



Target the Problem: Phonological and Phonemic Awareness

Phonological awareness is a broad skill that includes identifying and manipulating units of oral language – parts such as words, syllables, and onsets and rimes. Children who have phonological awareness are able to identify and make oral rhymes, can clap out the number of syllables in a word, and can recognize words with the same initial sounds like ‘money’ and ‘mother.’

Phonemic awareness refers to the specific ability to focus on and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words. Phonemes are the smallest units comprising spoken language. Phonemes combine to form syllables and words. For example, the word ‘mat’ has three phonemes: /m/ /a/ /t/. There are 44 phonemes in the English language, including sounds represented by letter combinations such as /th/. Acquiring phonemic awareness is important because it is the foundation for spelling and word recognition skills. Phonemic awareness is one of the best predictors of how well children will learn to read during the first two years of school instruction.

Students at risk for reading difficulty often have lower levels of phonological awareness and phonemic awareness than do their classmates. The good news is that phonemic awareness and phonological awareness can be developed through a number of activities. Read below for more information.



What the problem looks like

A kid’s perspective: What this feels like to me

Children will usually express their frustration and difficulties in a general way, with statements like “I hate reading!” or “This is stupid!”. But if they could, this is how kids might describe how difficulties with phonological or phonemic awareness affect their reading:

- I don’t know any words that rhyme with *cat*.
- What do you mean when you say, “What sounds are in the word *brush*?”
- I’m not sure how many syllables are in my name.

- I don't know what sounds are the same in *bit* and *hit*.

A parent's perspective: What I see at home

Here are some clues for parents that a child may have problems with phonological or phonemic awareness:

- She has difficulty thinking of rhyming words for a simple word like *cat* (such as *rat* or *bat*).
- She doesn't show interest in language play, word games, or rhyming.

A teacher's perspective: What I see in the classroom

Here are some clues for teachers that a student may have problems with phonological or phonemic awareness:

- She doesn't correctly complete blending activities; for example, put together sounds /k/ /i/ /ck/ to make the word *kick*.
- He doesn't correctly complete phoneme substitution activities; for example, change the /m/ in *mate* to /cr/ in order to make *crate*.
- He has a hard time telling how many syllables there are in the word *paper*.
- He has difficulty with rhyming, syllabication, or spelling a new word by its sound.



How to help

With the help of parents and teachers, kids can learn strategies to cope with phonological and/or phonemic awareness problems that affect his or her reading. Below are some tips and specific things to do.

What kids can do to help themselves

- Be willing to play word and sounds games with parents or teachers.
- Be patient with learning new information related to words and sounds. Giving the ears a workout is difficult!
- Practice hearing the individual sounds in words. It may help to use a plastic chip as a counter for each sound you hear in a word.
- Be willing to practice writing. This will give you a chance to match sounds with letters.

What parents can do to help at home

- Check with your child’s teacher or principal to make sure the school’s reading program teaches phonological, phonemic awareness, and phonics skills.
- If your child is past the ages at which phonemic awareness and phonological skills are taught class-wide (usually kindergarten to first or second grade), make sure he or she is receiving one-on-one or small group instruction in these skills.
- Do activities to help your child build sound skills (make sure they are short and fun; avoid allowing your child to get frustrated):
 - Help your child think of a number of words that start with the /m/ or /ch/ sound, or other beginning sounds.
 - Make up silly sentences with words that begin with the same sound, such as “Nobody was nice to Nancy’s neighbor”.
 - Play simple rhyming or blending games with your child, such as taking turns coming up with words that rhyme (*go – no*) or blending simple words (*/d/, /o/, /g/ = dog*).
- Read books with rhymes. Teach your child rhymes, short poems, and songs.
- Practice the alphabet by pointing out letters wherever you see them and by reading alphabet books.
- Consider using computer software that focuses on developing phonological and phonemic awareness skills. Many of these programs use colorful graphics and animation that keep young children engaged and motivated.

What teachers can do to help at school

- Learn all about phonemes (there are more than 40 speech sounds that may not be obvious to fluent readers and speakers).
- Make sure the school’s reading program and other materials include skill-building in phonemes, especially in kindergarten and first grade (these skills do not come naturally, but must be taught).
- If children are past the age at which phonemic awareness and phonological skill-building are addressed (typically kindergarten through first or second grade), attend to these skills one-on-one or in a small group. Ask your school’s reading specialist for help finding a research-based supplemental or intervention program for students in need.
- Identify the precise phoneme awareness task on which you wish to focus and select developmentally appropriate activities for engaging children in the task. Activities should be fun and exciting – play with sounds, don’t drill them.
- Make sure your school’s reading program and other materials include systematic instruction in phonics.
- Consider teaching phonological and phonemic skills in small groups since students will likely

be at different levels of expertise. Remember that some students may need more reinforcement or instruction if they are past the grades at which phonics is addressed by a reading program (first through third grade).

Browse our phonological and phonemic awareness resource library

Learn more about building children's phonological and phonemic awareness skills through our articles, tips for parents, video, FAQs, and research briefs. Visit our

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