PHONEMIC AWARENESS

**What is phonemic awareness?**

*Phonemic awareness* is:

1. the awareness that spoken words are made up of sounds, and
2. the ability to play with, or manipulate, those sounds through a variety of tasks.

A few points to remember:

* Phonemic awareness is **not** phonics.
* Phonemic awareness is **not** a reading instructional approach in and of itself. It is only *one component* of a successful comprehensive literacy program.
* Phonemic awareness is not a single skill. It is an awareness of the sounds of spoken language that develops over time.

**What is the difference between phonemic awareness and phonics?**

Phonemic awareness different from phonics in that phonemic awareness is related only to the smallest units of sound (phonemes) in *spoken* language. Phonics involves the relationship between spoken sounds and *printed* text.

EXAMPLE: Children who are phonemically aware can tell you that the three separate sounds they hear in *ship* are /sh/, /i/, and /p/. Children demonstrate their phonics knowledge when they can tell you that the two letters that make the /sh/ sound are *s-h*.

In order for beginning readers to successfully apply phonics strategies, they must be phonemically aware. Phonemic awareness supports the development of phonics knowledge, but they are not the same.

**LEVELS OF PHONEMIC AWARENESS**

Phonemic awareness is not a single skill; rather, it consists of a series of five levels of tasks. These levels are described below in order from the simplest to the most challenging. Each level includes an example of the type of task children would be asked to do at that level:

1. ***Rhyming Tasks***

* *Recognizing* that certain words rhyme (such as *sun* and *fun* or *shoe* and *two*)
* *Telling (identifying)* your own pairs of rhyming words

1. ***Sound Oddity Tasks*** This is the ability to compare and contrast individual sounds within words.

* Recognizing when many words begin with the same sound
  + Example: “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers” (alliteration)
* Matching beginning or ending sounds (phoneme matching)
  + Examples: naming another word that **begins** the same way as “man” (monkey); or naming a word that **ends** with the same sound you hear at the end of “cake” (brick); or naming a word that has the same sound you hear in the **middle** of “goat” (robe)
* Sorting words by beginning, ending, or middle sounds
  + Examples: Which word starts with a different sound: rose, bag, red, ring?
  + Which word ends with a different sound: kite, late, cat, shoe?
  + Which word has a different middle sound: duck, dog, lock, cot?
* Singling out one sound in a word (phoneme isolation)
  + Example: D-d-d Daniel, Sh-sh-sh-Shelly
  + What is the sound you hear at the end of “dragon?” (/n/)

1. ***Blending*** This is the ability to blend individual sounds together to make a word.

* Blending by word chunks
  + Example: What word would you make if you blended these chunks together: */s/-at?*
* Blending by individual sounds
  + Example: What word would you have if you blended these sounds together: /k/-/a/-/t/?

1. ***Phoneme Segmentation*** This is the ability to break apart a word into its separate sounds.

* What sounds do you hear in the word **cough?** Answer: /k/-/o/-/f/

***BLENDING* AND *SEGMENTATION* ARE THE TWO LEVELS OF PHONEMIC AWARENESS THAT MOST CLOSELY CONTRIBUTE TO FUTURE SUCCESS IN READING AND SPELLING. THINK ABOUT THIS. WHY?**

1. ***Phoneme Manipulation*** This is the ability to add, delete, or substitute a designation sound in a word to make a new word.

* Phoneme addition: What word would you make if you added /s/ to the word **and**? Answer: sand
* Phoneme deletion: What word would be left if you took /t/ away from **train?** Answer: rain
* Phoneme substitution: What word would you make if you traded the /s/ in **sand** with the /h/ sound? Answer: hand

Children’s ability to perform tasks at the five levels develops gradually over time. Performing phonemic awareness tasks is not easy, because the tasks require that children shift their attention away from the content of speech to the form of speech (Yopp, 1992). In other words, when performing a segmentation task like the one listed above, if a child is asked to tell the sounds she hears in the word **cat**, she must not think about a furry animal the purrs. Instead, she must turn her attention to the sounds in the word if she is to respond correctly that the sounds in the word **cat** are /k/ /a/ /t/. Yopp (2000) describes it this way: children who are phonemically ware “have the ability to notice, mentally grab hold of, and manipulate the smallest chunks of speech” (p. 130).

**SONGS THAT FOSTER PHONEMIC AWARENESS**

One joyful, easy way to foster young children’s literacy development is to sing songs that promote the development of phonemic awareness. These songs do just that because they encourage children to attend to certain sounds within words.

Hallie Kay Yopp (1992) has adapted many traditional tunes into songs that enhance children’s phonemic awareness. The songs are listed in order of difficulty of phonemic awareness skill, beginning with tasks that are easier for young children. Note that in these activities, the *sound* for the letter is sung, **rather than** the letter name. This is true for all the songs in this handout—children and adults say or sing the *sounds* rather than the *letter names.*

*The Sound Song*

This song focuses on sound matching. It is sung to the tune of “Jimmy Cracked Corn and I Don’t Care.”

Who has a word that starts with /d/?

Who has a word that starts with /d/?

Who has a word that starts with /d/?

It must start with the /d/ sound!

You can ask a child to suggest a word beginning with the target sound, in this case, /d/.

*Dog* is a word that starts with /d/

*Dog* is a word that starts with /d/

*Dog* is a word that starts with /d/

*Dog* starts with the /d/ sound.

Since the sound, not the letter, is emphasized, children do not need to know the alphabet to be successful at this activity. You can adapt this song to focus on any sound, including sounds made by more than one letter such as /sh/, /ch/, or /th/. After a time, your children may be eager to try the more challenging task of naming words with the same **ending** sound. Just adapt the lyrics accordingly: Who has a word that ends with /t/? ---*Bat* is a word that ends with /t/…

*What’s the Sound?*

This next song focuses on sound isolation. In the previous song, children were practicing sound matching. You told your children the individual sound and then asked them to share a word that began/ended with the same sound. Sound isolation asks children to do the opposite. They are given a word or group of words and asked to tell what sound occurs at the beginning, middle, or end of the word. This second song is sung to the tune of “Old MacDonald had a Farm.”

What’s the sound that starts these words:

*Turtle, time*, and *teeth*?

(wait for a response from the child)

/t/ is the sound that starts these words

*Turtle, time*, and *teeth*.

With a /t/, /t/ here, and a /t/, /t/ there,

Here a /t/, there a /t/, everywhere a /t/, /t/.

/t/ is the sound that starts these words:

*Turtle, time* and *teeth*!

What’s the sound that starts these words:

*Chicken, chin*, and *cheek*?

(wait for a response)

/ch/ is the sound that starts these words:

*Chicken, chin*, and *cheek*.

With a /ch/, /ch/ here…

Once your children seem comfortable with isolating many different sounds at the beginning of words, you can increase the challenge by focusing on middle and ending sounds. Variations of the song according to this adaptation follow:

Middle:

What’s the sound in the middle of these words:

*Leaf* and *deep* and *meat*?

/ee/ is the sound in the middle of these words:

*Leaf* and *deep* and *meat*.

With an /ee/, /ee/ here, and an /ee/, /ee/ there...etc.

Ending:

What’s the sound at the end of these words:

*Duck* and *cake* a *beak*?

/k/ is the sound at the end of these words:

*Duck* and *cake* and *beak*.

With a /k/, /k/, here and a /k/, /k/ there…etc.

*Shout it Out*

The third song focuses on blending sounds together. You may be more familiar with this concept as “sounding it out.” Blending asks children to listen to a series of isolated sounds and combine those sounds together to form a word. The lyrics of this song are sung to the tune of “If You’re Happy and You Know It, Clap Your Hands.”

If you think you know this word, shout it out!

If you think you know this word, shout it out!

If you think you know this word,

Then tell me what you heard,

If you think you know this word, shout it out!

(You say a segmented word, such as /sh/-/i/-/p/, and your child responds by saying the blended word.)

*Fee Fi Fiddly-I-O*

The final song in this section focuses on adding or substituting sounds. Although these are some of the most challenging phonemic awareness tasks, this particular song is easily sung and enjoyed by young children because they get to invent silly sounding words. This fourth song is sung to the portion of the song “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad” that begins with “Someone’s in the kitchen with Dinah.”

I have a song that we can sing

It goes something like this:

Fe-Fi-Fiddly-i-o

Fe-Fi-Fiddly-i-o-o-o-o

Fe-Fi-Fiddly-i-ooooo

Now try it with the /z/ sound!

Ze-Zi-Ziddly-i-o

Ze-Zi-Ziddly-i-o-o-o-o

Ze-Zi-Ziddly-i-ooooo

Now try it with the /br/ sound!

Bre-Bri-Briddly-i-o

Bre-Bri-Briddly-i-o-o-o-o

Bre-Bri-Briddly-i-ooooo

Now try it with the /ch/ sound!

Of course, you can sing this silly song using almost any beginning sound. After singing a few verses, your child will likely want to name the next sound to substitute into the song.

Notice that all these songs are activities that focus on orally playing with the sounds of language. That’s one of the reasons they are so ideal for young children—no spelling or alphabet knowledge is necessary for children to enjoy and successfully sing these songs. Yet children’s phonemic awareness will certainly be developing as they engage in this type of language play.

**PHONEMIC AWARENESS GAMES**

The following activities are playful and appealing to children while deliberately focusing attention on the sounds of spoken language. Helping children become phonemically aware will provide them with one more valuable tool to use on their journey into reading.

**Read, Read, Read!**

One of the best ways to help children develop phonemic awareness naturally is through the use of children’s books that focus on some kind of play with the sounds of language. This includes books that are rich with rhymes, alliteration, and predictable patterns. Children love playing with language through listening to and repeating rhymes, inventing nonsense words, and saying silly sentences.

* Point out the rhyming pattern of a nursery rhyme or story
* Re-read stories over and over again, allowing children to occasionally “fill in the blank” with an appropriate rhyming word
* Go on a “Rhyme Hunt” as you read familiar rhyming books and pick out all the pairs of rhyming words. See if children can tell additional words that rhyme with some of the pairs they discovered in the story.

These are just a sampling of ideas that encourage adults and children to extend the conversation surrounding a read-aloud in a natural, meaningful way.

**Play Games that Focus Attention on Rhyming, Blending, and Segmenting**

The marvelous thing about these games is that they are easy, involve very little (if any) preparation, and often involve tangible items (picture cards, blocks, etc.) that children can see and touch.

*Can You Rhyme?* (Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler, 1998)

This game encourages your children to listen to sound and context clues to generate a rhyming word that “fits” in a rhyme phrase. To introduce this game, say several rhyme phrases aloud. Then, challenge your children to complete each rhyme by telling a rhyming word that “fits” in the sentence. Adams et al. include a wonderful list of rhyme phrases to help get you started:

A **cat** wearing a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (hat)

A **mouse** that lives in a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (house)

A **moose** with a tooth that is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (loose)

A **pig** that is dancing a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (jig)

Some **kittens** wearing some \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (mittens)

A **sheep** that is sound \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (asleep)

An **owl** drying off with a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (towel)

A **bear** with long, brown \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (hair)

A **bug** crawled under the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (rug)

An **ape** that is eating a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (grape)

A **goat** that is sailing a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (boat)

A **duck** that is driving a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (truck)

A **guy** who is swatting a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (fly)

A **bee** with a hive in the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (tree)

On the **swing**, I like to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (sing).

We drove **far** in our \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (car).

Hold the **candle** by the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (handle).

Smell the **rose** with your \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (nose).

Write the numbers one to **ten** with a pencil or a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (pen).

Dancing, dancing, cross the **floor**, keep on dancing out the

\_\_\_\_\_\_ (door).

Airplanes **fly** up in the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (sky).

*If You’re Rhyming and You Know It* (Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler, 1998)

You can play variations of the above game by inventing new rhymes and singing them to the tune of “If You’re Happy and You Know It:”

Did you ever see a (bear) in a (chair)?

Did you ever see a (bear) in a (chair)?

No I never, no I never, no I never, no I never,

No I never saw a (bear) in a (chair).

*Rhyme Blending* (Callaway, 1997)

This is a rhyming game that can be played anywhere. The challenge is for your child to identify the rhyming word you suggest—the trick is in the way you say the word. You will be saying (segmenting) the beginning sound of the word apart from the rest of the word. In order to guess the word, your child must listen to the two chunks of the word and blend them together to tell the word. You might say, “I can rhyme a word with /-at/ that begins with /f/ (remember—you’re saying the sound *fffff*, not the name of the letter “f”). Can you tell me what it is?” You may have to repeat the word chunks for your child to hear them in order: /f/-/at/, to help him generate the word *fat*. You would then continue saying words that rhyme with the /-at/ word chunk, pointing out along the way that, “Rhyming words always have the same ending sound. *Rat* and *sat* rhyme because they both end with /-at/, but they start with a different beginning sound.” Callaway provides several rhyming patterns (teachers often refer to these as word families) to start with:

[s, f, m, r] /-at/

[z, l, r, sh] /-ip/

[f, m, r, v] /-an/

[f, m, n, s, h] /-eat/

[s, v, m, n] /-et/

[l, r, s] /-ock/

[s, l, th, t] /-ick/

[l, r, s, p] /-ay/

[m, s, b, t] /-ee/

[f, n, g, s] /-ame/

[f, c, v, p] /-an/

[b, f, r, l] /-ed/

[b, n, w, r] /-ag/

[k, l, p, br] /-ick/

[b, c, f, t] /-all/

[b, s, f, sh] /-ell/

[d, f, m, sh] /-ine/

[b, j, qu, t] /-ack/

*Picture Sort—Beginning and Ending Sounds* (Callaway, 1997)

This game involves some preparation but provides the perfect use for old magazines or all the catalogs that clog our mailboxes. Cut out pictures of items from magazines or catalogs and glue them on 3 x 5 index cards (car, cat, doll, elephant, dog, blocks, swing, slide, etc.). Try to have several pictures of items that begin with the same sound. Have children sort all of the items that have the same beginning sound, encouraging them to name the item out loud, emphasizing the beginning sound. For example, the picture cards for *cookie*, *cat*, *cup*, *cake*, and *kangaroo* would all be sorted in the same pile because they all have the same beginning sound, /k/. You can continue to add picture cards to your collection. Once children easily sort by beginning sound, you can vary the game by asking them to sort the pictures into piles that have the same *ending* sound. In this case, picture cards for frog, *dog*, *bag*, *wig*, and *pig* could be sorted into the same pile.

*I Spy—Segmenting and Blending by Phoneme* (Yopp, 1999)

Yopp (1999) suggests playing I Spy in the following manner to develop the segmenting and blending skills of phonemic awareness: say to your child, “I spy something on the street (or in the room—wherever you are). I’m going to tell you what it is, but I’ll say it in a silly way. Can you guess what I spy? It is a /j/-/ee/-/p/” (remember, always say the **sounds** in the word, **not the letters** of the word). When you play I Spy this way, you are *segmenting* the word into its sounds, while your child is listening carefully to the sounds and *blending* those sounds together to reconstruct the word. Both skills go hand in hand and are crucial for beginning readers. After your child gets really good at this version, vary the format and see if she will segment the clue word for you to blend. Please note: segmenting and blending are easiest for beginners if you use words with only two or three individual sounds. You can always work up to words with four or more sounds, such as /c/-/l/-/o/-/k/ (*clock*). Below is a list of words that are fairly easy to segment and blend:

ape cheese moose soap bean

desk pan stool book dog

pea stump bow dress pen

tie bread eel phone train

brick glass shoe truck broom

ice skate

*Sound Snacks—Phoneme Placement Identification* (Callaway, 1997)

This tasty game encourages children to pay attention to the specific sound at the beginning or end of a word and tell where that sound occurs in the word. Place two paper cups on a table next to a bowl of peanuts, raisins, M & Ms, or whatever snack you want to have. Label one cup “B” for “beginning” and the other “E” for “ending.” Ask the child to identify the beginning or ending sounds in words you say by placing one piece of the snack in the correct cup. For instance, you might ask, “Where is the /t/ sound in the word *wet*? Do you hear it at the beginning of *wet* or the end of *wet*? ” It is important to emphasize the target sound as you say the word (we**t**), and to ask the question both ways, as in the example. The child would then tell you that the /t/ sound is at the end of wet and put a piece of the snack in the cup labeled “E.” The child may eat the snack if she puts it in the right cup. Some words like *pop* or *treat* will allow children to put a treat in both cups, and eat more than one treat at a time. They’ll love that!

**References**

Adams, M. J., Foorman, B. R., Lundberg I., & Beeler, T. (1998). Phonemic awareness in young children: A classroom curriculum. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

Bishop, A., Yopp, R. H., & Yopp, H. K. (2000). Ready for reading: A handbook for parents of preschoolers. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Blevins, W. (1997). Phonemic awareness activities for early reading success. New York: Scholastic.

Callaway, J. (1997). Phonemic awareness—what is it? Retrieved December 13, 2000, from <http://www.mother.com/~callaway/tarika/phonawar.html>

Opitz, M. (1998). Children’s books to develop phonemic awareness—for you and parents, too. The Reading Teacher, 51, 526-528.

Yopp, H. K. (1992). Developing phonemic awareness in young children. The Reading Teacher, 45, 696-703.

Yopp, H. K. (1999). Phonemic awareness: Frequently asked questions. The California Reader, 32, 21-27.

Yopp, H. K., & Yopp, R. H. (2000). Supporting phonemic awareness development in the classroom. The Reading Teacher, 54, 130-143.

**Additional Resources**

Bray, B.A. (2010). *Early childhood phonemic awareness activities.* Huntington Beach, CA: Shell Education.

Scott, V. G. (2009). *Phonemic awareness: Ready-to-use lessons, activities, and games, 2nd ed.*  Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.