



Best Practices

Phonemic awareness is the ability to understand that spoken words are made up of separate sounds, called phonemes—the smallest units of sound, and to differentiate those sounds. Beginning reading skills are based on phonemic awareness, phonological awareness (recognizing that words are made up of a variety of sound units), and finally phonics (letter-sound associations). One way to think about phonemic awareness is that it could be taught in the dark; in phonemic awareness children listen for sounds, while in phonics, children look at letters.

There is a sequence to teaching phonemic awareness skills. Rhyming and clapping syllables is often taught first—children learn to listen for, recognize, and then generate rhyming words. Then they identify beginning sounds, final sounds, and medial sounds.

The ability to understand and manipulate sounds in words is essential to becoming a reader. It is a first step toward understanding the alphabetic writing system. Phonemic awareness is present in good readers and usually absent in poor readers. It must be taught consistently and systematically. But it can also be taught in fun and engaging ways.

Play with Rhymes

Rhyming is a helpful first step toward phonemic awareness. When children play with rhymes, they listen to the sounds within words and identify word parts. For example, the /at/ sound in the word *mat* is the same /at/ sound in *cat*, *rat*, *sat*, and *splat*. Children typically learn to recognize rhyming words first and generate their own rhymes later. It is important to recognize that these skills are not always learned on a schedule. For some children, recognizing rhyme can be difficult. Educators can use different methods to help develop children's skills.

- **Have children listen to and identify rhymes in books.** Before reading, ask children to listen for rhyming words and raise their hands when they hear them. Or, stop before you get to the rhyming word and have children supply it.
- **Prompt children to produce words that rhyme.** Both real words and “nonsense words” are useful, such as *Peggy* and *leggy*; *turtle* and *Yertle*.
- **Provide opportunities to recite rhymes in song.** Music is a natural part of a child's world. They can be active participants, clapping, snapping, and adding their own motions to songs. For example, “*I'm a little lizard, my oh my! My skin has scales, it's nice and dry.*”

What is phonemic awareness and why is it important?

- Phonemic awareness is the ability to recognize that words are made up of separate sounds.
- Phonemic awareness also includes the ability to manipulate sounds in speech.
- Phonemic awareness lays the foundations for learning to read and write.
- Research shows that children with good phonemic awareness skills are more successful in learning to read and write.
- Phonemic awareness can be integrated into other learning areas. In the video, children learned about reptiles in “Rhyming Reptiles,” while also learning phonemic awareness by suggesting rhyming words (*snake, take; lizard, blizzard*).

Why is rhyming an important skill for children to learn?

- Recognizing rhyming words is a basic level of phonemic awareness.
- Rhyming requires that children listen closely for sounds within words.
- Children who recognize rhyme learn that words are made up of separate parts.
- An early goal is to have children listen to a pair of words and decide whether or not the words rhyme.
- Eventually, the goal is to have children generate words that rhyme.

How can educators teach rhyming skills to children?

- Use music and songs to teach rhyme. Sing active songs that invite children to use movement. Fingerplays such as “Itsy Bitsy Spider” invite active participation in a rhyming game.
- Use books and read-aloud stories to teach rhyme. Rhyming texts, both fiction and nonfiction, support literacy in general and help children learn phonemic awareness skills.
 - Before reading, ask children to listen for words that rhyme.
 - Encourage children to raise their hands when they recognize a rhyming word.
 - Stop and have children supply a rhyming word in the text.
 - After you have read a poem or story aloud, ask for rhyming words. (*What word rhymes with mittens?*)

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- Use games to teach rhyme.
 - Toss a beanbag onto a picture grid. Have children think of a word that rhymes with the picture (*fish, wish; goat, boat*).
 - Play “I Say Night.” Teach children to respond with a rhyming word: *I say night. You say (right.) Or I say bread. You say _____.*
 - Play rhyming partners. As children “buddy up” for an activity, give one child a random word, for example, *mitten*. The first child to suggest a rhyming word becomes that child’s buddy.
- Use nursery rhymes to teach rhyme. Traditional nursery rhymes are fun to teach. Children can learn them quickly and enjoy repeating them.
- Make a chart of rhyming words. (If possible, connect the words to concepts being taught in the curriculum, such as colors, plants, weather, etc.) Add a word each day (*pink, clink, wink, sink, blink*). Once you have a bank of words, have children create their own silly rhymes. (*Wink, wink, wink. Watch me blink.*)
- Have fun with rhymes. Children enjoy saying rhymes in different voices. Whisper them, shout them, sing them, and chant them.
- Children need not suggest real words when supplying rhymes. Nonsense words (*alligator, shmalligator*) enable children to focus on the sound rather than the meaning. In time, children will develop the ability to generate real words that begin with the same sound, contain the same sound, or end with the same sound.

Play with Sounds and Words

When teaching phonemic awareness skills, educators should also focus on helping children learn the sounds of language. These important skills should be taught sequentially, from easiest to most difficult, but can still be shared in informal, fun ways. Children often begin with clapping syllables, first in their own names and then in other words. Next, children begin to recognize and match like sounds at the beginning of words. Finally, when children learn to recognize letter forms and letter sounds, they match sounds to make words. At this point, children are moving into phonics. The sequence of skills looks like this:

- **Clap syllables.** Help children recognize that words are made up of parts, and the parts make a whole word.
 - Clap names. Have children clap the syllables in their own names. As the game progresses, have children determine who has the longest name, e.g., Victoria (the most claps), or the shortest name, e.g., Sean (only one clap). Play a

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guessing game: *I am going to clap a name. (clap twice) Whose name has two claps?*

- Clap words. Children can progress to clapping words. It's especially fun to clap unusual and interesting words. Challenge children to think of a long word they would like to clap: *hippopotamus, elephant, chalkboard, or calliope.*
- **Match sounds.** Soon after they understand how to clap syllables, children will begin to recognize words that start with the same sound (sound matching). At this stage, children are not asked to *name or identify* beginning letters. They are recognizing the *sound* of the letter with which the word begins. For example, encourage children to recognize that *sand* and *sun* both begin with /s/ or that *bell* and *ball* begin with /b/. Ask, *What do you notice about these two words: rhyming, reptiles?* Praise children for hearing the sound itself.
- **Identify and isolate initial sounds.** Children learn to hear and identify the sound that comes at the beginning of words. Ask, *Who knows another word that begins with the sound /h/?*
- **Match sounds to letters.** Once children learn letter sounds, they begin to move into phonics and match those sounds within words. For example, say, *Tell me the sound you hear first in mat, mouse, and mail? What letter stands for that sound? Or, Who can tell me the letter you hear at the beginning of sail, Sam, and sit? Or, If I want to write Bella's name, what letter will I write first?*

How can educators use songs and games to help children learn phonemic awareness skills?

- Singing songs is fun for children, and they can learn from each other as they sing.

What do children learn by clapping syllables in names or other words?

- Children learn to listen for sounds in words.
- Children begin to understand that words are made up of separate sounds.

Why is sound matching an important skill?

- Sound matching activities prompt children to listen to the beginning sounds in words.
- As children identify the beginning sounds of words, they can group words that begin with the same sound. For example, /h/: *head, hair, hummingbird.*

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- Once children master the skill of identifying beginning sounds, they will be able to match the sounds to letters in the alphabet.

Glossary

phonemic awareness: the ability to recognize that spoken words are made up of separate sounds (*phonemes*, the smallest units of sound), and to manipulate those sounds in speech

phonics: the understanding that letters represent the sounds in words

phonemes: the smallest units of sound

phonological awareness: the ability to recognize that words are made up of a variety of sound units

nonsense words: made-up words, used for the phonemic principle being taught

sound matching: the ability to match words that begin or end with the same sound

View the self-paced video workshop at <http://resourcesforearlylearning.org/educators>.