoys being read to • Can retell a simple story 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read picture books every day • Point to words as you read • Sing nursery rhymes and songs • Play I Spy with sounds
5–6 (Year 1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading simple books independently • Writing simple sentences • Beginning to use capital letters • Learning phonics patterns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hear them read every day • Praise effort, not just accuracy • Play word games on car journeys • Let them see you reading
6–7 (Year 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading more complex texts • Writing with more detail • Using full stops and question marks • Learning common exception words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask questions after reading • Encourage diary or journal writing • Phonics games and spelling practice • Visit the library weekly if possible
7–9 (Years 3–4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading chapter books • Writing in different genres • Using paragraphs and punctuation • Building academic vocabulary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss books like adults • Encourage letter writing • Explore different genres together • Point out great writing in real life
9–11 (Years 5–6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysing texts at basic level • Writing with audience in mind • Developing personal style • Preparing for SATs assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read the same book together • Help draft and revise writing • Use VIPERS questions (see page 5) • Discuss news articles together
11–14 (Secondary)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysing language and structure • Extended writing under exam conditions • Critical reading of non-fiction • Literary devices and techniques 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about what they are studying • Read set texts together if possible • Help them plan essays using mind maps • Encourage wider reading beyond school

When Your Child Refuses to Engage

Almost every child goes through phases where English feels like a battle. Here is what to do:

If they refuse to read...

- Try audiobooks — listening counts
- Let them choose any book, magazine, or comic
- Read to them instead of making them read to you
- Try a 5-minute rule: just 5 minutes, then they can stop
- Find books on topics they are obsessed with
- Try graphic novels — they have sophisticated story structure
- Remove the pressure entirely for a week — just share enjoyment

If they hate writing...

- Let them dictate to you while you write
- Try voice-to-text technology as a starting point
- Start with lists rather than full sentences
- Give them a real audience — grandparent, friend, teacher
- Let them write about something they genuinely care about
- Focus on ideas — ignore spelling and punctuation for now
- Celebrate any writing output, however short

When to Speak to the Teacher

Most ups and downs in English are completely normal. However, there are times when it is important to seek support from your child's school:

Speak to your child's teacher if...

- Your child is significantly behind their peers and not catching up
- They seem very anxious or distressed specifically about reading or writing
- They are avoiding reading in a way that seems unusual or intense
- They are struggling with basic phonics beyond Year 2 (age 6–7)
- You suspect they may have dyslexia, dyspraxia, or another learning difference
- Their writing is significantly harder to read than their peers at the same age
- They are falling behind in other subjects because of reading difficulties
- Your gut tells you something is wrong — trust your instincts as a parent

A Note on Dyslexia

Dyslexia affects roughly 10% of the population and is nothing to do with intelligence. Signs include difficulty with phonological awareness, inconsistent spelling, confusion with similar-looking letters (b/d, p/q), and slow reading speed despite effort. If you suspect dyslexia, speak to your school's SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator). Early identification and the right support make an enormous difference.

Quick Reference: 50 English Activities for Home

Cut this out and stick it on the fridge! These activities range from 5 minutes to a full afternoon and cover all aspects of English.

Reading & Comprehension

1. Read together every day, even 10 minutes
2. Visit the library and browse freely
3. Listen to an audiobook on a car journey
4. Read a picture book to a younger sibling
5. Read the same book as your parent
6. Try a genre you have never read before
7. Read a newspaper article and discuss it
8. Read the instructions to a board game
9. Read recipes and cook from them
10. Read a non-fiction book about a hobby
11. Find your favourite poem and memorise it
12. Join the school or public library reading challenge
13. Learn a new word every morning at breakfast
14. Play Scrabble or Bananagrams
15. Do a daily Wordle or word puzzle
16. Look up the etymology of interesting words
17. Collect a list of 'wow words' from books you read
18. Create a personal dictionary of new words
19. Play word association or word tennis
20. Watch a documentary and list new vocabulary
21. Use a thesaurus to find alternatives to 'said', 'nice', 'good'
22. Play 'Just a Minute' — talk on a topic for 60 seconds
23. Play 20 Questions using descriptive language
24. Describe your day using 5 words you do not usually say

Writing

25. Write a letter to a favourite author
26. Start a diary and write every day for a week
27. Write and send a postcard
28. Create a family newsletter
29. Write a story that begins with 'The door opened...'
30. Write a review of the last film or book you enjoyed
31. Write an imaginary interview with a famous person
32. Create instructions for something you know how to do
33. Write an alternative ending to a book you have read
34. Write a poem with no rules — just feelings
35. Create a top 10 list on any topic
36. Write a letter to your future self
37. Practise Look-Cover-Write-Check with spelling list
38. Create silly sentences using all your spelling words
39. Play Hangman with tricky words
40. Write a sentence using only words with 3 syllables
41. Find all the verbs in a newspaper paragraph
42. Play 'spot the grammar mistake' with menus or signs
43. Punctuate an unpunctuated passage
44. Write the same event as a formal report then a diary entry
45. Find 10 adjectives to describe your bedroom
46. Find examples of metaphors in songs or adverts
47. Write a haiku about each season
48. Edit a piece of your own old writing and improve it
49. Write a speech persuading your family of something
50. Swap a piece of writing with a friend and give feedback

A Final Word for Parents and Carers

Supporting your child's English development does not require perfection. You do not need to have been a strong reader yourself. You do not need to have all the answers. What you need — and what you clearly already have, since you have read this far — is the desire to help. The moments that matter most are often the small ones: reading a chapter before bedtime, talking about a news story over dinner, celebrating a piece of writing that took courage to produce. These moments are not preparation for later life. They are later life, experienced early. Language is how your child will make sense of the world, connect with others, express their identity, and pursue their ambitions. Every word you share with them is an investment in who they are becoming.

Useful Resources

All of the following are free or low-cost:

Online Resources	Books for Parents
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• BBC Bitesize — free revision and learning for all ages• Oxford Owl — free ebooks and phonics support• ReadingZone — book recommendations by age and interest• Pobble365 — daily creative writing prompts with images• NationalLiteracyTrust.org — parent guides and resources• SummerReadingChallenge.org.uk — free annual library challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Read-Aloud Handbook — Jim Trelease• Raising Readers — Megan Dowd Lambert• The Reading Mind — Daniel T. Willingham• Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons• Romeo and/or Juliet — Ryan North (for older reluctant readers)• The Literacy Shed — free teaching and home resources

Next Steps: Support That Grows Confidence

If English continues to feel heavy, you don't have to navigate it alone.

With individualised support, children can rebuild confidence, strengthen understanding, and approach learning with less fear and more curiosity.

If you'd like to explore what support could look like for your child, I'd love to connect.

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