

Phonological Awareness Skills All Kids Need to Learn

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As a Speech-Language Pathologist, I often see clients come into my office concerned about their child's reading abilities. But what many people don't know is that there are vital pre-reading skills (also called phonological awareness skills) that can be taught to set children up for future reading success!

What is Phonological Awareness?

Phonological Awareness is the ability to recognize and manipulate the spoken parts of sentences and words. Research has shown that phonological awareness is one of the most important foundational skills that a child needs for reading and writing. According to Calfee, Lindamood & Lindamood, 1973: **Children's ability to attend to, and manipulate phonemes strongly correlate with their reading success through to the end of their schooling.** These skills are most important for Pre-K, to first grade, as they are the foundation for reading. As SLPs, we work to create a strong foundation with our clients, so that they are set up for future success with reading and writing!

What are the areas of Phonological Awareness?

So now that you know the importance of strong Phonological Awareness skills, you may be thinking: "What are the main areas of phonological awareness that set my child up for reading success?" I'm glad you asked! When thinking about phonological awareness, it is helpful to think about it in terms of an umbrella. Each skill falls under this umbrella, and all are needed in order to be a successful reader and writer!

Rhyming: Rhyming is the ability to identify **and** produce rhyming words. *Rhyming identification* involves a child listening and identifying when two words rhyme, or end with the same sounds (i.e., "Do 'bat' and 'cat' rhyme?"). Once a child is consistently able to identify whether two words rhyme, then rhyme production begins! *Rhyme production* involves a child learning to produce their own rhyming words when given a starting word (i.e., "What rhymes with 'mug'? ---- 'hug', 'lug', 'bug', etc.). When developing the skill of rhyme production, it can often be helpful to introduce the concept of "word families" with kids. Word families are all the words that end in the same set of sounds. For example, the "—an" word family includes the following words: ran, man, fan, van, pan, ban, can, tan, Dan, Jan. Working on rhyme production in terms of word families provides an easy way for kids to distinguish each set of rhyming words from each other.

Segmentation: Segmentation is the ability to divide sentences, syllables, and phonemes in words. **Segmenting tasks should take place orally without the use of the written word.** Segmenting sentences often looks like clapping out words in a sentence (i.e., "I—want—to—go—home"). Once a child develops this skill at the sentence level, then you can move to the syllable level! This may involve clapping out syllables (or parts of a word) (i.e., "pa—per", "bas—ket—ball", "wa—ter—me—lon"). One helpful hint for teaching syllable segmentation is having a child place their hand under their jaw while saying the word. Whenever their jaw drops in the word, it signifies a syllable. Try it yourself! This is a great tactile way for kids to learn if they are having difficulty with syllable segmentation. The final (and most difficult) level of segmentation involves phonemes. For those that are not familiar with this term, a

phoneme is a unit of sound that can distinguish one word from another in a particular language. Examples of phonemes in the English language are all vowel and consonant sounds (/b/, /w/, /e/, /o/), as well as consonant digraphs (th, sh, ch, wh). Segmentation at the phoneme level involves breaking down a word into individual phonemes (i.e., bat ; b—a—t , shop ; sh—o—p). Mastering phoneme segmentation helps future readers learn to break apart sounds in a word, blend them together, and read!

Blending: Blending is the ability to blend syllables and phonemes together to form words. *Syllable blending* involving a child listening to a word broken down into syllables and then blending those syllables together to form a full word (i.e., “snow—man” is “snowman”, “bas—ket—ball” is “basketball”). Once a child is consistently able to blend together syllables, then phoneme blending begins! *Phoneme blending* involves blending together individual phonemes in order to create a word (i.e., “p—o—t” is “pot”, “c—a—m—p” is “camp”). When targeting phoneme blending, it can be helpful to start with the use of picture cards, in order to give children a visual cue during blending tasks. For example, if the target word is “sun”, have a picture of a sun and a pot out in front of them. Next, orally give the child the individual phonemes aloud to blend together, while they look at the given pictures. The picture cues can aid them in quicker auditory blending of sounds, and thus strengthening this skill to eventually be done without use of the pictures.

Isolation: Phoneme isolation involves having students identify specific phonemes in words (e.g., first, middle, last sound). Phoneme isolation tasks also take place orally without the written word. For example, a child should be able to identify “b” at the beginning sound in “bat”, “a” as the middle sound, and “t” as the ending sound. It can be helpful to begin working on isolation with beginning sounds, as they tend to be easier for children to isolate when first targeting this skill. Eventually (after much practice), children should be able to isolate all sounds in CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words. Before moving on to the final two areas of phonological awareness (phoneme deletion and phoneme substitution), phoneme isolation should first be consistent!

Deletion: Deletion is the ability to delete syllables and phonemes in words. Just like many of the above tasks, syllable/phoneme deletion also take place orally without the written word. *Syllable deletion* involves removing individual syllables from compound words (i.e. “first say snowman. Now say snowman without snow”) — (answer is “man”). Once syllable deletion is mastered, then *phoneme deletion* can be targeted. Phoneme deletion involves deleting one or more individual phonemes in a word (i.e., “Say bat. Now say bat without “b”)—(answer is “at”).

Substitution: Substitution is the ability to substitute individual phonemes in words. For example, an instructor might say, “Start with the word cat. Now change the /c/ to a /b/.” (new word would then be “bat”). Physical manipulatives can be a big help when working on phoneme substitution, since it gives a physical representation of each of the sounds in the word (without it being the actual letters). I have found find that using colored blocks, coins, or colored notecards all work great when targeting phoneme substitution! When starting with a CVC word, use one color block/coin for each letter sound. Have the child delete/take out the block desired phoneme in the word (initial/final phonemes tend to be easier than the medial phonemes in words), and have your child replace it with a new sound/block. Next, isolate each sound aloud, and lastly have the child blend together the “new” word. This skill may take lots of blocked practice, but you will soon see your child manipulating and substituting sounds in words like a pro in no time! As students practice and become more confident, they can begin to substitute phonemes completely mentally and without the need for manipulatives.

I sincerely hope that this breakdown of the main areas of phonological awareness is a resource that you can come back to again and again as your child’s development continues! We as SLPs love early intervention and helping our families navigate the development of their children. Stay tuned in future months for a follow up blog post (from me) on a variety of Phonological Awareness games and activities you can use at home!