

Phonological awareness is the ability to recognize and work with sounds in spoken language. It includes being able to hear distinct words, syllables, and sounds as well as being able to segment, blend, and manipulate those sounds. Phonological awareness is a foundational skill for learning how to read and write.

Children develop phonological awareness in any language they are learning and speaking, which includes the language of instruction in school—typically white mainstream English—and other languages at home and in their communities. The phonological awareness skills addressed in this overview are skills associated with white mainstream English, the language of school instruction. Keep in mind, there are other ways of speaking and other phonological progressions that are equally valid.

Children come to our classrooms with a variety of language backgrounds, identities, and cultures. This overview takes a culturally relevant-sustaining approach to the teaching of phonological awareness. Our teaching of phonological awareness is relevant and sustaining to the cultures, identities, and interests of children when we are:

- teaching skills within texts that represent and align to who they are
- affirming and utilizing their home language practices and encouraging flexible and fluid movement between and among their languages
- articulating the significance of learning phonological awareness skills to learning to read, i.e., understanding that these skills are a means to becoming the readers and writers they are capable of
- teaching skills alongside of knowledge development, criticality, and other areas of literacy development

What is Phonological Awareness?

Phonological Awareness includes the initial recognition of sounds in larger, more concrete linguistic structure like words, syllables, and onset/rimes. Evidence that children are developing an awareness of these structures includes:

- Recognition of individual words in a sentence (How many words are in this sentence?)
- Recognition and identification of rhyming words (What words rhymed on these pages? Do these two words rhyme?)
- Recognition of the parts of a word—or syllables—by counting them, taking them apart, and putting them together (How many syllables in oct/o/pus? Say them one at a time)
- The ability to manipulate onset and rime—producing rhymes (“What rhymes with *fox*?”) requires the understanding that rhyming words have the same rime (the onset in *fox* is “f” and the rime is “-ox”)

Phonological awareness also includes the recognition of smaller, more abstract sounds in words—the individual sounds in words known as *phonemes*. This is called phonemic awareness, which

is a subset of phonological awareness. It is the ability to isolate, blend, and segment the smallest units of individual sound, phonemes. It is now recognized that children can begin learning to hear and say phonemes without first practicing syllables in words. Therefore, it is important to begin with and stay focused on developing phonemic awareness more than other aspects of phonological awareness (ILA PA Position Statement, 2020).

Phonemic awareness includes the ability to:

- Identify and produce phonemes; for example, identify the last sound in the word *goat* as /t/.
- Blend phonemes—like putting together the individual sounds /b/ /a/ /t/ into the word *bat*.
- Segment phonemes, which is taking apart the sounds in the word, so *dip* becomes /d/ /i/ /p/.
- Isolate phonemes, which means hearing and naming one specific sound anywhere in the word. For example, identify the sound /i/ when asked, “What’s the middle sound in the word ‘fish’?”
- Manipulate phonemes or change things up—like making the /c/ in *cot* become the /h/ sound to make *hot*.

Why is Phonological Awareness Important?

When phonological awareness knowledge is in place, children have a solid grasp on how to break up words into parts, like syllables, onsets and rimes, and phonemes, and then blend those parts together. When they learn to match these processes with written language, they can decode and encode, which means they can break apart written words into sounds and patterns. This sets them on the path to becoming independent word learners. Once children begin to read words, they get lots of information about what they are reading. This means that phonological awareness is crucial for fluency and comprehension. Moreover, evidence has led many researchers to believe that the acquisition of phonological awareness is also associated with vocabulary development.

How Do We Teach Phonological Awareness?

» Use diverse texts in read alouds and shared reading experiences

Using texts that help children see, celebrate, and discuss their identities, cultures, experiences, and interests—and then teaching phonological awareness skills within those texts—will have a high impact on Black and Latinx children's ability to learn a skill in joyful and meaningful ways. During the reading aloud or shared reading of these texts, children can listen for rhyming words while you read aloud and then generate a list of more words that rhyme with the words in the text. As they practice rhyme, repetition, and word play, they'll see the letter associated with the sounds they are making as well as expand their vocabulary and print knowledge.

» Affirm and utilize children's home languages

We honor and utilize children's linguistic repertoires when we encourage linguistic dexterity, moving flexibly and fluidly between and among their languages. Remember, phonological awareness skills aren't specific to a certain language. If children can hear the sounds within words in their home language, they can hear those sounds within English words. Not all sounds are the same from language to language, but, the skill of hearing those that are is the basis for reading everywhere. Highlighting the role of sounds in words in child's home language by singing, rhyming, and playing with language in a child's home language both affirms children's language background, while supporting the natural transfer between phonological awareness and syntactic information between two languages.

» Connect phonemic awareness to phonics and vocabulary

The most effective kinds of activities for fostering phonemic awareness involve deconstructing and reconstructing the sounds in words, taking the sounds in words apart and putting them back together again. Combining phoneme-level instruction in sounds with grapheme-level instruction in letters—i.e., teaching phonemic awareness and phonics simultaneously—has also been shown to be both effective and efficient, as it helps children better understand the relation between letters and sounds. This may look like deconstructing and reconstructing sounds with magnet letters/board, tiles, or sound boxes, and then modeling for children how to write the words they are making. It is also critical to connect this instruction to vocabulary—if we are highlighting parts of words, or making words in our instruction—children, particularly those learning English, must understand what those words mean in order for the instruction to be relevant to them. This could be aided by visuals, gestures, and explaining of word meaning.

» Play-based, joyful activities

The teaching of phonological awareness outside of texts should be play-based, short, and joyful. During transition times when children are arriving to school or getting ready for lunch they can line up by listening to the beginning sound of their name. During centers and small group instruction, sort picture cards by the sound they hear in the beginning of the words.

» Small Group Reading allows for differentiation

In addition to whole class time, teaching phonological awareness during small group reading time helps to ensure that you are differentiating your instruction for a variety of learners. A phonological assessment should help to drive instructional plans for children of different reading levels. For example, readers in the early reading stage will not need as much attention to phonological awareness as those in the emergent reading stage. Additionally, children learning English may require additional instruction on English phonemes that do not exist in a child's home language. Teachers must acquire knowledge of these phonemes and then explicitly demonstrate the production of the sound, focusing on how you move your mouth to do so. Helping Latinx and MLL children to identify sounds in short words with picture sorts can also support the learning of unfamiliar phonemes (Robertson, retrieved 2021).

Remember to consider phonological awareness instruction in relation to your overall curriculum and instruction, and to the children in your classrooms. The International Literacy Association's most recent position statement on phonological awareness emphasizes that while phonological awareness instruction is important for many children's reading development, over-emphasis can come at the cost of other crucial areas of the curriculum, with minimal benefits. Therefore, phonological awareness instruction should be "purposeful, highly efficient, and focused primarily on skills that support literacy development" (ILA PA Position Statement, 2020). Knowledge and intellect, the development of criticality, and the amplification of joy are just as critical for reading development as the learning of phonological awareness skills—which are simply a means to becoming the readers and writers our children are capable of. A child's literacy abilities and development, therefore, are defined not just by a narrow set of skills like the number of sounds they know, but by the assets, mindsets, and dispositions they bring to the journey of becoming literate.



Phonological Awareness Instruction

An Overview

Works Cited

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