Developing Phonological and Phonemic Awareness

A newborn has an in-born awareness of the sounds and rhythms of spoken language (Saffran, 2004). As a young child grows, she refines this early awareness by listening to and taking part in conversations, rhymes, word play, and songs. Early experiences with spoken language help her develop “ear skills”—phonological and phonemic awareness—providing an important foundation for later reading success (Adams, 1990; Watkins, 1996; IRA, 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000; Scarborough, 2002, National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

**Phonological awareness** includes a wide range of abilities related to *spoken* language. “A child who is phonologically aware is able to pay attention to the rhythms and rhymes of spoken words *apart from their meaning*, he is able to treat a word as a word. . . .” (Rath & Kennedy, 2004, p. 48). Phonological awareness includes the ability to notice:

- individual words within a *spoken* phrase /The/cat/is/sleeping/in/the/chair/
- words within *spoken* compound words /dog/house/
- syllables within a *spoken* word /sleep/ing/
- onset-rimes in *spoken* words (in the word *cat*, /k/ is the “onset” sound and /at/ is the “rime” ending sound).

**Phonemic awareness** is a type of phonological awareness and is the last to fully develop. It refers to awareness of the very smallest units of *spoken* sound (the sounds /l/ /g/ /sh/ are all examples of phonemes). Most preschoolers have not yet developed phonemic awareness (McGee & Richgels, 2000). A child who is phonemically aware notices the individual phonemes that make up spoken words. She can single out and say beginning phonemes. Later, an older child can blend phonemes together to say words, break apart spoken words into individual phonemes, and leave out certain phonemes when asked to do so (such as: “Say /fork/ without the /k/”). Phonemic awareness, measured at the beginning of
kindergarten, is one of the best predictors of how well children will learn to read over their first 2 years of school (National Reading Panel, 2000). It is built slowly and continues to develop through the first years of reading instruction.

**Phonics**, a similar-sounding term, is different from both phonological and phonemic awareness because it focuses on written rather spoken language. It is the study of the relationship between written letters and the spoken sounds they represent. For example, the letter *c* is pronounced /k/ in words like *cat* and makes a /s/ sound in words like *city*.

Opitz (2000) suggests that phonological awareness is more “caught” than “taught.” Many opportunities to develop phonological skills present themselves throughout the day—teachable moments to play and have fun with words. These should be casual, playful and even silly, rather than lesson-like. When engaging in word play, the child must shift her attention away from the meaning of language to the sounds of language.

**Everyday ways to play with words**

- If a minor mishap occurs, such as hurting her finger, you might say or sing silly-sounding words, “Boo hoo hoo! Don’t hurt *you*!” The child is not expected to say the words, but she will be tuning into the sounds. (Don’t be surprised if you later hear her experimenting with those words!)
- Look for chances to use alliteration, which is a series of words that repeat the same beginning sound. As you give her a cracker, you might say “Here’s a cracker. Crunchy, crackly cracker.”
- Use rhyme, too—sometimes this happens almost accidentally. If she is going down a slide, you might rhyme, “A slide ride. Slippery slide ride.”
- When the cat meows, imitate it and stretch out the sounds playfully, “Meeeee—ooooow.” Try stretching out the sounds in her name.
- Use the child’s name or the names of family members to rhyme or form alliterations: “Mia makes muffins in the morning.” “Sam likes ham.”
• A young child may enjoy clapping, stomping, marching, or banging on a drum or shaking an instrument to mark the syllables she hears in her name or the cadence of a song or rhyme.

Books, songs, and games to foster phonological awareness

• Games played with names can be especially motivating for a young child. Several familiar songs use this device—“Willaby Wallaby” by Raffi (“Willaby wallby woo, an elephant sat on you. Willaby wallaby wee, an elephant sat on me. Willaby wallaby wustin, an elephant sat on Justin!”)

• For the book, Ants in My Pants, read the story on several different days until it is familiar. Enjoy Jacob’s clever attempts to avoid getting dressed, talk about his feelings, and enjoy the surprise happy ending. Then play with some of the rhyming words, such as “goat in my coat,” “ants in his pants,” or “geese in his fleece” shirt.

• The Piggy in the Puddle features both alliteration and rhyme. After reading the story, play with the alliteration. Think of and say more words that begin with a /p/ sound. The definite cadence of this rhyming story would also be fun for marching or clapping.

• In Old MacDonald Had a Farm, the “E-I-E-I-O” can be changed to “Feee-i-feee-i-o” or “Zeee-i-zeee-i-o” to change out the beginning sounds. In Knick Knack Paddywack, “knick knack” might be changed to “mick mack.

• For the Dr. Seuss book, Fox in Socks, first read the story through for fun. After enjoying the story and talking about it, play around with the fun words, such as “tweetle beetles,” “tweetle beetle battle.” Your child may join in and add some, too.

• Many rhymes, songs, and stories contain animal sounds or words that sound like the sound they name—“buzz,” “slurp,” “boom” These words usually interest a young child and easily lend themselves to word play.

• Play tongue twister games—Peter Piper Picked, Sally Sells Seashells
Phonemic Awareness for Bridging Into Reading

As explained earlier, phonemic awareness—awareness of the smallest units of spoken sound—is a type of phonological awareness. It is last to develop and is strongly linked to success in the beginning stages of learning to read for print readers. Some studies of students who use braille as their primary reading medium also show a strong relationship between level of phonemic awareness and braille reading skills (Gillon & Young, 2002).

Most children are not able to perform more difficult phonemic awareness tasks, such as blending phonemes or breaking up spoken words into individual phonemes, until kindergarten or later (Gillon & Schwarz, 2001; IRA position statement, 1998). By mid-first grade, however, about 80% of children have developed these more advanced phonemic awareness skills (IRA, 1998).

As a child prepares to bridge into reading, he will gradually be able to:

• segment longer words that he hears into syllables (/ca/ /ter/ /pil/ /lar/)
• recognize when he hears words that rhyme, and words that do not rhyme
• experiment with making up and saying rhyming words (candy/sandy; Justin/Dustin)
• become aware of beginning sounds in words he hears
• begin to be aware of ending sounds in words he hears

Research shows that of all the skills that make up phonemic awareness, the ability to break apart words into component sounds seems most helpful in learning to read (Davidson & Jenkins, 1994). And being able to hear and pinpoint the sound at the beginning and end of words is easier than hearing sounds in the middle of words (Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley cited in Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001).

Games for calling attention to beginning sounds

Play short games that call attention to beginning sounds. These can be repeated throughout your child’s preschool years, and there are many occasions to fit them in: riding in the car, waiting in line, while out for a walk, working around the house. Start with your child’s name, since this is familiar and of interest to him. Call his attention to words that begin like his name, emphasizing their beginning sound:

“Banana—that begins with ‘buh’ just like your name, Benton! Benton, banana. I bet Benton likes bananas!”

In a playful way, encourage the child to think of other words that begin like his name. Later, use the name of a family member or a familiar object as a starting point.

To help a child gain awareness of sounds at the beginning of words, you can play games like the following:

“Boxes, Sacks, & Pails” Game (Phonemic Awareness):

Purpose: The child will increase his awareness of sounds at the beginning of words using familiar objects in his natural environment.

Game: Give the child an empty basket or box and say,

“Let’s find things to put in the basket that begin with a ‘buh’ sound, the same sound in the beginning of basket.”

You and your child can work together to find things to put in. Name each object as you put it in the basket and say something like,

“[Name of object] begins with the same sound as ‘basket.’ Let’s put the ___ in the basket!”

Once several items are in the basket, you may want to take them out and talk about them using their name each time. Then keep the items in the basket to play with later in the day. Be sure to plan ahead so that a few objects are in an area where he can easily find them: book, boot, bear, banana, ball, etc.
**Extension 1:** At another time, use a different container and find objects whose names begin with the same sound as the container you choose. You might use a *pail* or a *purse* (putting in a *pen*, *paper*) or a *sack* or the *sink* (putting in *soap*, *sock*). During the day as occasions arise, point out other words that begin like the objects in the container, such as *soup* and *salad* at lunch, or mention words beginning with that sound in a story you read.

**Extension 2:** After the child has had a lot of experience with beginning sounds, extend the game by using *two* containers of objects that the child has already collected. Take out all the objects and make a game of sorting them by beginning sound, putting them back in the correct container.

**Extension 3:** After a lot of experience with beginnings sounds, add a familiar object to the container that does *not* begin with the same sound. If the child does not notice the difference in beginning sound, talk about it and emphasize the difference. Keep it playful.

**Extension 4:** After even more experience, give the child familiar objects (different from those he has already collected). Choose objects that begin with two different sounds, such as /d/ and /m/. Ask him to sort the objects by beginning sound. Remember to keep it game-like and stop when he has had enough.

[At first, play these games choosing objects that begin with a single sound. Avoid objects that begin with two consonants (*tr* in truck for the *t* container, or *sh* in shoe for the *s* container).]

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**Which One Is It? Game (Phonemic Awareness):**

**Purpose:** The child will increase his awareness of the sound at the beginning of spoken words.
**Game:** Say to child,

“What do you like to play?”

[Or use another category—eat, drink, sing, do.] Let the child name a few things without prompting, such as jumping, running, music. Then say,

“The name of one of the things you said begins like the sound in the beginning of *Mom.* Which thing is it?”

Keep these short and fun. Name only two or three things each time you play, so it remains entertaining. [Remember that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between letters and phonemes. There are approximately 41-44 phonemes in English (Ehri & Nunes, 2002; Gillon, 2004). Since this game is about sounds—rather than letters—accept the child’s response if the sounds match, such as the /s/ sound at the beginning of *cereal* and *sand*.]

**Ending Sounds**

Learning to hear the sound as the end of a word also helps a beginning reader sound out written words and should also be practiced (Beck, 2006). Play both phonemic awareness games (Boxes, Sacks, and Pails; Which One Is It?), asking the child to locate and sort objects by their ending sound.

Choose obvious ending sounds. The /t/ sound at the end of *bat* and *hat* is easier to hear than the /l/ sound in *ball*. Since hearing ending sounds is more difficult, expect to offer your child more help and keep it game-like.

**Phonemic awareness assists beginning readers and . . . learning to read assists phonemic awareness.** The effects appear to be reciprocal (Liberman, Shankweiler, Fischer, & Carter, 1974; Scholes, 1998). Many of the more difficult phonemic tasks, such as including every sound when saying a word, aren’t mastered until after a child starts to read. An example of how reading helps phonemic
For additional ideas for activities building phonemic awareness visit: www.readingrockets.org