Phonological Awareness:
An Instructional and Practical Guide for Use in the Kindergarten Classroom
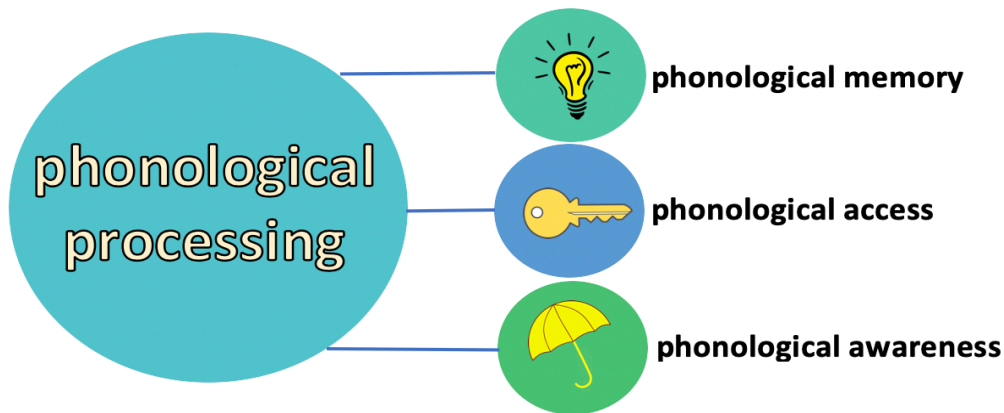
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Introduction

One of the strongest predictors of a child's future reading success is their phonological awareness skills at the end of kindergarten. In a stimulating classroom setting, phonological awareness appears to come quite easily for some children while others require more explicit phonological awareness instruction.

Teachers play a critical role in facilitating the acquisition of young students' pre-reading and reading skills, which develop as children expand their phonological processing abilities through exposure to a variety spoken and written input. This guide provides information on the following areas:

phonological memory	
phonological access	
phonological awareness	

phonological processing

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Phonological processing	The mechanism behind how a person is able to use the sounds (i.e. phonemes) of their language to process the language in spoken and written forms.
Phonological memory	The ability to hold speech sound information in the memory readily available to be manipulated during tasks such as speaking or reading.
Phonological access	The ability to efficiently recall phonological codes from memory.
Phonological awareness	A person's sensitivity to the sound structure (i.e. words, syllables, and phonemes) of their spoken language.

Phonological or Phonemic Awareness?

Δ Phonological awareness can be considered the ability to listen inside a word. It is the skill of having a sensitivity or explicit awareness of and ability to manipulate the phonological structures within words.

Δ Phonemic awareness is **the most complex or advanced part** of a part of phonological awareness. It refers to a person's knowledge of words at the level **of individual sounds** (phonemes).

Δ Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify and manipulate individual sounds in spoken words.

Δ Students' **reading success is correlated with phonemic awareness ability**. When a student achieves phonemic awareness, he or she will be able to identify the first, final, and middle sounds in words.

Δ They will also be able to segment sounds (e.g. 'cat' is made of the sounds 'c'-'a'-'t') and blend sounds (e.g. the sounds 'd'-'o'-'g' make the word 'dog').

What About Phonics?

Δ Phonics involves the relationship between sounds and written symbols – understanding the **sound-letter connection**.

Δ Phonological awareness and phonics skills are used together for successful reading and writing.
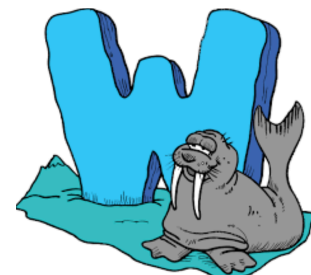
How does Phonological Awareness Develop?

Δ As children develop their phonological awareness skills, they become **increasingly sensitive to smaller and smaller word part**s or structures and learn how to manipulate these structures with varying skills requiring increasing complexity.

Δ Phonological awareness can be organized based on the **structural level** (i.e. word level, syllable level, phoneme level) as well as the **process** by which a child can manipulate the word, syllable, or phoneme (e.g. rhyming, segmentation, isolation, deletion, substitution, blending).

Δ Children develop these phonological and phonemic awareness skills along a **continuum of complexity**, reflected by the table below.
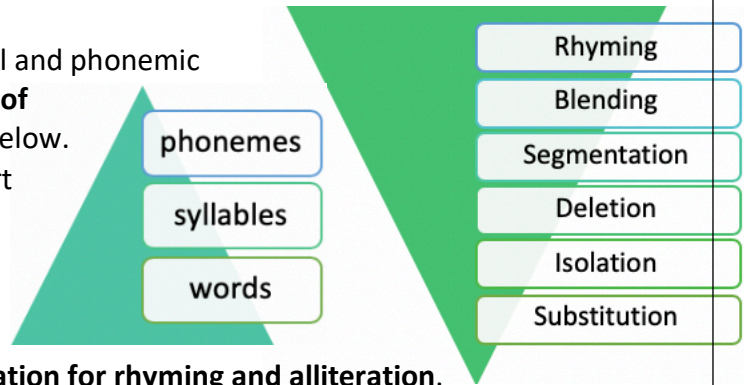
Δ **Around the age of two** children start to show some awareness of the sounds of their language.

Δ Children show their earliest phonological awareness abilities when they demonstrate an **appreciation for rhyming and alliteration**.

phonemes

syllables

words

Rhyming

Blending

Segmentation

Deletion

Isolation

Substitution

Δ Children first learn to detect and manipulate words before they can detect or manipulate syllables, and individual phonemes are the most challenging parts of words for children manipulate.

Δ Furthermore, before children can manipulate sounds within words, they learn to detect differences between similar- and dissimilar-sounding words.

Δ Blending sounds together to form words is a skill that precedes segmenting phonological information of the same complexity.

Δ It is important to note that learning **phonological awareness skills do not occur in developmental stages**, rather, children continue to refine and solidify earlier phonological awareness skills as they to learn the more complex skills phonemic awareness skills.

Δ As children continue to grow, it can be challenging for them to acquire the more complex phonemic awareness skills that follow phonological awareness development.

Δ Considering that pho**nemic awareness skills associate most critically with students' reading success on entering school** and throughout it, children benefit greatly from **explicit instruction** for both phonological and phonemic awareness development.

Δ Children more successfully read and write words when they have a firm understanding that **words can be segmented into individual sounds** and that these **sounds can be blended into words**.

Δ The following table illustrates and exemplifies the increasing levels of complexity of each phonological skill at various levels of word structure.

Continuum of Phonological and Phonemic Skill Complexity

less complex → COMPLEXITY → more complex		
WORD AWARENESS	**SYLLABLE AWARENESS**	**PHONEME AWARENESS**
		Isolation What is the first/last/middle sound in *fan*?
Sentence Segmentation How many words do you hear in this sentence?		**Identification** Which word has the same first sound as *car*?
		Categorization Which word does not belong? *bus, ball, house*?
Blending Listen as I say two small words: *rain … bow*. Put the two words together to make a bigger word.	**Blending** Put these word parts together to make a whole word: *rock…et*.	**Blending** I'm going to say a word slowly. What word am I saying b - i - g?
Segmentation Clap the word parts in *rainbow*. How many times did you clap?	**Segmentation** Clap the word parts in *rocket*.	**Segmentation** How many sounds in *big*? Say the sounds in *big*.
Deletion Say *rainbow*. Now say *rainbow* without the *bow*.	**Deletion** Say *pepper*. Now say *pepper* without the *er*.	**Deletion** Say *spark*. Now say *spark* without the *s*.
		Addition Say *park*. Now add *s* to the beginning of *park*.
		Substitution The word is *mug*. Change *m* to *r*. What is the new word?

Assessing Phonological Awareness Skills
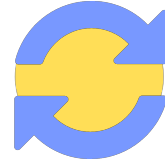
Δ Students' phonological awareness skills are typically assessed **throughout kindergarten and first grade**.

Δ It is during this period of development that children usually learn to segment words into individual phonemes.

Δ The purposes for assessing phonological awareness skills are to identifying students at **risk of reading acquisition challenges** and to monitor students' **progress of phonological awareness** who participate in explicit phonological awareness instruction.

Δ Teachers may carry out **informal assessment** of students' phonological awareness skills by having asking students to complete tasks pertaining to each level of complexity outlined in the table above.

Δ Options for **formal assessment** of phonological skills include the Phonological Awareness Test-2 Normative Update (PAT-2: NU), the Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processes (CTOPP), or the Pre-Literacy Skills Screening (PLSS).

Phonological Awareness Instruction

Δ There is a **two-way road between learning to read and developing phonological awareness skills**: phonological awareness instruction benefits reading development and early reading instruction, which tends to focus on letter-sound correspondence, benefits skills in phonological awareness.

Δ A strategy that strong readers use to decode and spell unfamiliar words is to search for **letter patterns**.

Δ This enables the reader to **chunk together familiar patterns and readable parts of words** for more efficient and effective reading and spelling.

Δ The ability to **look inside words** and analyze the syllables and phonemes is based on strong phonological and phonemic awareness skills.

Δ Phonological awareness instruction should **follow the continuum of complexity** in the table above.

Phonological Awareness Instruction Considerations

Δ Model each phonological or phonemic awareness activity as it is introduced.

Δ Introduce and practice larger units (words) before moving on to smaller units (syllables and phonemes).

Δ Teach easier phonological awareness tasks (e.g. rhyming) before more complex phonemic awareness tasks (e.g. blending and segmentation).

Δ Consonant sounds are easier than vowel sounds.

Δ Words with single consonants (e.g. pin) are easier to manipulate than words with consonant clusters (e.g. spin).

Δ Continuous sounds (e.g. f, v, s, z, th, sh, m, n, r, l, w) are easier than non-continuous sounds (e.g. p, b, t, d, k, g, ch, j).

HELPFUL TIPS

Quick Activities for Phonological Awareness Exercises

Δ What follows is a selection of three or four brief phonological awareness activities for six phonological awareness skills.

Δ These activities can be integrated into or between planned classroom activities. The activities can be modified for students at various points in their phonological awareness development and to fit relevant topics covered in the classroom

Rhyming
Blending
Segmentation
Deletion
Isolation
Substitution

W Word
S Syllable
P Phoneme
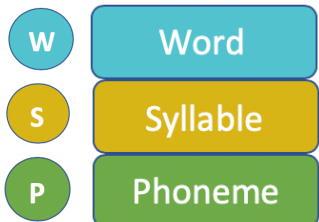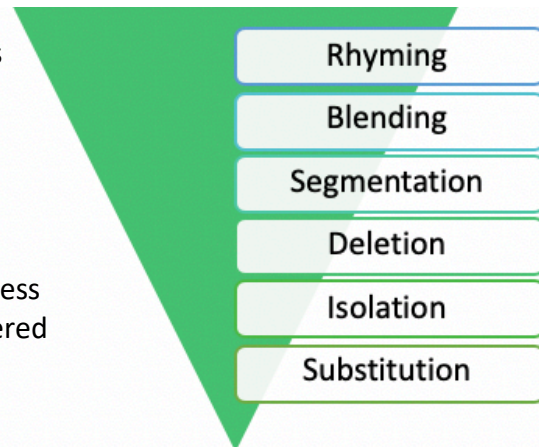
Δ While some activities target a single level (i.e. word, syllable, or phoneme level), others may be modified to target various levels, as indicated next to each activity.

Quick and Easy Phonological Awareness Activities

RHYMING

Odd Word Out

Let the students know that they will be listening for the "odd word out" in groups of words that rhyme (e.g. man, can, fan, pan, book). For students struggling with this task, provide word cards that they can look at for support. For students excelling at this task, ask them to generate two new rhyming words for the odd word out (e.g. look & cook).

Rhyming Riddles

Come up with simple riddles or poems and go over them with the students. Next, let the students fill in the rhyming word after you start the riddles or poem (e.g. "The black cat is very _____ (fat)" or "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a big _____ (fall)". Finding a word that rhymes is challenging for students, repeat the riddle or poem and give the first sound of the rhyme (e.g. "The black cat is very f___").

I Spy

Play a game of I Spy using items around the room that rhyme (e.g. "I spy something that rhymes with four…" "door!"). If students are doing well at this game, ask them to take a turn spying a rhyming object. Allow students to use made up words during their turns (e.g. "I spy something that rhymes with lacket"… "Jacket!"). It is alright for children to make up non-words that rhyme since their vocabularies are still developing and they are correctly completing the phonological awareness task regardless.

Scavenger hunt

Create a list of pairs of rhyming words where at least one of the words is a concrete noun (e.g. ball-fall, hat-bat, sock-rock). Hide objects or pictures that correspond to one of the words in the rhyming pair around the classroom (i.e. hide a [picture of a] ball, hat, and sock). You may split the students into teams or groups. Tell the students they will listen to you say a word and will then have to find an object or picture that rhymes with that word and then read out one word at a time or one word for each group.

BLENDING

Compound word picture-matching

This activity engages students in blending together compound words, the simplest of the blending tasks. Create a list of various compound words (e.g. snowman, dog house, toothbrush, etc.). Print images of these compound words and pictures for the words making up the compound word (e.g. for 'snowman', find an image of a snowman, of snow, and of a man). Put the smaller words (i.e. 'snow' and 'man') around the carpet. Ask students to sit in a circle around the smaller words. Give pairs of students each a compound word picture. Take turns asking each pair of students to say what their picture is and then to find the two smaller words that create their compound word.

W

Blending in Songs

Choose several songs, chants or rhymes that are familiar to your students. While engaging your students with the songs, present some of the familiar words syllable by syllable (segmented; i.e. "rock…et", "cat…er…pi…lar"). Have them guess what the word may be. Start with words with words with two or three syllables as the students practice their blending skills before moving on to longer words up to five sounds. This activity can also target phoneme blending (e.g. "c…a…t"

S **P**

Word Detective

Tell your students that you will say some words to them in a funny way, and they will have to figure out what the words are. Choose words that are familiar to students, such as common classroom objects or student names, with up to five sounds. When saying the words, segment them into individual sounds without adding 'uh' (e.g. 'g' not 'guh'). When students accurately determine the word, provide a segmented model once again and blend it together.

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SEGMENTATION

Shape Hopping

In this activity, students hop from shape to shape on the floor as they segment sentences or words. Find mats with various shapes or colours and lay them out over the floor. Come up with several simple sentences with words that are all one syllable (e.g. "Pat has three big dogs") and demonstrate how to hop from shape to shape for each individual word. To increase the difficulty, create sentences containing words with two or three syllables (e.g. "Abigail has a pretty green dress"). Ensure the students hop once for each word and not for each syllable. This activity can be modified to target segmentation at the syllable level (hop for every syllable) or phoneme level (hop for every phoneme).

Word Counters

Provide your students with objects (blocks, marbles, pennies, etc.) Ask your students to listen carefully as you read out various sentences and move one item into a bucket or across the table for each word you read. Start with single-syllable words before moving onto multisyllabic words (ensure they are moving the item for every word and not every syllable!). This activity can be modified for compound word segmentation (e.g. the word 'snowman' is made up of 'snow' and 'man'), syllable segmentation (e.g. the word 'table' is made up of 'ta' and 'ble'), and even phoneme segmentation (e.g. the word 'cat' is made up of the sounds c-a-t).

Word Counting Snakes and Ladders

Provide your students with printouts of Snakes and Ladders game board.
Tell your students that for every word they hear, they will move one space. For example, if the sentence is "The bird ate the food" they would move five spaces. Carry out the game of Word Counting Snakes and Ladders until the group beats the game! This activity may also be modified to target segmentation at the syllable and phoneme levels as well.

Body Tapping Game

This activity can help students to determine how many syllables make up a word that they hear by tapping out each syllable on a body part. Ask students to stretch their arm out and tap their body in order from fingertips, wrist, inside elbow, shoulder, and nose depending on how many syllables a word has. For example, if the teacher says the word "strawberry" the students should tap their fingertips, followed by their wrist and inside elbow. You may play this game at the phoneme level as well (e.g. three taps for 'p-a-n').

DELETION

Word Take-Aways

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In this activity, the teacher will ask a student to say a word, and then to figure out what the new word is after part of it is taken away. For example, the teacher will say, "Say the word *blueberry*. Now say it again but don't say *blue*." Start with compound words (e.g. snowflake, rainbow, airplane, rainboot, etc.). Once the students are comfortable here, move on to taking away syllables from words with two to four syllables (e.g. "Say *umbrella*. Now say it again but don't say *um-*.") Start with deleting initial syllables before practicing deleting final syllables.

Word Match Ups

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In this activity, your students will match words with corresponding word parts that have a sound missing. For example, they can match *at* with *cat*, *arm* with *farm*, etc. Ask the students how the words are similar and how they differ and have them identify which letter is missing. This provides a good opportunity to discuss what happens when a sound is taken away, or deleted. This phonemic awareness task can be challenging for some students, so providing them with the written words can be supportive.

Block Take-Aways

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Deleting individual phonemes is the trickiest phonemic awareness task of all the deletion tasks. Show your students how they can use blocks or similar objects to "spell" simple words (e.g. *pig*, *fan*, *gum*, etc.) by touching a different block as each sound in the word is said. Your students can practice phoneme deletion by physically removing a block or object from the word. Ensure that they remove the first block when deleting the first sound and make sure the students say the word out loud first and then again once they have removed a sound. Start with beginning sounds before moving on to end or middle sounds.

ISOLATION

Sound Matching

This activity requires students to listen to several familiar words in order to determine which sounds are similar within the words. This activity can be easily done with student names. For example, chose two or three students in the class whose names start with the same sound (George, Julia, and Jane). Ask the students what the matching sound is in the name. Be sure to point out matching sounds and not matching letters! Each day name a group of different students and ask them what the matching sound is. For an added challenge, ask students to think of one more word starting with that same sound.

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Guess the Sound

Tell your students you want them to guess which sound is the same in a group of words you say to them (e.g. carrot, kitten, caramel). The students will repeat the words and then determine the sound in common. This activity is easiest when all words start with the same sound.

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Dog Visual

The concept of beginning and end sounds in words may be challenging for many students at this level. They may benefit from having a visual representation of the beginning, middle, and end of a word. For example, this could be done with an image of a dog where the dog's head, body and tail represent the beginning, middle, and end sounds of a word, respectively. Start with words with three phonemes (sounds) such as *dog*, *cat*, *hat*, *man*, or *sun*, and avoid consonant clusters such as in _glove_ and _hand_. Vowels are much harder for young students to hear, so many children will have difficulty listening for the middle sound.

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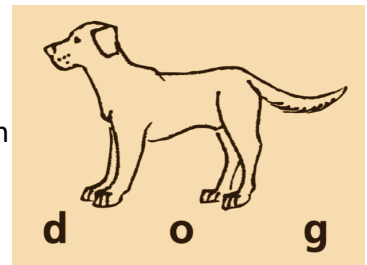
Listening for Sounds

Ask your students to listen for particular target sounds as you read familiar lists of words, sentences, a poem, song or story to them. Their job is to raise their hand each time they hear the target sound. It may be helpful to model or demonstrate this task to familiarize the students with the task before starting. Sounds at the start of words will be easier than sounds at the end or middle of words, and consonants will be easier for children to detect than vowel sounds.

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SUBSTITUTION

Song or Story Substitution

You can introduce the concept of substitution to your students by teaching sounds that make use of alliteration and sound substitution, such as "Willoughby Wallaby Woo" or "Oo-pples and Boo-noo-noos". Students find these activities entertaining and engaging. Take it up a notch by reading a familiar or favourite story but change all the first sounds to the same sound (e.g. "*Mary had a little lamb*" becomes "*Mary mad ma mittle mamb*"). Let the students take a turn making a silly sentence with all the same initial sounds.

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Block Substitutions

Substituting a sound in a word for another sound is another challenging phonemic awareness task. Students will need a lot of modelling from the teacher and a lot of supported practice before they can do substitution by themselves. In this activity, show your students how they can use blocks or similar objects to "spell" simple words such as *pig*, *fan*, or *gum* by touching a different block as each sound in the word is said. For example, as you present the word *pig*, segment the word and touch each block as you say each sound. Then say the new word, *dig*, and ask the students to guess which sound changed and to switch out the appropriate block (i.e. the initial block) with a new block. Continue to switch sounds to create new words (e.g. *dig* to *dip*, *dip* to *tip*, *tip* to *Tim*, etc.). Beginning sounds will be easier for children than sounds at the end or middle of words.

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Letter Switching

Ask your students to listen carefully to a word you say, then model how you can change the first sound to create a new word. For example, you can say the word *fat* and change *f* for *c* to make the word *cat*. Ask your students what sound changed to make the new word? Or ask them to say *rope*, and then ask what word they would have if they changed the *r* sound to an *s* sound. Be sure to talk about sounds as opposed to the letters. As this is an oral language task, the spelling makes no difference (soap, rope). Start with initial sound substitutions before trying final sounds.

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Phonological Awareness Handouts for Parents

Δ The following section contains individual handouts for teachers to give to parents if appropriate.

Δ The handouts containing information on the following six phonological awareness skills:
  o Rhyming
  o Blending
  o Segmentation
  o Deletion
  o Isolation
  o Substitution

Δ The handouts describe each skill, importance of the skill in the development of their child's reading skills, and ideas for home activities to practice each skill.

Rhyme Time

What is rhyming?

A rhyme is a repetition of similar sounds in two or more words, most often at the end of words, like: cat-hat, head-bed, oak-poke

Why is rhyming important?

Rhyming is a skill children acquire as they develop their phonological awareness skills. Phonological awareness is the ability to recognize and work with sounds in language. It forms the foundation for reading. There are three stages when learning to rhyme:

1 **Hearing Rhymes**: Child gets used to hearing and repeating rhyme
2 **Recognizing Rhymes**: Child can identify two words at a time
3 **Producing Rhymes**: Child can think of a word that rhymes with another word
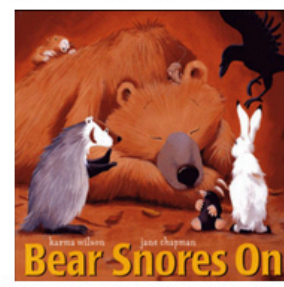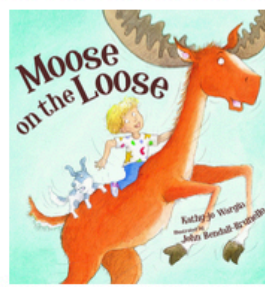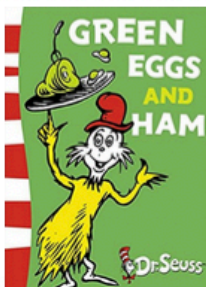
Rhyming activities at home:

Nursery rhymes
Humpty Dumpty
Jack and Jill
Itsy Bitsy Spider

I Spy
"I spy something that rhymes with duck!"

Rhyming books
Green Eggs and Ham
The Hungry Thing
Moose on the Loose
Bear Snores On

BLENDING

What is blending?

Blending is a phonological awareness skill that involves putting individual sounds or syllables together to make words. Think of it as the opposite of segmentation.

Why is blending important?

When learning to read, children must understand that the letters on a page correspond to certain sounds. Once they can match those letters to the appropriate sounds, they then learn blend the sounds together in order to read the word. Blending is a very important skill children use as they learn to read efficiently.

c-a-t

cat

w-i-n

win

Blending activity ideas for home:

Write words on the side walk in chalk. Have your child blend the sounds as he walks across each letter

Use letter beads to make bracelets or key chains to create and blend your child's favourite words

Write words on a paper and have your child "drive" over each letter as she says each sound

segmentation

What is segmentation?

After rhyming, the next step in phonological awareness is segmentation. This means recognizing that sentences break down into words, words break down into syllables, and syllables break down into sounds!

Why is segmentation important?

Understanding that spoken and written language can be broken down into smaller and smaller pieces is a very important skill for children as they develop their reading and writing abilities. There are three stages when learning to segment. Let's take a look:

Stage 1: sentences → words	the	kitten	loves	playing	fetch
Stage 2: words → syllables	hi	ppo	po	ta	mus
Stage 3: syllables → sounds	d	o	n	k	ey

Segmentation activities at home:

You can practice segmentation with your child anywhere! You can clap out the words to his favourite song or have her jump for each word in a poem. This works for segmenting words into syllables too! Clap, jump, snap, or splash along if help is needed.

bed

computer

motorcycle

Segmenting syllables into sounds can be done in the car ride to school, while reading a book, while playing an instrument, even while playing Lego! Feel free to get creative as you support your child in developing their literacy skills!

Deletion

What is deletion?

Deletion is a more complex phonological awareness skill that requires a child to take away part of a word, either a syllable or a sound, and then say what is left. For example:

Say "cupcake" without the "cake"? → cup!
Say "couch" without the "ch" → cow!

Why is deletion important?

Knowing what happens to words after a sound or syllable is deleted is an important skill for building the foundation for your child's reading abilities. Practicing deletion will make it easier for your child to understand that all words are made of sounds and syllables. This in turn will make it easier for your child when he or she comes across an unfamiliar word.

Deletion activities for home:

o Ask your child what his or her name would be without the first sound (e.g. Daniel would become Aniel).

o Read your child's favourite book and delete a sound or syllable from a known word. Ask what part is missing?

o Make silly words with your child: "*If I take away 't' from 'toilet, what silly word do we get? 'Oilet'!*"

o Read **Did you take the B from my _ook?**

TIPS

1. Start with **compound words** like rainbow, starfish, & sunflower before words like cookie, mouse, or beach
2. Start with deleting **syllables** before deleting **sounds**
3. Start with deletions at the **start** of the word before at the **end**

Did you take the **B** from my _ook?

Books That Drive Kids CRAZY!

Beck & Matt Stanton

ISOLATION

What is isolation?

Sound or phoneme isolation is a higher level phonological awareness skill that involves identifying:

1. Where a sound appears in a word (start, middle or end)	**e.g. Where is the 'n' sound in the word 'sun'?**
2. What sound appears in a given position	**e.g. What sound is at the start of the word banana?**

Why is isolation important?

Sound isolation is an important step in literacy and language development. Practicing sound isolation in various word positions will build your child's knowledge of sound-letter matching and improve his or her ability to manipulate sounds in words. Children learn to isolate sounds at the start of words first, then at the end of words, and finally sounds in the middle of words.

Isolation activities for home:

While reading, ask what sound lives at start/ middle/end of a word:

"What sound lives at the end of the word 'cup'?"

Sort toys and objects into sound baskets by sound positions:

"Put the toys ending with 's' in the s-ending box!"

Sound scavenger hunt: hide objects around the room and ask your child to find the objects beginning (or ending) with a particular sound.
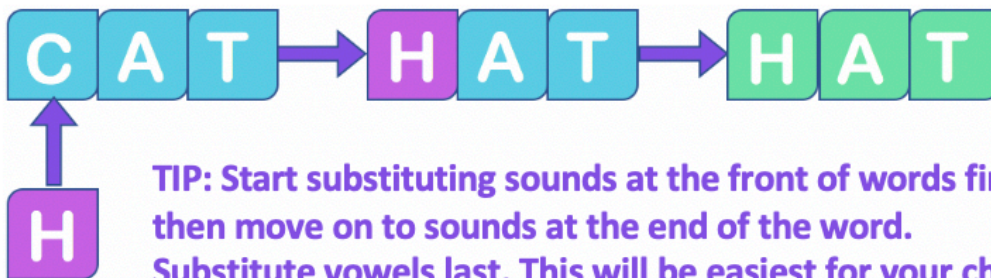
SUBSTITUTION

What is substitution?

Substitution is a phonemic awareness skill involving a child's ability to change a word into a new word by switching a letter.

Why is substitution important?

Phoneme substitution, or exchanging one sound for another in a word, is one way that children learn to manipulate sounds in words. Manipulating sounds in this way is a critical skill in learning new words and in reading development.

Substitution activities for home:

➢ Swap first letters of two names, toys, foods, to make silly new words: **k**iwi and **m**ango become **m**iwi and kango

➢ Play around with letter blocks, Scrabble tiles, Bananagrams tiles, or fridge magnets letters to make new words each day

TIP: Start substituting sounds at the front of words first, then move on to sounds at the end of the word. Substitute vowels last. This will be easiest for your child.

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