

What Is Phonemic Awareness?

The two best predictors of early reading success are alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness. —Marilyn Jager Adams

When I became a teacher, the term phonemic awareness was never uttered. However, during that first year I began to notice children who struggled learning how words “work.” That is, they seemed to have difficulty mapping sounds to spellings, blending sounds to decode words, and even understanding that words are made up of different sounds. I searched for ways to address my students’ needs, but with varied success. Now, years later, I have learned that one important piece of the “reading puzzle” I was missing was phonemic awareness. Some of my students lacked this essential skill and there was much I could have done to help them. As I travel around the country conducting phonemic awareness workshops, I encounter many teachers searching for answers to the same questions I had. *What is phonemic awareness? Why is it important? How do you teach it?* This book addresses those questions.

Phonemic awareness is the understanding or insight that a word is made up of a series of discrete sounds (phonemes). This awareness

KEY TERMS

Before using the poems, songs, and activities provided, familiarize yourself with the following terms used throughout the book.

onset: refers to the part of the syllable that comes before the vowel. An onset can be a single consonant, consonant cluster, or consonant digraph. (For example, the letter *c* in *cat*, the letters *pl* in *plate*, and the letters *ch* in *chair*.)

rime: a vowel and any consonants that follow it in a syllable. (For example, the letters *at* in the word *cat*.)

phoneme: a sound; the smallest unit of speech sound that distinguishes one word from another in a language.

includes the ability to pick out and manipulate sounds in spoken words. A related term, sometimes confused with phonemic awareness, is **phonological awareness**. Phonological awareness is an “umbrella” term that includes phonemic awareness, or awareness of words at the phoneme (sound) level. It also includes an awareness of word units larger than the phoneme. Therefore, phonological awareness includes:

- words within sentences;
- rhyming units within words;
- beginning and ending sounds within words;
- syllables within words;
- phonemes, or sounds, within words (phonemic awareness); and
- features of individual phonemes such as how the mouth, tongue, vocal cords, and teeth are used to produce the sound.

Phonemic awareness is not the same thing as phonics. Phonemic awareness deals with sounds in spoken words, whereas phonics involves the relationship between sounds and written symbols. Therefore, phonics deals with learning sound-spelling relationships and is associated with print. Most phonemic awareness tasks, by contrast, are purely oral.

According to Adams (1990), there are **five basic types of phonemic awareness tasks**. Within each task type are progressively more complex activities. Although some of the tasks are more accurately labeled phonological awareness tasks, the goal of most tasks is awareness at the phoneme level. These task types and sample activities include the following:

TASK 1—

The ability to hear rhymes and alliteration

- a. **rhyme** *Example:* I once saw a cat, sitting next to a dog. I once saw a bat, sitting next to a frog.

b. alliteration Example: Six snakes sell sodas and snacks.

c. assonance Example: The leaf, the bean, the peach—all were within reach.

TASK 2—

The ability to do oddity tasks

a. rhyme Example: Which word does not rhyme: *cat, sat, pig?* (pig)

b. beginning consonants Example: Which two words begin with the same sound: *man, sat, sick?* (sat, sick)

c. ending consonants Example: Which two words end with the same sound: *man, sat, ten?* (man, ten)

d. medial sounds (long vowels)
Example: Which word does not have the same middle sound: *take, late, feet?* (feet)

e. medial sounds (short vowels)
Example: Which two words have the same middle sound: *top, cat, pan?* (can, pan)

f. medial sounds (consonants)
Example: Which two words have the same middle sound: *kitten, missing, lesson?* (missing, lesson)

TASK 3—

The ability to orally blend words

a. syllables Example: Listen to these word parts. Say the word as a whole. ta...ble—What's the word? (table)

b. onset/rime Example: Listen to these word parts. Say the word as a whole. /p/...an—What's the word? (pan)

c. phoneme by phoneme Example: Listen to these word parts. Say the word as a whole. /s/ /a/ /t/—What's the word? (sat)

TASK 4—

The ability to orally segment words (including counting sounds)

a. syllables Example: Listen to this word: *table*. Say it syllable by syllable. (ta...ble)

b. onset/rime Example: Listen to this word: *pán*. Say the first sound in the word (the

onset) and then the rest of the word (the rime). (/p/...an)

c. phoneme by phoneme (counting sounds) Example: Listen to this word: *sat*. Say the word sound by sound. (/s/ /a/ /t/) How many sounds do you hear? (3)

TASK 5—

The ability to do phonemic manipulation tasks

a. initial sound substitution

Example: Replace the first sound in *mat* with /s/. (sat)

b. final sound substitution Example:

Replace the last sound in *mat* with /p/. (map)

c. vowel substitution Example: Replace the middle sound in *map* with /o/. (mop)

d. syllable deletion Example: Say *baker* without the *ba*. (ker)

e. initial sound deletion Example: Say *sun* without the /s/. (un)

f. final sound deletion Example: Say *hit* without the /t/. (hi)

g. initial phoneme in a blend deletion
Example: Say *step* without the /s/. (tep)

h. final phoneme in a blend deletion
Example: Say *best* without the /t/. (bes)

i. second phoneme in a blend deletion
Example: Say *frog* without the /r/. (fog)

Why Is Phonemic Awareness Important?

Children sometimes come to school unaware that words consist of a series of discrete sounds. Phonemic awareness activities help children learn to distinguish individual sounds, or phonemes, within words. This awareness is a prerequisite skill before children can learn to associate sounds with letters and manipulate sounds to blend words (during reading) or segment words (during spelling). "It is unlikely that children lacking phonemic awareness can benefit fully from phonics instruction since they do not understand what letters and spellings are supposed to represent" (Juel, Griffith, & Gough, 1986).