

## PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS – Preparing for Literacy

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### PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS – WHAT IS IT?

Phonological Awareness is the ability to consciously reflect on or 'tune into' the sound (phonological) system of our language.

Phonological awareness is different from the following: hearing or acuity, being able to say or articulate sounds, auditory discrimination of words and phonics.

Phonological Awareness consists of many of skills that are related to early reading development and others that appear to develop as a consequence of learning to read. That is, there is a 'two way' relationship between Phonological Awareness and learning to read.

At a general level **Phonological Awareness** involves an awareness that words can -

- be broken up into **beats** or **syllables** (hos-pit -al)
- **rhyme** (can, fan, man)

At the sound (phoneme) level Phonological Awareness involves awareness that words can -

- start with the same **sound** (never naughty)
- be segmented into the first sound or sounds (onsets) and the **rime** pattern.(sand & stand can be segmented into s-and, st-and)
- be formed by **blending** separate sounds together (f-i-sh makes fish)
- be segmented into separate sounds (s-l-i-p)
- be changed or manipulated by removing, adding or reordering sounds within the word to make a different word (trip without the r says tip)

Phonological Awareness tasks vary in **difficulty** even when it appears they are similar tasks. For example, it is usually easier to detect that two words rhyme than to produce a word that rhymes with a given word. Some tasks require greater memory and thought than a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer - e.g. saying which word is the 'odd one out' in a series of 4 words (3 of which begin with the same sound), is more difficult than asking for a judgement about whether or not two words begin with the same sound.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

There is much research that shows that Phonological Awareness is an important component of early reading success. A child's level of phonological awareness prior to school is one of the **best predictors** of their later reading development. Good Phonological Awareness enables children to more readily develop an understanding of the alphabetic nature of English - i.e. that there is a direct relationship between the sound of the spoken words and the letters that represent them in written language. Studies have also shown that training in Phonological Awareness has an impact on reading acquisition. This is particularly so when Phonological Awareness instruction is combined with letters. Much can be done at preschool to provide children with opportunities for developing sound awareness and to prepare them

for literacy instruction. However, whilst Phonological Awareness is seen by many to be an essential ingredient of early reading instruction, it is not sufficient on its own to enable children to read.

This view is supported by the National Reading Panel which in 2000 released its research-based findings in 2 reports about what is best practice in "Teaching Children to Read". In summary the 5 key areas to be included in early reading instruction are - phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension and fluency.

### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS**

Phonological Awareness can appear to develop 'naturally' in some children through experience with oral language games such as rhyme and exposure to written language. For others however, phonological awareness requires explicit and intense teaching. It must be remembered that **Phonological Awareness** is complex and requires abstract thinking. It is one of a number of what are called, "metalinguistic" tasks. Language, whether spoken or written, usually focuses on the exchange of meaning, while "meta" language requires us to analyse language, and then think and talk about how it is put together. It is quite understandable, therefore that young children arrive at preschool or school with a wide variety of levels of phonological awareness ability and early experiences with literacy.

### **DIFFICULTY WITH PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS & ITS IMPLICATIONS**

When learning to read and spell the young student must understand that **words** are made up of **sounds** that can be sequenced, segmented, blended and rearranged. If they do not, they are unlikely to learn the mappings of letter-sound patterns and will find it difficult to tackle the reading or spelling of unfamiliar words. Phonological Awareness is one of the key contributors to the development of automatic word recognition. Repeated matchings of correct sound and letter patterns help to build up the young reader's reading vocabulary or lexicon. This in turn leads to automatic word recognition and reading mastery. Lack of automaticity will prevent students from becoming independent readers and will impact on their reading comprehension.

Therefore, activities that link phonological awareness and letter/orthographic knowledge in a balanced reading program should be part of all good early literacy teaching.

### **A BROADER VIEW**

In addition to performing poorly on Phonological Awareness tasks, some students have specific problems with a range of other phonological tasks, all of which contribute to the reading difficulty. They may confuse similar sounding words such as cone/comb, have problems recalling words especially names or remembering word sequences such as rhymes, songs and letters of the alphabet. Additionally they may be inaccurate in their articulation of multi-syllabic words. For example, saying **cimanom** for **cinnamon** or **bsgetti** for **spaghetti**. It has been suggested that these difficulties all have their basis in the inaccurate laying down, storage and retrieval of sounds - they are often referred to as **phonological processing** problems.

## DEVELOPING PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

The Preschool or Kindergarten can be an ideal place to involve children in activities that will develop Phonological Awareness in a fun and relaxed way. Even though many preschool children will not yet be ready for reading or know any letters of the alphabet they can still develop good listening skills and build early levels of Phonological Awareness that will support them later when presented with formal reading instruction. Parents can further encourage this development through reading and talking about books regularly with their children and introducing them to rhymes and sound games.

## SOME GENERAL SUGGESTIONS FOR EARLY PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

- Encourage **active listening**, setting an atmosphere of fun by using a headband with oversized "Mickey Mouse" ears attached. Make a habit of playing games that focus on words, syllables, rhyme and sounds.
- Thinking about sounds is a very abstract task for young children. They will need time and practical activities to understand the concept of a sound. A bridge to this understanding is through developing **oral awareness**. A mirror will help children explore the way their mouth and tongue moves as they say the sounds - e.g. m f p (sounds not letter names). Encourage children to copy sounds and words and talk about how their mouth and tongue moves.
- Take time to **emphasize how words are said** and provide children with **opportunities to practise correct pronunciation** of words in an atmosphere that allows mistakes and experimentation. The clearer that the sound patterns are laid down, the easier it will be for children later on, to retrieve the correct sounds in words.
- Assist children to discover **syllables, rhyme, and alliteration** (words that start with the same sound) as you talk about words and play sound and action games.
- Be clear and accurate in the way you **talk about sounds and letters** and how they relate to each other. We can hear sounds as we say or make sounds in our mouths. We can see and write letters on the page. Don't confuse children with inaccurate requests such as - What letters can you hear at the beginning of that word?
- Remember that there are 2 "**baskets of knowledge**" - one for sounds and one for letters. Young children need to build up their skills in each "basket" before they are ready to learn how the two are linked.
- Promote Phonological Awareness by drawing attention to different aspects of rhymes and sound play in **books** such as those listed below. Alphabet books will also help to increase awareness of sounds at the start of words as well as develop familiarity with the names of the letters.
- A **balanced preschool program** involves many components. We must keep the role of Phonological Awareness in perspective and see its place within the broader focus of building good oral language skills. Free and imaginative play, physical activities, real life

experiences, learning about new words, reading to children and encouraging story telling and learning about questions are also important.

- Remember that all the Phonological Awareness activities should be fun and not a learning drill.

## ACTIVITIES FOR PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

**SYLLABLES:** Children love a sense of absurdity combining nonsense, movement and rhythm.

- **The Train Game**

Let's pretend we are on a train. Copy the train driver (teacher) as he/she calls out the names of places we will visit. The teacher selects fun sounding multi-syllabic words for the children to say and clap out the syllables. For example: "Stopping all stations from Toot-gar-ook to Wan-ga-rat-ta." or "Next stop Dim-boo-la. Or "Do you want to go to Win-ky-woo or Tim-buc-too?"

- **The Longest Word**

Ask the children to think of the longest words they know. Demonstrate the length, clapping out the beats or syllables - caterpillar, encyclopaedia. When you notice long or interesting sounding words, have fun with the children, repeating and breaking the words up into their beats. Eg. Cat-a-ma-ran. Be aware that some children will still be thinking that 'long' word refers to the meaning of the word and might suggest 'train' as a long word!

**RHYME - Onset/Rime:** Remember that building knowledge of rhyme takes time. Children usually find it easier to recognize rhyme than to produce rhyming words unprompted.

- **Sing songs and read nursery rhymes**

Emphasize the rhythm and the rhyming words in old favourites such as Incy Wincy Spider, Little Jack Horner, One Two Buckle my Shoe. Repeat the rhyming words and ask children to copy eg. Incy Wincy Spider- *spout - out*.

- **Rhyming Riddles**

Children can enjoy solving these riddles and then afterwards finding the words that rhyme.

In the garden it <b>grows</b>	It sleeps on the <b>mat</b>
You can smell it with your <b>nose</b> .	It's bigger than a <b>rat</b>
It is called a _____ ( <b>rose</b> )	It is called a _____ ( <b>cat</b> )

- **Rhyme cloze:** Providing a context for the children will make it easier to think of a rhyming word to complete the sentence. In this task the answer is always a body part.

Mrs Rose has a mosquito on her \_\_\_\_\_ (nose).

Jenny Bin has a pimple on her \_\_\_\_\_ (chin).

Mr Weg has a broken \_\_\_\_\_ (leg).

Tommy Weir has a flea in his \_\_\_\_\_ (ear).

**FIRST SOUND AWARENESS:** Some children may already have an awareness of the first sound of words prior to formal teaching, whereas others may not. However all children will

have fun with sound play that makes the alliteration (each word begins with the same sound) obvious.

- **Alliteration Game:** Children will play a "copy-cat" as the teacher 'builds up' an alliterative character e.g. Miss Marble. Miss Marble's muffins. Miss Marble makes muffins. Miss Marble makes marvellous muffins. Miss Marble makes marvellous marmalade muffins - "mm ..." Other examples that you might begin with could include silly Simon ..., tiny Tina..., little lambs ...,
- **The First Sound Shop:** Set up a shop that sells only things that start with a particular sound. For example: The Mmmm shop sells milk, mice, marbles, marshmallows, mushrooms, matches, monkeys, mugs, mops and maps. Children brainstorm other items and may be encouraged to bring from home items that could be displayed. Try this with other sounds e.g. 'b' (balls, butter, bags, beetroots etc), or 's' (sandwiches, soup, sardines, sox etc).
- **The Food Game - Watch what you eat!** Each child stands and tells the group the name of a food they like that starts with the same sound as their own name. The activity could be extended to include an item they don't like to eat as well. For example, "I'm Fiona and I like to eat fish but I don't like to eat frogs."
- **I Spy:** Identify an object in the room and say "I spy with my little eye something beginning with the sound 'm'....." Mummy, make-up, mandarins, muffins, milo etc. (Make sure to use the sound not the letter name).

### **Children's Literature for Rhyme, Alliteration and Syllabification.**

Each Peach Pear Plum. by Janet and Alan Ahlberg

Goodness Gracious by Phil Cummings

Where's my Teddy by Jez Alborough

In Search of Octopotamus and Other Strange Animals by Allan Cornwell

Don't Forget the Bacon by Pat Hutchins

Pass the Jam Jim by Kaye Umansky and Margaret Chamberlain

Happy Families series - Mrs Plug the Plumber, Mr Tick the Teacher etc. by Allan Ahlberg

Hairy McClarey from Donaldson's Dairy by Linley Dodd

Can You Hear me Grandad? by Pat Thompson

### **Other Useful Resources**

A Sound Way - Phonological Awareness activities for early literacy. Love, E. & Reilly, S. 1995. Longman

Sounds Fun. Love, E. and Reilly, S. 2002. Love and Reilly - Speech & Language Products

My Go. Sandpiper Publications

### **Further Reading**

Phonological Awareness - It Makes Sound Sense (1998) Helen Fritz, Florence Gough and Elizabeth Love. SPELD Victoria. Fax: 03 9486 2437

A Sound Way. Phonological awareness - activities for early literacy (1995) Elizabeth Love & Sue Reilly. Longman. Melbourne, Australia.

National Reading Panel (2000) [www.nationalreadingpanel.org](http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org)

Phonological Awareness - from research to practice (2004) - Gail T. Gillon The Guilford Press.