

CHAPTER 6 – Phonological awareness

Classroom activities

Research studies suggest that for most children a complete phonemic awareness program should take no more than around 20 hours in total (Cassano & Schickedanz 2015; Konza 2016; NICHD 2005). This could be made up of 10–15 minutes a day for the first two terms of kindergarten. Teaching phonics then consolidates phonemic skill development.

Phonemic awareness has a part to play in the preschool curriculum when children, although they may not be formally learning to read and write, are engaging in language play, rhyme and rhythm. In the preschool and early years of school, the challenge is to make awareness of phonemes engaging and interesting. Teaching activities for phonemic awareness are essential and it is important to find out which children need additional support. An evaluation of a range of early childhood phonemic awareness programs by Skibbe et al. (2016) found that the majority of curricula did not provide strategies for individualising instruction for children at different skill levels within the classroom. Some children fall through the cracks and have difficulty hearing and articulating sounds.

Phonemic awareness can be taught through playful activities such as rhymes, rhythms, songs and games, and through the language that children bring to school. Phonemic awareness *does not* have to be an additional program—it should be an integral part of the literacy program where teachers and children pay attention to the sounds of language alongside other literacy activities.

Many teachers support children to learn phonemic awareness by using pictures or images of objects or just the spoken word. If written letters or words are used, the child's attention is likely to go to the symbol rather than focusing on the auditory sound.

Rhymes and songs

Children enjoy chanting raps and jingles and noticing the words that rhyme. Traditional nursery rhymes can be used to talk about words that rhyme and words that begin with the same sound, and children can also clap the rhythm and clap the syllables in words. Raps, chants, advertising jingles and pop songs can be used in the same way to explore rhyming words, alliteration and phonemes (see Figure 6.9).

Figure 6.9 Rhymes and songs for phonological awareness

<p>Strong rhythm This Old Man Hickory Dickory Dock Humpty Dumpty To Market, To Market The Bear Went Over the Mountain Are You Sleeping? Down by the Station London Bridge is Falling Down This is the Way the Farmer Rides Ride a Cock Horse to Banbury Cross Mary Had a Little Lamb</p> <p>Body part Heads Shoulders Knees and Toes This Little Pig Went to Market If You're Happy and You Know It</p> <p>Finger plays Incy Wincy Spider Little Peter Rabbit One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Once I Caught a Fish Alive Open Shut Them Round and Round the Garden Where is Thumbkin?</p>	<p>Clapping rhymes Miss Mary Mac, Mac, Mac</p> <p>Action songs Grand Old Duke of York Here We Go Up, Up, Up A Sailor Went to Sea, Sea, Sea The Wheels on the Bus Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star Johnny Works With One Hammer</p> <p>Songs Three Blind Mice Row, Row, Row Your Boat Jack and Jill</p> <p>Lullaby Hush Little Baby</p> <p>Cumulative and subtractive Five Little Ducks There Were Ten in the Bed One Man Went to Mow...</p>
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Paying attention to words

Making different sounds and listening

Have children attend to and identify sounds you play on a music app or produce with the help of musical instruments. The children listen carefully, with their eyes closed, and raise their hands when they know what the sound is or where it comes from. You may want to use recordings of animal sounds or make sounds by clapping, closing the door, or using the pencil sharpener or the stapler. You could record some sounds at home (telephone, alarm clock, doorbell, footsteps, drips, cars, dogs, cats, birds).

It doesn't make sense

For this activity, you modify some well-known rhymes, riddles and stories by reversing, substituting and swapping words. The children are invited to listen carefully and identify the part that has changed. For example:

Twinkle, twinkle little bat
Three blind dogs
Humpty Dumpty sat on a car

Whisper your name

Have one child become the listening child. Tell that child the name of another child in the classroom, and then blindfold the listening child. All the other children should stand in a circle and whisper their own names. The listening child is guided around the circle, listening for the name of the child that was told to them. When they hear the selected name, the listening child acknowledges the child and they change roles.

Dramatise a story

Read a simple or familiar storybook to the children. After the reading, distribute some materials that refer to the story and help children dramatise what has been read. For example, after reading 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears', designate some space with chairs and a table to be the bears' house. Place three plates on the table. Encourage the children to use their own words, along with the book's dialogue, to elaborate on or extend the story.

Rhymes and alliteration

Four- and 5-year-olds love to recite rhymes and produce rhyming words. The ability to produce words that begin with the same initial sounds (alliteration) typically develops in older 4-year-olds and young 5-year-olds. The following activities are appropriate for children who are still developing rhyming skills.

Let's rhyme!

Invite children to produce words that rhyme with the words you present. Real or made-up words can be used. For example:

cat—hat	book—hook
car—far	face—lace
rose—hose	map—nap

Alliteration book

For this activity, the children think of things that start with the same sound and draw or find pictures to represent these objects. You can then create a book based on these drawings or pictures. There are many alphabet books available and these can be displayed for children to use as examples.

Ants on all apples
Brown bears bicycling
Crazy cats call coyotes

Classroom feast

Invite children to participate in the preparation of a classroom feast. Have them think of fruits, vegetables and other foods that start with the same sound as their names. These will be the 'foods' that they bring to the feast. For example, Sarah will bring soup, salad, celery and sandwiches. Mark will bring milk, macaroni and meatballs. Then have the children draw and colour the foods they will bring to the feast, collect the drawings and place them on paper plates at the table. Children find their seat at the table based on the 'food' served. After you finish the feast, you could staple the drawings together and create a class book entitled 'Our Feast'.

Can you rhyme?

Rhyming words can also be presented in sentences. Introduce this game by reading several rhyming phrases aloud, emphasising the rhyming words. Children should complete each rhyme aloud. For monitoring purposes, individual responses should be requested. For example:

A cat wearing a _____
A mouse that lives in a _____
A goose with a tooth that is _____
A pig that is dancing a _____
Some kittens wearing some _____

Rhyming poem

Write a popular rhyming classroom poem on chart paper, and share it with the class. After the children have heard it read aloud many times, ask them to find all the rhyming words. Write them on chart paper and display it in the room. Next, have children think of other rhyming words, and add these to the list. Children could take one of the rhyming lists and draw pictures next to it.

The ship is loaded with ...

Have the children sit in a circle, and make sure you have something to toss (e.g. a bean bag). To begin the game, say, *'The ship is loaded with cheese.'* Then toss the bean bag to someone else in the circle. This person must make a rhyme from the sentence. For example:

The ship is loaded with peas [fleas, trees, bees, keys]
The ship is loaded with logs [dogs, hogs, frogs]

Awareness of syllables

Hearing syllables

Hearing big chunks of sound is easier than discovering single sounds. Ask children to clap the parts they can hear in a few words they know well. Choose words of one and two syllables at first, and later three or four. Repeat this activity from time to time as opportunities arise.

Word box

Prepare a box with different objects or little toys for children to select, one at a time. Invite them to pick an object and then clap or pronounce the name of the object segmented into syllables. For example:

ba-na-na

pen-cil

rab-bit

cake

Make sure the objects you include have different numbers of syllables for added practice.

Pass the bucket

This activity is a variation of the word box activity. To add some variety to the work with the syllables, place the objects you have used before in a bucket (or you could use picture cards). Then ask the children to sit in a circle and pass the bucket around. You may want to have all children select an item from the bucket or you could do it randomly (for example, when the background music stops, like in musical chairs).

Each child who picks an object or card from the bucket has to segment the syllables in the name of the item. The other children then blend the spoken syllables to come up with the object's name. Then all the children clap the syllables in the word and/or sort the items into groups based on the number of syllables in the name.

Garden time

Mark the floor with masking tape to create three columns. Then place one, two and three sticky notes at the top of each column (these represent the number of syllables). You will need plastic fruits, vegetables and flowers (or you could use pictures). Ask the children to sort the items by syllables. For example, a carrot would be placed in the column with two syllables (two sticky notes). A plum would be placed in the one-syllable column and a potato would be placed in the three-syllable column. An alternative would be to use toys, different toy cars or other objects.

Clapping names

One way to teach syllable awareness is to start by clapping the syllables in the children's names. This is a good activity because it starts with something very familiar. Next, progress to clapping syllables with two- and three-syllable names of objects in the room.

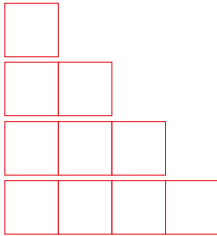
Identifying, segmenting and blending phonemes

Many of the following activities use pictures so that children listen to the sounds. Once phonics instruction begins, then letters are used. When children have developed the phonological concepts of rhyming, alliteration and syllable division, they will begin to understand that there are segments of sounds within syllables—called phonemes. Phonemes are important because they are the units of sound represented by letters. The following activities require children to identify initial and final phonemes and to segment and blend phonemes.

Picture sorting for initial and ending consonant sounds

The following activities (based on Elkonin 1973) can be undertaken to help children become aware of all the sounds in words. Once children are aware of the sounds in the spoken word, they can write them down, but initially it is important just to focus on the auditory nature of sounds in words. Use counters in the initial stages.

Elkonin boxes



Prepare a sheet of paper with one, two, three and four squares in rows. Make a series of cards with pictures or photographs of objects. Some teachers prefer to use actual objects such as a cup, ball, pen and so on.

Take a picture card and say the word very slowly so the sounds are separated but still one word: *c ... u ... p*. Ask the child to say the word slowly. You could use a mirror and ask the child to look at their lips and tongue as they say the word. Children put out counters in the appropriate boxes to indicate how many sounds they have heard.

Blending tasks

In blending tasks, the teacher can blend phonemes, for example, /m/ /a/ /p/ and the children then identify the word *map*. Blending phonemes to identify words is necessary for reading proficiency. In segmenting, the word *map* may be spoken and then the children segment the word into phonemes: /m/ /a/ /p/. Segmenting is necessary for spelling and writing. Blending and segmenting are reversible processes.

Picture sorts

Collect picture cards. Be sure to go over the pictures with the children so there won't be any confusion. Have children sort the pictures according to beginning, ending and, finally, middle sounds.

Picture closed sort

Use picture cards for this activity, or make it a digital activity. Draw three columns on a sheet of paper, and paste pictures of two objects with different beginning sounds at the top of the first two columns. Leave one column blank for pictures that don't fit. Have children sort through the picture cards for words that have the same beginning sound as the two pictures. Then put pictures with neither sound in the third column. Children can sort again for ending sounds.

Picture open sort

Ask children to use picture cards to sort where they see a pattern. Some children will sort for meaning, such as the concept of animals, while others will look for initial or ending consonants.

Guess what I'm thinking!

Challenge children by inviting them to guess words you are thinking of. Give them clues that refer to either the initial or the final sounds of the words as they try to guess. Stretch the sounds for emphasis, for example:

*'I'm thinking of something that begins with /m-m-m-m-/.
It's an animal with a long tail.'*

*'I'm thinking of something that begins with /t-t-t-t-/.
It is red and goes in a salad.'*

*'I'm thinking of something that ends with /f-f-f-f-f-f-/.
It has one syllable.'*

What sound?

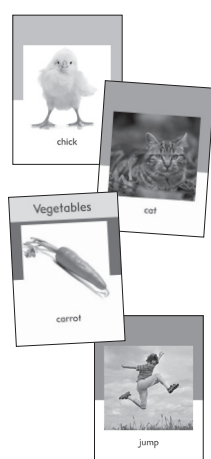
This game is played like Concentration. Use picture cards, and have children match pictures that begin with the same sound. If there is a match, the child keeps playing. When the child misses, a different child has a turn. Children can sort the cards based on initial sounds to begin with.

Letter-sound boxes

Put together a series of plastic containers with a picture attached on the outside. Next, assemble a collection of objects such as toy farm animals, zoo animals or other small objects. Children can place the objects in the relevant container by using the picture to identify objects that begin or end the same way. A check sheet can be provided.

Comparing beginning sounds 1

Read out pairs of words and ask children to compare them. Have the children nod their heads—'yes'—if the words begin with the same sound and shake their heads—'no'—if they do not begin with the same sound.



Comparing beginning sounds 2

Read out pairs of words and ask children to compare them. If the words begin with the same sound, ask children to nod or hold one finger up to indicate 'yes'. If the words do not begin with the same sound, ask them to shake their heads or hold two fingers up to indicate 'no'. Progress to comparing three words, but use pictures to relieve the load on memory.

carrots, cabbage
weed, gift
sick, chop
jump, jag
dip, talk

vase, bear
you, year
catch, cap
time, dance
road, rip

Comparing ending sounds

Ask children to compare the ending sounds in words, giving the thumbs-up signal if the words end in the same sound and the thumbs-down signal if the words do not end in the same sound. Again, start by comparing two words. Progress to comparing three words when children are successful with two words.

ship, soap	pass, pace
hat, pan	bug, take
itch, beach	tub, ripe
work, walk	build, paid
farm, barn	wash, reach

Comparing middle sounds

Ask children to compare the middle sounds in words. Start again by comparing two sounds. Tell children that you are going to say some words, and they should listen to the middle sound in each word. You could tell them, for example, that the words will either have the /a/ sound or the /i/ sound. Again, they use signals to indicate whether the sounds are the same or different.

cat, rack
tan, drip
pin, hip
ran, lap
it, flip

Blending

Phoneme blending is a very important skill. Take the CVC word *cat* and explain that the sounds can be blended /ccaatt/, similarly with *dog* /dddooogg/. When teaching phoneme blending, use the clear sound and do not add other sounds; for example, /c/ /a/ /t/ not /cuh/ /a/ /tuh/. Once CVC words are blended then other CCVC and CVCC words such as *ship* can be blended.

Blending words

This activity should be done as a circle game. Have children sit in a circle on the floor and listen carefully as you say words in parts. Then ask: 'What word did I make?' Increase the difficulty of the words as the children become more proficient with the task. Remember that this is an auditory activity.

d-o-g	b-a-ke	p-aw
sh-e	d-i-sh	w-a-sh
b-all	b-oy	sh-o-p
m-ou-se	c-a-m-p	l-ea-f

Blending phonemes with pictures

Find pictures of three-phoneme words and cut them into three parts. Ask children to move one part of the picture at a time as they say a phoneme. They can then put all the parts of the picture together to say the word. Some examples of pictures that you can use are:

fish	moon	dog
leaf	ship	cat
jet	pick	fork

Say the sounds

Select different objects or use picture cards. Ask the children to name the items first so they are clear about what they represent. Then have them produce the words, one sound at a time. This is a good activity to use with the 'Move It—Say It' strategy. Children move chips or counters when they say a sound. Be sure to select appropriate cards that will represent words of increasing difficulty in terms of the number of phonemes they contain. For example, start with two- and three-phoneme words until the children are successful.

Move from pictures to just saying the words. Ask children to move their chips for each sound. Below is a list of words and the number of sounds. Be sure to switch between two, three and four sounds so children are not used to one phoneme. Remember—this is an auditory activity.

size	[3]	choose	[3]	flat	[4]	risk	[4]
shave	[3]	each	[2]	best	[4]	fox	[3]
odd	[2]	miss	[3]	ski	[3]	sleep	[4]
oat	[2]	nice	[3]	cats	[4]	sat	[3]
shop	[3]	night	[3]	pump	[4]	shoot	[3]

Detecting the initial sound

This is a good activity to play in a circle as a game. Have the children listen as you say a word. Then ask them to repeat it. Next, have the children say the word without the beginning sound. For example, say, 'lime', then say, 'Now say lime without the /l/. ' ['ime'] Say, 'fish', then say, 'Now say fish without the /f/. ' ['ish'] Remember to say the sounds and not the letters. Play this game many times, until the children are comfortable with dropping the beginning sounds. As they become more proficient, proceed to more challenging words. Some examples are as follows:

Cake without the /c/	ake	List without the /l/	ist
Meet without the /m/	eet	Shin without the /sh/	in
Song without the /s/	ong	Shrub without the /sh/	rub
Ball without the /b/	all	Thread without the /th/	read
But without the /b/	ut	Mask without the /m/	ask

Detecting the final sound

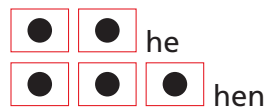
Next, play the game and ask the children to drop the ending sound. For example, say 'sleep', then say: 'Now say sleep without the /p/.' ['slee']. Some examples are as follows:

Meat without the /t/	me	Bike without the /k/	bye
Rake without the /k/	ray	Pave without the /v/	pay
Card without the /d/	car	Lake without the /k/	lay
Time without the /m/	tie	Soak without the /k/	so
Felt without the /t/	fell	Boat without the /t/	bow

Other phonemic awareness tasks

Phoneme segmentation tasks

This activity extends on the earlier Elkonin boxes. In phoneme segmentation tasks a child can be given a wooden stick and asked to tap out the number of phonemes heard in a one-syllable word. For example, given the word *mat*, the child should tap three times, once for each phoneme /m/ /a/ /t/. The Russian psychologist Elkonin developed a similar task (1973) where the children were asked to lay out counters in boxes to represent each phoneme in a word spoken by the teacher. For example, they would lay out two counters for the word *he* for the two phonemes heard and three counters for the word *hen* for the three phonemes heard when the word is spoken.



The Elkonin task generates a visual and discussable record of each child's effort to work out the sounds in words. Some children have problems with hearing phonemes in words like *cat* as the phonemes run together, and it seems that there is no way of knowing that *cat* has three phonemes without somehow learning that it is a fact that the word has three sounds.

Phoneme manipulation tasks

In these tasks a child could be asked, for example, to say a word like *hill* without the /h/, saying *ill*. They may be asked to say *monkey* without the /k/, making the word *money*; *nest* without the /s/, making *net*; or *pink* without the /k/, making *pin*. These tasks require all manner of memory skills and mental gymnastics, and their place in enhancing early reading and writing is not clear.

Within syllable splitting tasks

Many educators claim that syllable-splitting tasks are easier than phoneme segmentation tasks because children are asked to break off the first phoneme of a word or syllable. For example, a teacher asks the child to say the first sound in bear and the child says /b/. Next, the child is asked to say what is left—*ear*.

This intersection between syllable splitting (*c-at*) and phoneme segmentation (/c/ /a/ /t/) is where a current debate in phonics is taking place.

c at	onset and rime
/c//a//t/	individual phonemes

Several teachers and researchers question whether children can more easily analyse spoken words into phonemes or whether onsets and rimes are easier to manage. One argument is that onset and rime is a more natural way to make analogies from known words to unfamiliar words than sounding out phonemes (see Moustafa 1997). Many teachers combine work on individual phonemes with onset and rime or word families.

Oddity tasks

In phoneme oddity tasks, the child is presented with a set of three or four spoken words and asked which one is different or doesn't belong.

Sometimes the child is asked to listen for the first sound of the word:

sill	pop	pan	pin
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Sometimes the last sound:

doll	hop	top
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Sometimes the middle sound:

pin	gun	bun
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These tasks require the child to compare and contrast similarities and differences and not break up words.