



# **PHONEMIC AWARENESS: HELPING STUDENTS CRACK THE CODE**

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The attached newsletter was written to provide educators with research-based information on phonemic awareness - what it is and why it's important - and specific, detailed tips on what educators can do to help their students develop and enhance their phonemic awareness skills. There are numerous activities that can be done in the classroom and at home, as well as a page of information on what teachers can do to involve parents in this process. A webliography is listed with links to additional articles on phonemic awareness and sites devoted to helping with the recommended activities. The bibliography includes additional research-based articles on phonemic awareness.

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## SO WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS ABOUT?

Phonemic awareness, the understanding that speech is composed of individual sounds, is a difficult concept for many children to grasp.

Research has shown that phonemic awareness is strongly related to success in reading and spelling acquisition. In fact, studies have concluded that tests for phonemic awareness are better predictors of reading achievement than vocabulary, listening comprehension, and IQ tests. Furthermore, studies have shown that poor readers who are phonemically unaware entering the first grade are likely to remain poor readers at the end of the fourth grade (Griffith & Olson, 1992).

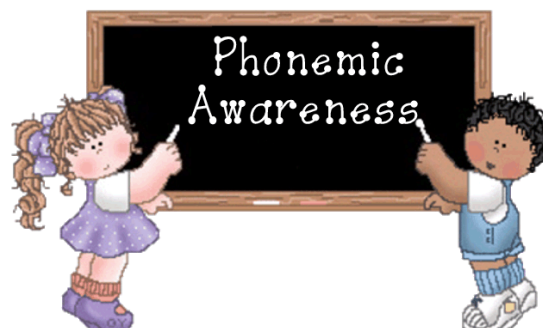
The good news is that phonemic awareness is not an “all or nothing” characteristic. Children can be taught to successfully understand phonemic awareness at any age. Even better, this knowledge results in significantly increasing students' success in learning to read and spell.

According to Griffith, there are several levels of phonemic awareness - some are easier for children to learn than others - so it's important that we use a variety of well-planned activities in the classroom and home to help develop each phonemic awareness skill (1992).

This newsletter will focus on research-based tips and activities to help you provide the best instruction to your students to help them crack the code.

### Tip 1. Determine Which Skills to Develop

According to Yopp, the very first step is to choose a specific skill to focus on, so you can develop an activity to address that skill. Yopp lists five major phonemic activities: sound matching, sound isolation, sound



blending, sound addition or substitution, and segmentation activities. It is important to know the goal of the lesson, before going further.

### Tip 2. Have Fun!

Be sure to consider the age group for each activity. Studies have shown that students learn better when they are engaged in activities that are fun and enjoyable. You want the students to develop a positive attitude toward learning, so avoid drills and memorization. Keep it fun!

### Tip 3. Socialize

Yopp recommends conducting phonemic awareness instruction in group settings, so students can interact with one another and develop their language skills in a social setting. This gives students an opportunity to learn from one another.

### Tip 4. Integrate Activities

Studies have shown that less formal activities conducted in real classroom settings such as rhymes, riddles, storytelling, and word games provide “linguistic stimulation” and have resulted in gains in phonemic awareness and subsequent reading and spelling achievement. “Phonemic awareness should not be addressed as an abstract isolated skill to be acquired through drill type activities. It can be a natural, functional part of literacy experiences throughout the day.”

### Tip 5. Teacher Read-Alouds

Draw children's attention to the sound structure of language through the use of read-aloud books like, I Can't Said the Ant by P. Cameron, Dr. Seuss's ABC, and There's a Wocket in my Pocket by Dr. Seuss. Many children's books emphasize speech sounds through rhyme, alliteration, assonance, phoneme substitution, or segmentation and offer play with language as a dominant feature. In addition to being fun and entertaining, sound-play books heighten a student's awareness of the phonological structure of language. Some children may be able to discover the sounds in language as a result of the linguistic stimulation provided by these kinds of books. Children who have enjoyed extensive storybook exchanges may develop phonemic awareness without direct instruction. Favorite books can be read and reread and the language explored during class discussion by using the patterns in the books to create additional words and verses.

### Tip 6. Rhyme Time

Recognizing rhymes and finding rhyming words are the easiest phonemic tasks for children. Some recommended rhyming activities are reading nursery rhymes and having students identify the rhyming words and playing matching games with pairs of rhyming words. Children will develop a list of "old favorites" (Griffith & Olson, 1992). Another activity is "Presto Chango" which focuses on word families. Select a word family such as -in. Students come up with a list of words that end with the -in sound. Then, go through words with the student. For example, start with "pin" and say "This word is pin, if we take off the p, we have -in. Now add a "b" and Presto Chango, what word do we have?"



Use teacher Read-Alouds for linguistic stimulation

### Tip 7. Alliteration and Assonance

Teachers can help students develop phonemic awareness by exposing them to literature that "plays with the sounds of the language." Reading books with alliteration and assonance, where the same sound occurs in two or more words of text is another proven strategy for developing phonemic awareness in young children. When teachers read books with alliterative or assonance patterns to students, the children may begin to recognize the smaller units of language. Griffith and Olson recommend the book, Animalia by Base which contains many examples of alliteration. The first consonant of a word is repeated across several words in the books Who Said Red by Serfozo and Sheep on a Ship by Shaw.



### Tip 8. Talking Like Turtles

The objective of any phonemic awareness activity should be to facilitate children's ability to perceive that their speech is made up of a series of sounds" (Yopp, 1992). The activity Talking Like Turtles helps students learn that words are made up of different sounds. Choose four or five words from a recently read book and say each word slowly. Try to emphasize each separate sound. Have the students try to figure out what word you have said. Once you have gone through all your words, ask for volunteers to choose a word and "talk like a turtle", so their classmates can guess the chosen word.

### Tip 9. Elkonin Boxes

Yopp recommends using concrete objects to help focus children's attention on speech sounds. A tool that has been successfully used in Reading Recovery programs is the Elkonin Box, which is used to help students think about the order of sounds in spoken words. Words should be chosen from text that the children have become familiar with through multiple oral readings.

Procedure:

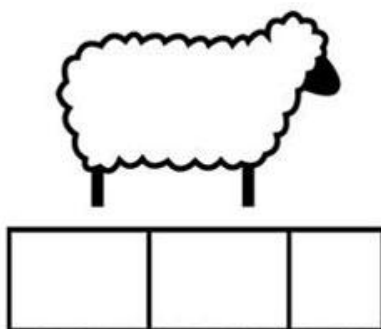
1. Pronounce a target word slowly, emphasizing each sound.
2. Ask the student to repeat the word.
3. Draw "boxes" or squares on a piece of paper, chalkboard, or dry erase board. Use one box for each phoneme or sound.
4. Ask the student to count the number of sounds in the word.
5. Have the student slide one colored counter or unifix cube into each box corresponding to the sound heard. There should be one counter for each sound.

Some books that can be used with this activity are:

Go Dog Go by P.D. Eastman

Hamster, Shells, and Spelling Bees by Lee Bennett Hopkins

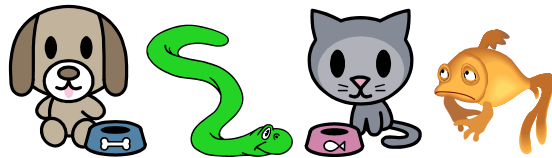
Hop on Pop by Dr. Seuss



Sample of an Elkonin Box  
The boxes would be filled with  
Sh ee p

### Tip 10. Picture Match

"One of the easier phonemic awareness activities is matching sounds". In this activity, a child is given a set of pictures with familiar objects such as a cat, dog, fish, snake and the child is asked to choose the picture that matches the targeted sound. A variation of this game is to use pairs of pictures with the same sound or in the same word family. Shuffle the cards and lay them face down in a rectangle. Take turns turning over two cards at a time. If the cards match, the child keeps them, if not, they are turned over and the next child takes a turn.



Which of these starts with the /k/ sound?

### Tip 11. Songs

Singing songs with predictable text is one of the best ways to get children involved with using language. "Songs and singing should play an important role in the literacy experience for children in school and at home". Yopp suggests modifying common children's songs to emphasize different language sounds. For the song "Row, Row, Row, Your Boat", she suggests changing the chorus "merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily" to insert new sounds, such as "terribly, terribly, terribly, terribly" or "jerrily, jerrily, jerrily, jerrily".



Young children often find such manipulation of sounds amusing and are likely to be heard singing nonsensical lyrics on the playground.



**Tip 12. Guessing Game**

A game that has been used successfully with both groups and individual students to help with sound blending is the Guessing Game. The teacher asks the question. “What am I thinking of?” and then provides a clue such as the category. The teacher then says each sound in a segmented fashion and the students must blend the sounds together to discover the answer. For example, the teacher gives the category “article of clothing” and then says the following three sounds: “/h/ /a/ /t/”. The students must blend these sounds to form the word “hat”. This game can be integrated with current curriculum as well. If the class is learning about sea animals, the teacher can say “I’m thinking about one of the sea animals we’re learning about - it is a /c/ /r/ /a/ /b/. Who know what it is?”

**Tip 13. Which One Doesn’t Belong?**

This activity is also known as “Odd Word Out”. A student is presented with three words, two of which have something in common. The student needs to determine which word doesn’t belong by analyzing all three words to find the common feature. For example, with beginning sounds, the words could be cat, cane, and tree. For word families, the words could be hot, pot, car (Padak & Rasinski, 2008).

**Tip 14. Physical Movement**

Griffith and Olson recommend using physical movement such as clapping, marching and walking in place as good opportunities for students to match words and syllables. “Words and syllables are more directly perceivable and thus more easily available to children than are phonemes... The rhythmic activities help the children focus on speech segments separately from meaning” (1992, p. 521). Start with a short poem, song or other text familiar to the child. Read the text along with the child and then clap the words or syllables while reading. Once the child can do this comfortably, march together taking one step for each word (Padak & Rasinski, 2009).

**Tip 15. Writing**

At least one study has shown that frequent opportunities to write using invented spellings, enhance writing fluency and may be beneficial for children lacking phonemic awareness. “When children write they have to face head-on the problem of mapping spoken language onto written language. The more the children write, the better they become at segmenting sounds in words” (Griffith & Olson, 1992).

**Tip 16. Involve Parents**

Phonemic awareness is strongly related to success in beginning reading and can be developed in children through language activities as early as their preschool years.

Verbal interactions between parents and children play an important role in language acquisition. If these interactions are limited, diminished language development may result (Ming & Dukes, 2010).

Research has demonstrated the benefits of parent-child practice with short text accompanied by a few minutes of word play. Children who engage in these activities at home outperformed in reading achievement and reading related skill development those classmates whose parents did not engage in these games.

Playing word games with their children was twice as effective as just listening to their children read and six times more effective than simply reading to their children. Word games are opportunities for parents and children to spend quality time together having fun and learning sounds and words (Padak & Rasinski, 2008).

## How Can I Involve Parents?



Teachers need to help parents see that there are a variety of materials available which are easily accessible and can be read in short spurts.

Encourage parents to read with their child

Encourage parents to use environmental print such as street signs, food labels, restaurant menus, advertisements, and bumper stickers to develop early letter recognition.

Share generic descriptions of different games that can be played at home in a newsletter and then send brief notes home suggesting words to use with the games. The words can be based on books or content being covered in class. Repetition is a good method for developing a child's fluency.

Develop an hour-long workshop to share activities with parents and let them know how they can use them to help their children. As teachers we need to think outside the box and encourage parents to do so as well.

When introducing the activities to parents, stress that games should be played in an atmosphere that is light and enjoyable. The child should never feel frustrated or stressed. Share tips with parents on keeping activities fun (Padak & Rasinski, 2008).

Develop a written guide that parents can refer to when using these alternative materials with their children (Rasinski & Padak, 2008).

“Short rhymes and poems are particularly well suited for home use” (Rasinski & Padak, 2008). Encourage parents to read a favorite poem every evening. Parents can also use the poems for word play activities.



Encourage parents to sing with their children. Songs are a good way of introducing a young child to the sounds of language. Songs also have highly predictable texts, making it easier for students to follow along with printed lyrics. “Such texts, we feel are among the very best materials for developing student's fluency and word recognition skills” (Rasinski & Padak, 2008).

Have parents pick a specific time for sharing these activities with their children, so that it becomes a daily ritual that the entire family can look forward to.



## WEBLIOGRAPHY

<http://www.readingrockets.org/article/377>

This article discusses 8 different activities to stimulate phonemic awareness in preschool and elementary school children. The activities can be done in the school or at home.

<http://www.readingrockets.org/books>

This site contains links to numerous children's book listed by theme, award winners, and author as well as articles and resources on selecting quality children's books. This site can be used by both teachers and parents to select books for read-alouds.

[http://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/elkonin\\_boxes](http://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/elkonin_boxes)

This site explains how to use elkonin boxes to teach phonemic awareness. There are instructions, links to templates and a list of books which can be used in conjunction with the templates.

<http://www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content2/phoemic.p.k12.4.html>

This is a good summary article on what phonemic awareness is, why it's important and research based phonemic activities to help improve students' phonemic awareness. The article is written for educators, but could be used by parents as well.

[www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/](http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/)

This site offers many lesson plans, activities and interactive games for students from Kindergarten through twelfth grade. One of the best phonemic awareness games is the "picture match" game.

<http://kids.niehs.nih.gov/music.htm>

This site contains songs and lyrics to classic children's songs as well as information on using the Sing-Along pages. There is also information on how songs can be used to motivate young children to learn to read and to improve their reading skills.

<http://www.rhymes.org.uk/>

This site has free nursery rhymes along with their origins. Nursery rhymes can be used by parents and teachers in numerous literacy activities.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cassidy, J., Valadez, C., & Garrett, S. (2010). Literacy trends and issues: A look at the five pillars and the cement that supports them. *The Reading Teacher*, 63(8), 644-655.

This article discusses the 5 "pillars" of reading as determined by the National Reading Panel (NRP). The pillars are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The authors review the 5 pillars and how their popularity in both research and practice has changed from 1997 - 2010.

Imperato, F. (2009). Getting parents and children off to a strong start in reading. *The Reading Teacher*, 63(4), 342-344.

This article was written by a reading specialist who works with the parents of incoming kindergarteners on literacy. He shares several simple at-home literacy activities that parents and teachers can use to help young students improve their literacy skills.

McGee, L., & Ukrainetz, T. (2009). Using scaffolding to teach phonemic awareness in preschool and kindergarten. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(7), 599-603.

This article discusses how preschool and kindergarten teachers can use scaffolding to help with phonemic awareness instruction. The article discusses 3 different levels of scaffolding - intense, moderate, and minimum - and situations and strategies for the use of each. The article shares specific activities and examples of effectively using scaffolding.

Opitz, M. (1998). Children's books to develop phonemic awareness--for you and parents, too! *The Reading Teacher*, 51(6), 526.

There's a very short article on the effectiveness of using children's literature that focuses on playing with language and sounds, followed by a letter to the parents with information on phonemic awareness and a request for their participation in at-home literacy activities, a list of children's books for developing phonemic awareness, ideas for using the books to develop phonemic awareness and a reading observation form which parents can complete.

Williams, M., & Rask, H. (2003). Literacy through play: How families with able children support their literacy development. *Early Child Development & Care*, 173(5), 527-533.

This article reports on findings from a research study to identify factors that help "able" students extend and develop their literacy skills. The article discusses the importance of preschool home influences and the importance of children being able to hear the sounds in words through playing games and hearing nursery rhymes,

## RESOURCES

Griffith, P., & Olson, M. (1992). Phonemic awareness helps beginning readers break the code. *The Reading Teacher*, 45(7), 516-523.

Ming, K., & Dukes, C. (2010). Gimme five: Creating a comprehensive reading lesson with all the essential elements. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 42(3), 22-28.

Padak, N., & Rasinski, T. (2008). The games children play. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(4), 363-365.

Rasinski, T., & Padak, N. (2008). Beyond stories. *The Reading Teacher*, 61(7), 582-584.

Yopp, H. (1992). Developing phonemic awareness in young children. *The Reading Teacher*, 45(9), 696-703.

Yopp, H. (1995). A test for assessing phonemic awareness in young children. *The Reading Teacher*, 49(1), 516-523.

