

Minimal Pairs

What are minimal pairs?

Minimal pairs are two words which sound the same apart from one sound, for example:

tea	key
pin	bin
dough	go

Children sometimes find it difficult to hear or make different sounds, which might mean they mix the sounds up and say a different word (e.g. they say 'tea' but mean to say 'key').

Why use minimal pairs?

Minimal pairs are used so that children can hear the different sounds contrasted against each other and develop their awareness of sounds. Minimal pairs help children to understand that using a sound correctly or incorrectly changes the meaning of the word.

How do I use minimal pairs?

1. Pick a pair of the minimal pair picture cards (e.g. 'tea' and 'key')
2. Place the pictures in front of the child
3. Tell them what they are by naming each picture

Once the child knows what each picture card is, you can start using minimal pairs within some activities and games.

Barrier Game

If the child is practicing listening to the different sounds, you can play the barrier game! You'll need something to use as a barrier and two sets of the minimal pair picture cards.

1. Place the barrier in the middle of the table
2. Lay out one set of the picture cards on each side of the barrier

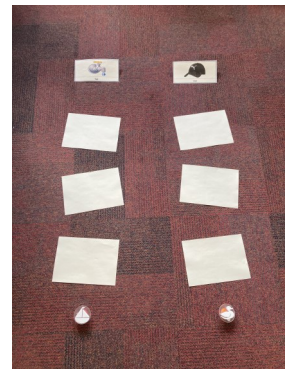


3. Remind the child that they are not allowed to peek over the barrier and see your cards
4. The child needs to listen carefully while you say one of the words (e.g. key) and the child should hold up the picture of what they hear
5. You then show the child the picture of the word that you said and see if they match

Stepping Stones Game

If the child is practising saying the different sounds, then the stepping stones game is a great way to concentrate on this using one minimal pair (e.g. 'tap' and 'cap')

1. Lay out some 'stepping stones' along the floor to create a path (this can be cushions, paper or anything else you can think of)
2. Put one of the minimal pair picture cards at the end of each path (e.g. tap and cap as shown in this picture)
3. Place a toy or counter at the bottom of each path
4. Ask the child to say one of the words e.g. 'tap' or 'cap'. Whichever word you hear, move the toy up one step on that path.
E.g. child says 'cap', move the toy one step on the cap path.
child says 'tap', move one step on the tap path.
5. Try to get both toys up their paths by saying both words many times.
6. You can take turns in this game so that the adult says the words and the child moves the toy up the paths. This encourages the child to listen to the adult modelling the sounds.



This is a great way for the child to see that there is a difference in the sounds because they will have to concentrate on getting both toys to the end of the path. Give feedback e.g. 'I heard 'tap' that time with your 't' sound'.

Hide the penny game

1. Lay your minimal pair cards (e.g. 'tea' and 'key') in front of the child.
2. Tell the child to close their eyes while you hide a penny under one of the cards.
3. Ask the child to open their eyes and guess where you put the penny. They say the name of the picture (e.g. 'key') and the adult turns over the 'key' card to see if the penny is there. If they find it, they win a point. Swap over and take turns to find the penny.
4. If the child says the word incorrectly (e.g. 'tea' but they mean 'key') the adult can turn over the picture of 'tea'. The child might say 'no not that one!' The adult can say 'I heard you say 'tea' with your 't' sound, did you mean 'key'? Let's try that again with your 'k' sound'. Praise the child for trying and for producing their sound correctly.





Top Tips:

- It is important to praise the child for their good listening and for trying hard to say their sounds.
- E.g. 'Wow I heard your 'k' sound when you said 'key', that was great'
- If they find it difficult, model the sounds for the child by saying "it did sound a bit like **t**ea, try listening again, I was using my **k** sound, I said **key**"
- Being in a quiet place with no distractions will help the child concentrate and hear the sounds properly
- Try to practice the child's minimal pairs once a day in short bursts e.g. 10 minutes at a time. You can come back to the activity later if it's not the right time