What Makes Independent and Successful Spellers?
A Guide for Parents
Children learn spelling as they write and they learn spelling for their writing. Independent and successful spellers use a range of strategies to learn and remember the spelling of words. They:

- are interested in words
- pay attention to how words are used
- have a broad spoken vocabulary and know the meanings of many words
- have a broad reading vocabulary and know the meanings of many words
- have a range of strategies for remembering how to spell words
- can successfully spell many words
- recognise when words have been incorrectly spelled
- select appropriate strategies to use when they don’t automatically know how to spell words
- are persistent if their first strategy is not successful
- know they can’t spell all words and use other resources to check how words are spelled.

Why do children want to become spellers?

- To be able to record thoughts, ideas and information for themselves and other readers.
- To be able to ‘talk’ with others using ICT: email, SMS and social networking.

How do children become spellers?

Before starting school, children are already building up their listening and speaking abilities which provide the foundation for reading and writing skills. Children listen as others talk and read to and with them, and they start to experiment with using an increasing number of words when they speak. This exposure to talk and print leads them into writing where they start to make writing marks on all kinds of surfaces! Some children begin to write alphabet letters important to them, such as the letters in their name.
Influences on children’s spelling

Auditory and visual skills

Regular hearing and vision checks will ensure your child is able to successfully hear, see, discriminate between, and remember sounds, letters, letter patterns and words. Vision and hearing skills affect spelling progress.

Language skills

Your child’s ability to clearly say words and sounds can have an impact on how they spell. Children who are still developing all the speech sounds may spell some words incorrectly; for example, free (three), Febry (February), efalefalent (elephant). Parents can influence their child’s spelling if words are pronounced in unusual ways; for example, somethink (something), boos (bus), comeovaere (come over here).

Family expectations

Keep a positive attitude about your child’s spelling development and don’t assume that he or she will find spelling difficult or easy because of other family members’ experiences.

Learning to spell is a much more complex process than learning to talk and many words are spoken well before they can be correctly spelled. This is similar to your child’s earlier developmental milestones. When your child first started to make noises (mmmm, mu) you encouraged their attempts (Mum. That’s right, it’s mum, mum) and gradually the word was said correctly. Spelling development is no different: expect your child to spell words incorrectly on the way to understanding how they should be spelled.
Stages of spelling development

A child’s spelling transitions through a series of stages that are not age- and year-level related.

- The earliest stage often starts before school when children start to pick up writing instruments. Some marks may be scribble while others may be letters in their name (or in the names of important others), or random letters.
- The next stage occurs when children have learned how to write some letters and they attempt to spell words often by writing more easily heard consonants (‘dd’ for ‘dad’, ‘bk’ for ‘bike’) or writing some vowels, but incorrectly (‘mem’ for ‘mum’, ‘sied’ for ‘said’).
- At the third stage children mostly write words phonetically (‘bicos’ for ‘because’, ‘whot’ for ‘what’).
- The fourth stage sees children realising that sounds do not always indicate the correct spelling of words and they move to using a more visual approach and more complex letter patterns (‘aftar’ for ‘after’, ‘gowing’ for ‘going’).
- The final stage is correct spelling where many words are known automatically.

The English language is complex because there are 26 letters but 44 different sounds can be made when some letters are grouped together. The sound ‘ay’ can be spelled as debut, break, say, beige, reign, weigh, ballet, they, entree, main, straight, gauge.

There are five vowels: a–e–i–o–u. In addition, y has a vowel-like quality in some words, such as the ‘i’ sound in ‘sky’ and the ‘e’ sound in ‘happy’.

Are good readers, good spellers?

Not necessarily. Some children can easily read and understand an author’s message so they don’t need to stop and look at individual words. While they can read many words it does not mean they can spell all of them. (Can you spell every word you read?) However, reading and spelling are connected and each supports development of the other.

What skills are needed to be good spellers?

When independent and successful spellers write words they draw on what they know about:

- **Phonetic skills**: how words, parts of words, and letters sound.
- **Visual skills**: remembering how words look by seeing letter patterns in words and common letter patterns between words.
- **Morphological skills**: understanding how base words can be changed, for example, by adding suffixes and prefixes, making compound words, and changing tense.
- **Etymological skills**: recognising that words come from many sources and that this may influence how they are spelled.
How can I support my child’s spelling development?

Talk with your child. Listening and speaking provides your child with opportunities to hear new words being spoken and to experiment with saying and writing different words.

Provide a positive role model. Talk about how you remember to spell words and what you do when you don’t know how to spell some words.

Talk about words with your child every day. Chat about different, interesting words you have noticed in books, newspapers, magazines and onscreen. Point out words when you are travelling. Make links between words, for example, words that start with the same letter, have the same letter pattern, or some unusual feature.

Encourage your child to write. Ask them to write items on the shopping list, write in cards, and send emails and text messages to family and friends.

Play with words. Use your child’s name to make links with words, for example: There’s a ‘mat’ in Matthew, There’s a ‘get’ in Target, There’s a ‘did’ in Adidas, The first letter in Kmart is in your name Kristen.


Be editors. Have fun looking at, and correcting, misspellings.
What spelling strategy can I teach my child?

Look-Say-Cover-Write-Check is a popular learning approach for spelling because it encourages your child to use a range of senses:

❖ **Look** at the whole word and identify letter patterns, small words in the longer word, break it into syllables, check for suffixes and prefixes. Close your eyes and visualise (see) the whole word.

❖ **Say** the word by stretching out the sounds in the word while still looking at it. Name the letters.

❖ **Cover** the word.

❖ **Write** the whole word from memory while saying it slowly.

❖ **Check** whether you wrote the word correctly. Does it look right? If yes, go on to your next word. If no, go through the steps again.

Do not ask your child to practise spelling words orally. Words already well known are easy to spell aloud, but unfamiliar words need to be written so your child can check to see if they look right.
Why do teachers send spelling words home for my child to learn?

Teachers look at the words your child has written, record words that need to be learned and then respond to this information by planning activities to meet his or her learning needs. Teachers send spelling words home so children will have valuable opportunities to practise what is taught at school.

Your child may have already had some practice learning their words at school but additional practice will help to improve his or her automaticity. Teachers are also keen to ensure that your child can spell words in different contexts.

When can I find time to help my child learn spelling words?

The hours after school may be taken up with child care, leisure activities, or other commitments that limit the time available to help your child. So, how might you fit practising spelling words into a busy day?

- If you are working in the kitchen have your child spell the words by placing magnetic letters on the fridge or cooking trays.
- In the bathroom they can write words on the tiles with washable crayons.
- When outside they can use a stick in the sandpit, chalk on the pavers, and brushes and water on house bricks.
- At the computer they can change the font and size of the typeface and use other highlighting features such as WordArt.
- They can write words on mini-whiteboards or magic slates anywhere at all, and use different coloured pencils, pens, crayons, felt-tipped pens and textured and/or coloured paper to vary the practice.

What if my child refuses to do spelling practice?

- You could write the words but make some errors and have your child correct them.
- Set a time limit. Do you need 5 or 10 minutes to practise your words?
- Vary the practice to encourage your child’s active involvement and interest.
Should I get my child to sound out words?

It depends! It’s often difficult for children to know what letters are needed for what sounds because the English language has 44 sounds but only 26 alphabet letters. If words are phonetic, with each letter having one sound, then you can suggest they sound out each letter.

Child: How do you spell lost?
Parent: This is a word that you can sound out. Say the word slowly and stretch out each sound.
Child: ll-ooo-ssss-ttt.

However, not all words are phonetic and for some sounding out can be no help at all; for example, with a word like ‘they’.

Should I get my child to write each word ten times?

There is little benefit in writing words many times because it is rarely done with joy! Rather, they may write (copy) the word and simultaneously be thinking about something else.
What if my child guesses the spelling?

Guessing is a spelling strategy used by people of all ages if they aren’t sure how to spell a word. Suggest that your child pronounces the word slowly, says the word in parts, and then writes the sounds that are heard. While this will not always be successful, your child will probably write some letters correctly and then you can be helpful!

What if my child keeps asking me how to spell words?

It depends on the word. If the word is unusual such as a place, trade, or person’s name, write the word (and maybe point out an interesting feature of the word) and let them return to their writing. If it is a word that they could reasonably learn to spell, ask him or her to first write it so you can see what is already known. Congratulate your child on the attempt (even if just one or two letters are correct) and then write the correct spelling for them.

Look for what is correct in the word and positively acknowledge it. Say something like:

- That’s so close to being right. You’ve got all the letters but the ‘a’ and ‘i’ need to be the other way around.
- I used to have trouble remembering how to spell this word, too. Let me show you how I learned it.
- It’s just one letter that you need to remember. I can see why you spelled ‘they’ with an ‘a’ because it sounds like it has an ‘a’. It actually has an ‘e’ in that place. Let’s think about how you can remember to put an ‘e’.

A further complication can arise when only a verbal response is given:

Craig: Are there one or two b’s in ‘bubble’?
Parent: Two b’s.
Craig then spells the word as ‘bbuble’.
**Why do my child’s spelling lessons look different from spelling lessons I had at school?**

Rather than learning words your child may never need to write, he or she will be learning how to spell high-frequency words, words they want to know how to spell, and words used in other Learning Areas.

**Why doesn’t the teacher correct all my child’s spelling errors?**

Learning to spell is a developing process so children will misspell words before they spell them correctly. Teachers can only help your child to become a better speller if he or she is willing to write. If teachers ‘red pen’ all errors, some children may refuse to write or they may limit the amount they are writing. Teachers focus on correcting a few key words at a time (including those already taught) and leave less pressing errors to be attended to at a later date.

**What if the spelling words seem too hard or too easy for my child?**

Talk with your child’s teacher.
Is there a place for spelling rules?

There are very few spelling rules that have wide use, for example: words don’t end in ‘v’ or ‘j’ in the English language, ‘q’ is always followed by ‘u’ (‘Qantas’ is an acronym for Queensland and Northern Territory Air Service). Most ‘rules’ are actually generalisations that work for many, but not all, words (for example, ‘i’ before ‘e’ except after ‘c’), and they can be helpful (up to a point). Some spelling rules are so complex that often it is easier to help your child work out a way to learn how to spell a word than trying to teach them a rule.

How can I get my child to use a dictionary?

Dictionaries are excellent resources for checking the meaning/s and spelling of words; for example, Do I double the letter? However, a dictionary can be confusing if your child does not understand that some sounds can be represented by more than one letter.

Child: How do you spell ‘pneumonia’?
Parent: Look it up in the dictionary.
Child: But I don’t know how to spell ‘pneumonia’.

Your child would probably go to the ‘n’ page looking for the spelling of ‘pneumonia’ and they would understandably become frustrated.

Initial letter  Spelling choices
  c  c (came), k (kick), ch (chemist), q (quick)
  f  f (friend), ph (photo)
  g  g (game), gh (ghost)
  j  j (jumped), g (giant)
  k  k (kind), c (car), ch (choir), q (quickly)
  n  n (name), gn (gnaw), mn (mnemonic), kn (know)
  q  q (quiet), c (cousin), k (kids), ch (chorus)
  r  r (room), wr (write)
  s  s (sleep), c (city)
  w  w (was), w (when)

Have an up-to-date dictionary at home and show your child how to access an online dictionary.
**How do I explain different spelling of the same word?**

Talk with your child about how the spelling of words has changed over time; for example, we don’t spell all words the same as the classical writers (Chaucer and Shakespeare). Globalisation has influenced the spelling of some words and this is reflected in dictionaries where there may be more than one entry; for example, traveled/travelled. Check with your child’s teacher whether the school accepts Australian and/or American spelling.

**What about computer programs, software and published spelling programs**

A hand-held or computer spellchecker can be motivational and a good resource but they have limitations. If your child spelled ‘apple’ as ‘apel’ most spellcheckers would readily identify the word and show the correct spelling. However, if your child spelled it as ‘apal’ some spellcheckers could flash up ‘appal’. Spellcheckers are like dictionaries: children need to already know most of a word’s spelling to be able to decide whether what spellcheckers show looks right. Simple function spellcheckers can be used by children from quite a young age and for children who are anxious may offer a level of independence and reassurance. It’s remarkable how many children will accept correction from a spellchecker yet not from a family member!

Some spelling CDs and websites offer engaging practice activities but make sure they get your child to really think about the words and not just copy them.

**How can I help my child find spelling errors in writing?**

Remind your child that spelling mistakes are a fact of life and point out that published books have good spelling because every author has an editor. Have your child:

- underline words they think are incorrect
- read stories from bottom to top (backwards) as it’s slower and increases the likelihood of finding errors
- put a ruler below each line to help focus on words
- write a word two ways and put in the one that looks right
- read their writing aloud to you or you can read it to them
- find errors after telling them how many are on a line or in a paragraph. Don’t show them the errors as they need practice looking for them (only select words that your child can reasonably be expected to spell for his or her current level of ability).