

Developing Phonological Awareness



Phonological awareness is the awareness of the sounds of speech that a person hears or makes. As children hear people talk to them and develop phonological awareness, they learn to break up the speech they hear into parts.

Phonological awareness involves the sounds of words that children *hear*, not the written symbols they see. Two other Big 5 skills, *Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing* and *Book Knowledge and Print Concepts*, focus on written symbols, that is, letters and words.

Infants and toddlers develop phonological awareness primarily by hearing and making sounds.

- ▶ Infants babble and practice the sounds of their language(s).
- ▶ Older infants and toddlers begin to make syllables and words.
- ▶ Adults provide infants and toddlers with fun and engaging sounds by talking, singing, playing, chanting, and reading to them.
- ▶ Adults and infants and toddlers often enjoy repeating sounds back and forth, making loud and soft sounds, and making each other laugh by using sounds.

As children gain more experience hearing speech, they become aware that:

- ▶ Speech is made up of words
- ▶ Words are made up of syllables
- ▶ Syllables are made up of individual sounds (phonemes)



Children develop phonological awareness at their own pace. Some children may develop these skills quickly and easily. Most children will require a lot repetition and practice.

Using familiar songs, chants, and words helps children develop phonological awareness. Once children have mastered a skill (they become experienced in rhyming, for example), more practice on that skill is not necessary. Instead, they can develop new skills, such as breaking words into syllables.

Small-group activities allow teachers to more easily hear each child make, use, and play with sounds. Small-group activities should be fun, engaging, and include positive feedback and modeling.

Types of Phonological Awareness in English

Phonological awareness develops in different ways in different children. Most children develop several types of phonological awareness at once. They may be learning how to recognize words and at the same time realize that some words rhyme.

There is no strict sequence for developing phonological awareness skills in English. However, some phonological awareness skills tend to be easier and develop sooner than others. They are listed here from typically earlier to later skills.

Word Awareness

Children gradually become aware that speech is made up of words. For example, beginning talkers may think of “all done” or “thank you” as single words. This is developmentally appropriate! As children develop more experience listening and talking, they learn “all” and “done” and “thank” and “you” are different words.

Rhyme Awareness

Many words share an ending sound, or “rhyme.” As children gain experience with English sounds, they realize that some words sound alike, or they rhyme. Many children enjoy pointing out, making, and creating rhymes. At this stage, children often want to read and reread their favorite rhyming books.

Some common English rhyming words:

- ▶ -an
 - ▶ can, ban, fan, tan
- ▶ -ing
 - ▶ sing, ding, ping, sling
- ▶ -ent
 - ▶ bent, sent, lent, tent



Syllable Awareness

English is a language in which words are made up of one or more syllables. Syllables are short groups of sounds. Children learn to break up words into their smaller sound (syllables) in preschool or kindergarten.

- ▶ Some words are one syllable
 - ▶ eat, sleep, one, can, laugh
- ▶ Some words are two syllables
 - ▶ eat-ing, sleep-y, Mar-ta, ap-ple
- ▶ Some words are three syllables
 - ▶ ba-na-na, di-no-saur, cam-er-a
- ▶ Some words are even longer
 - ▶ A-mer-i-ca, tel-e-vi-sion

Phonemic Awareness

A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound. Even syllables can be broken up into individual sounds, or phonemes. As children gain more experience with sound, they are able to identify, produce, and work with phonemes. Since most English letter sounds are a single phoneme, knowing phonemes helps children make and identify letter sounds. Children begin to develop this skill in late preschool, and they continue to refine it throughout kindergarten and first grade. Beginning-sound awareness is the first aspect of phonemic awareness that children develop. Many children learn the first sound in their own names: “Maria,” “Simon,” “Luci.” Children soon notice that other words begin with the same sound (alliteration), for example, “Maria,” “market,” “mittens.”

What Phonological Awareness looks like

Juanita

Eight-month-old Juanita falls asleep every evening as her father sings her a lullaby. Her mother chants to her when she bathes her. Through these experiences, Juanita is developing an awareness of sound and the meaning and comfort it conveys. When she goes to Early Head Start (EHS), she hears different songs with different sounds. Juanita adds to what she hears in EHS and builds on the phonological awareness she has developed at home.



Examples of one-letter phonemes in English		
A		A-pple
B	as in	B-all
C		C-ar

Examples of two-letter phonemes in English		
Th		Th-ick
Sh	as in	Sh-ell
Ch		Ch-in

Examples of two-phoneme words in English	
a-t	at
i-t	it
i-s	is
h-e	he
sh-e	she
i-ck	ick

Examples of three-phoneme words in English	
c-a-t	cat
b-i-t	bit
g-e-t	get
th-i-s	this
l-o-t	lot
s-i-ck	sick

Min

Min, who is 2 years and 10 months old, has an older sister who chants jump-rope rhymes, which Min repeats. He also hears rhymes in Spanish when his sister plays with Mireya next door: “Osito, osito, ¿puedes saltar? Ayúdame, ayúdame a contar.” Min is hearing rhymes in English and Spanish! When Min reads *The Little Engine That Could* with his home visitor, Min chants “I think I can! I think I can! I think I can!” All these experiences help build Min’s phonological awareness.

Ari and Jean

Four-year-olds Ari and Jean and their teacher, Kia, are matching the first sound of the names of the children in the class so that Ari and Jean can develop their awareness of the beginning sounds of words. The next day, Ari shares the first sounds of the names of his family members with his teacher. Kia notes that Ari is interested in developing his knowledge of alliteration and shares the book *Alligators All Around*, by Maurice Sendak, with Ari and a few of his classmates. Ari tells the children that his name begins with the same sound as “alligator”—and all the other words in the book’s title, too!

Alex

Five-year-old Alex is clapping out the syllables in very long dinosaur names. Alex is becoming aware that very long words are made up of smaller syllables, and he is learning how to break up those long words. He is becoming enthusiastic about reading!

At his Head Start center, Alex uses his skills of segmenting and blending sounds as well as using the context and pictures in books to identify the names of dinosaurs. When reading a book about dinosaurs, his teachers will stop reading and have Alex clap out the name of a dinosaur. They also support his interest by including the names of dinosaurs on the word wall and helping him write down the names of his favorite dinosaurs for his collection of special words.

Did you know that phonological awareness is about sounds, not print? You can babble, sing, chant, or rhyme just with your voice!



Children’s Books

Sendak, M. (1962). *Alligators all around: An alphabet*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.



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