

What are visual and contextual cues?



When your child is reading a book or text, visual and contextual cues might help them work out unfamiliar words. For example, they might look at the illustrations, consider what has happened previously or they might have noticed a pattern in the story (particularly if it uses repeated words or phrases).

Encourage your child to look at the pictures before they read the text on a page, as these images can stimulate the brain to make links to words that would fit the context. Ask your child to summarise what has happened so far and even discuss what they think might happen next. The previous sentences and words can provide important clues to any new words that show up.

Examples

Take a look at this sentence.

They walked carefully to the door while holding onto the vase.

Your child can use the image to help them work out any words they are unsure of. You could discuss how they would walk if they were holding a precious, breakable item - this might help them work out any unfamiliar words too.

Comparing Synthetic Phonics to Visual and Contextual Cues

Synthetic Phonics

- This method teaches individual letter-sound relationships.
- Children blend individual sounds together to make words.
- Children are taught to recognise the sounds represented by individual letters or groups of letters before they start to look at whole words.
- Children are taught letter sounds before they learn to read and potentially before they are introduced to books.

Visual and Contextual Cues

- This method advocates the use of pictures and the surrounding sentences to work out any unfamiliar words.
- Children are encouraged to learn words in context; they discover the meaning of words and relate them to pictures and sentences.

Advantages

This method promotes an understanding of what the child is reading and relating words to their real-life applications and visual representations. This can engage more learners, because they're making links between words and pictures. Many fluent readers use the context to help them know how to read a word, such as whether to read 'tear' (that rhymes with 'bear') or 'tear' (that rhymes with 'ear').

Disadvantages

Children will eventually move onto reading books without pictures; could they become too reliant on these clues to work out unfamiliar words? This method does not give children a clear system for approaching a new word - it moves them away from looking at the letter-sound relationships.

It is worth noting that several methods might be used alongside each other to teach a child to read. This is sometimes called a balanced approach.



We hope you find the information on our website and resources useful. As far as possible, the contents of this resource are reflective of current professional research. However, please be aware that every child is different and information can quickly become out of date. The information given here is intended for general guidance purposes only and may not apply to your specific situation.