

PLAYING WITH WORDS & SOUNDS

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS ACTIVITY CARDS



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For more in depth learning...

Phonological and Phonemic Awareness: In Practice Reading Rockets

This Reading Rockets module offers practical strategies and activities to help educators and caregivers build children's awareness of word parts and sounds. It includes step-by-step guidance on how to model, scaffold, and assess skills.

The resource supports instruction by emphasizing natural, spoken language practice (no print at first), using manipulatives (like counters), and progressing from easier to more challenging tasks.

National Reading Panel - The 5 Pillars of Reading

The Big 5 of Reading are the essential skills children develop on their journey to becoming confident readers: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. These five areas work together to help children connect sounds to letters, understand words and sentences, and make meaning from what they read and hear.



1. **Phonemic Awareness:** Hearing and working with the smallest sounds/phonemes in spoken words helps children connect sounds to letters when they begin to read.
2. **Phonics:** Phonics teaches how letters and groups of letters attach to sounds, helping children spell and read.
3. **Fluency:** Reading with accuracy, expression, and at a good rate—so words flow naturally and make sense.
4. **Vocabulary:** Building vocabulary helps children understand what they read and express their ideas clearly in speaking and writing.
5. **Comprehension:** Making meaning from text—connecting ideas, asking questions, and thinking deeply about stories and information.

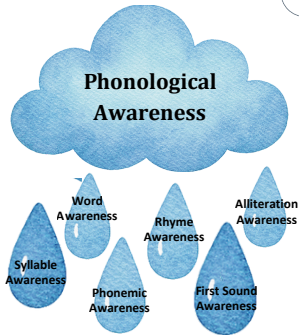
What is it?

Phonological Awareness is the big picture term for awareness of the sounds of the spoken language.

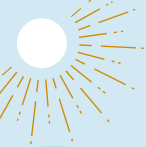
Phonemic Awareness is a type of phonological awareness. It's the "the ability to notice, hear, identify and manipulate words and word parts including phonemes, (sounds) syllables, onset, and rime" (beginning sound and the rest of the word). (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001).

Phonological and phonemic awareness skills are auditory—they can be practiced even with eyes closed. Children learn these skills at different rates and benefit from revisiting earlier skills while exploring more complex ones. They often move back and forth between stages, strengthening early foundations as they grow.

Readiness: Please note that ages and levels listed on these cards are typical but don't be afraid to try new skills. Use your child's interest and skills as a guide to determine their readiness for new skills.



Why is it important? Phonological awareness skills help children make the connection between letters and sounds, develop the skills to manipulate those sounds to form and change words and are essential early reading skills.



PHONICS

Stages 10

Reading & Spelling
(Ages 5 to 7+ years)

Stages 9

Sound & Letter Relationship
(Age 4 to 7+)

Stages 6-8

Phonemic Awareness
(Age Range - 4 to 7 years)

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS



Stages 5

Onset & Rime (Age Range - 4 to 5 years)

Stages 4

Syllable Awareness (Age Range - 3 to 5 years)

Stages 3

Rhyme Awareness (Age Range - 2 to 4 years)

Stages 2

Auditory Discrimination (Age Range - 1-3 years)

Stages 1

Listening & Speaking Skills (Age Range - Birth to 2 years)

Phonemic Awareness Continuum



Phoneme Isolation, Comparison, Categorization	Phoneme Blending	Phoneme Segmentation	Phoneme Addition	Phoneme Deletion	Phoneme Substitution
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Initial Skills

Children begin by listening for and identifying sounds in words—like hearing that fish and fan start the same. These playful listening games help them tune their ears to language.



Mid-Level Skills

Next, children learn to put sounds together (blend) to make words and take them apart (segment) to hear each sound. Clapping, tapping, or moving counters keeps it fun and active.

Complex Skills

As confidence grows, children change sounds to make new words—turning pan into man or mat. These skills prepare them to connect sounds to letters when learning to read and spell.

Stage 1: Listening & Speaking Skills

Age Range - Birth to 1 year

Description of Stage 1

Language starts in the womb, phonological awareness begins as early as about 24 weeks. Babies need to be surrounded by language to learn it. Research shows that babies prefer normal adult talk but slower, higher pitched and in a slightly sing-song way, using lots of expression.

Explanation

Watch



Reading Rockets
"Bringing Up Baby"

Watch



What to Expect
"How to Talk to Baby"

Examples

Talk to Your Baby

- Talk to your baby, describe what you are doing and what you see.
- Read books to your baby, even in the womb, they are learning language even if they don't understand the concepts.
- Imitate coos and babbles, sing and tell stories.
- Use gestures and/or simple sign language and try to expose them to different types of sounds, it will build oral language and background knowledge for future comprehension skills.
- Sing to your child.



Stage 2: Auditory Discrimination

Age Range - 1 to 2 years



Description of Stage 2

At this stage, children are cued into listening to build their language skills and understanding of the world. They can typically understand between 200–500 words and are beginning to connect what they hear to meaning. They start tuning in to the subtle sounds of speech and the many noises around them.

Auditory discrimination builds children's ability to listen closely and tell the difference between sounds.



Tiny Tap
"What's That Sound"

Listening
Game
Ideas



Early Impact
"21 Listening Games"

Sound Awareness

Close your eyes, what sound do you hear?
(Parents make one sound at a time, children guess. Hands clapping, pouring water...)

- **Auditory Identification:** What sound do you hear? (Hands clapping, pouring water...)
- **Auditory Discrimination:** loud vs. soft sounds, long vs. short sounds, different types of sounds.
- **Play "I Hear"** (variation of I Spy) – play sounds while children match the sound to a picture of what is making that sound. Use Alaska animal sounds, water splash/salmon jumping, gun shot/hunting.
- Engage in singing, dancing, and drumming.

Creating playful listening moments can strengthen attention, memory, and curiosity, laying the groundwork for future sound learning.

Stage 3: Word Awareness - Rhyming

Age Range - 2 to 4 years

Description of Stage 3

Children in this stage are ready for lots of word play with repetition such as songs, rhymes, finger plays and alliterations (the repetition of the same sounds, usually the initial consonant).

Rhyming - Modeling

Have fun with rhymes as you read and play, emphasizing patterns. Point out words that sound alike and invite your child to repeat them.

Games



MomLovesBest
"25 Fingerplay
Ideas"

Read



Pam Barn Hill
"Benefits of
Nursery Rhymes"

Watch



Mr. Mike TV
"Rhyming
Word Games"

Recognition

Then see if your child can find rhyming words. Think of two words, have your child give thumbs up if the two words rhyme. Change it up and have fun with this game.

- Does cat rhyme with hat? (yes)
- Does toe rhyme with Tom? (no)
- Adult: Did you hear the rhyming words?

Production

Once children can recognize rhyming words, it's their turn to come up with them. Adult: What rhymes with cat? (*allow made up words*)

Rhyming Train Game (Challenge)

First person starts with a word, the next player then says a rhyming word within a few seconds followed by the next. **Example:** rat-pat-scat-cat-sat-mat until someone can't think of anything that rhymes, then start a new rhyme.

Stage 3: Word Awareness - Alliteration

Age Range - 2 to 4 years



Alliteration

Alliteration is when words begin with the same sound, like “Silly seals slide on snow.” It helps children tune in to beginning sounds and strengthens their awareness of how words are built. Alliteration serves as a bridge between rhyming and onset–rime awareness, moving children from noticing how words sound alike at the end (rhyming) to recognizing and playing with the first sounds in words (onsets).

Model

- **Name Games:** Make silly sentences with everyone’s names —Maggie makes muffins.
- **Animal Alliteration:** Match animals with action words — Busy bears bounce.
- **Art Time:** Draw or paint objects that start with the same sound.
- **Sound Scavenger Hunt:** Spot items with the same starting sounds and build sentences.

Recognition

Parent makes up a sentence in which all of the words begin with the same sound. “*Many moose move*”. What sound do all of the words start with?

Production

Ask, “Can you make up a sentences all starting with the “f” sound?” (Funny fox feel fine.)

Alliteration Train Game

Change the Rhyming Train Game. Instead of the next person saying a word that rhymes, have them say a word that begins with the same sound. The first person starts the train, the next player must say a word that makes sense but begins with the same sound. For example: Tim takes ten timers to Ted’s train. Play until a sentence is complete. Start a new sentence.

Stage 4: Syllable Awareness

Age Range - 3 to 5 years

Description of Stage 4

Children at this stage are starting to refine their language skills. Breaking down sentences and then parts of words are important skills needed when learning to read. Compound words are easier to learn at first, then move on to whole words.

**Important note, since all syllables must contain a vowel sound and we open our mouths to say vowel sounds, you can check the number of syllables by holding a hand just under your chin and count how many times your chin hits your hand.*

Watch



Reading Rockets
"Blending Syllables to
Make a Word"

Games



Early Impact
"7 Syllable Games"

Sentence Segmentation - Word Awareness

Make up a sentence or read one in a book. How many words are in this sentence?

Mom picked berries. (3) Show me on your fingers.

Syllable Awareness

Blending

Listen to the two word parts: *snow...ball*.

Say the whole word: (*snowball*)

Listen: *Yes...ter...day*

Say the whole word: (*yesterday*)

Segmenting

Now you say the two words in
treetop: (*tree...top*)

Deletion

Say fishnet without fish: (*net*)



Stage 5: Onset & Rime

Age Range - 4 to 5 years



Description of Stage 5

In stage 5, children are ready to isolate or separate the first sound from the rest of the word, this is called “onset” and “rime”. The onset is the part of a single- syllable word before the vowel. The rime is the part of a word including the vowel and the letters that follow.

/f/ /ish/

This is an important stage which will eventually lead into blending skills for sounding out words.



Glue Sticks Blog
Hidden Pictures - Camping
*use w/Mystery Word
Game



Watch
Kindergarten Rocks
Mrs Horvath
“Onset & Rime 4B”

Onset and Rime

Mystery Word Game

Parent says a word isolating the first sound (the onset) /l/.../ake/ from the rime (last part of the word) (ake).

What’s the mystery word? (lake)

/w/ .../ood/
(wood)

/n/ .../est/
(nest)

You can play it like I Spy, choose words about items and descriptions of things around you or pictures on a page...*I spy a gray /r/ .../ock/
What do I see? (rock)*

When your child can play it well, it’s their turn to choose the word, separate the onset from the rime and ask if you know what the word is.

Stage 6: Phonemic Awareness - Isolation Skills

Age Range - 4 to 6 years

Description of Stage 6

Children begin by training their ears to hear the smallest parts of spoken words. As they play with sounds—listening for ones that are the same or different—they build strong single-sound awareness. This early listening strength helps them notice patterns in language and prepares them for the next steps of blending, segmenting, and playing with sounds in new ways.

Phoneme / Sound Isolation

Beginning: (Model) I am going to listen for the first sound in a word. My word is coat. Let's think, the first sound is /c/.

- (Production) Now it's your turn. What is the first sound in goat? /g/

End: What is the last sound in goat? /t/

Middle: What is the middle sound in sun? /u/

Picture Book Activity

As you are reading a picture book together, ask questions about some of the pictures.

Beginning: Can you find a picture of something whose name begins or starts with a /b/sound?

- Talk about what your mouth is doing when you say the sound, what part of your mouth is making the sound?

End: Can you point to a picture whose names ends with a /b/ sound?

Middle: Can you point to a picture whose names has an /o/ sound in the middle?



Early Learning Coach
"Phonemic Isolation Practice"



Stage 6: Phonemic Awareness - Isolation Skills

Age Range - 4 to 6 years



Phoneme Comparison

Model

The adult models listening for and identifying the shared sound clearly and slowly.

- “Listen to these two words: sun and sock. They both start with the same sound — /s/. Sun, sock.”
- “Now listen to fish and moon. These do not start with the same sound. Fish starts with /f/ and moon starts with /m/.”

Recognition

“Do cat and cup start with the same sound?” (yes)
Moon and berries ? (no)

Production

Adult: “Can you think of another word that starts with the same sound as berries? different sound?”

**Children hear beginning sounds first, then ending, with middle sounds being the hardest.*

Categorization

Beginning

- Model: “Listen: seal, snow, and tundra. Tundra does not belong since it starts with a /t/ and not a /s/.”
- Recognition: “Which word doesn’t belong: moose, mukluk, or fish?” → fish

Ending

- Model: “Listen carefully — cup, cap, and map all end with the /p/ sound. They sound the same at the end.”
- Recognition: Which word does not belong? cup sun ran (cup)

Middle

- Model: “Listen: fish, sit, and hill all have the /i/ sound in the middle.”
- Recognition: Which does not belong? sat ran pill (pill)

Watch



Claudia Yelaya
“Phoneme
Categorization”

Stage 7: Phonemic Awareness - Blending & Segmenting

Age Range - 4 to 7 years

Description of Stage 7

At this stage, children move beyond simply hearing sounds to putting them together and taking them apart. They learn to **blend** individual sounds to make a word and to **segment** words into their separate sounds—all without seeing any letters or print.

These hands-on listening skills build the foundation for complex phonemic work. Practice starts with simple three-sound words like sun or dog and grows in complexity as children's confidence develops.

Watch



Pronunciation Guide

**Be careful about adding an /uh/ sound after the sound, it can add an extra syllable to the word and confuse children.*

RRFTS - "44 Phonemes"

Blending Phonemes

Model

The adult says the individual sounds slowly and then models blending them together: "Listen carefully. /s/... /u/... /n/. When I put the sounds together, it says sun!"

Recognition & Production

I spy a brown /l/ /o/ /g/ What do I see? (*log*)

*You can play it like I Spy

Watch



Reading Universe
"Blending Phonemes
w/DeAngela Huggins"



Stage 7: Phonemic Awareness - Blending & Segmenting

Age Range - 4 to 7 years



Phoneme Segmentation

Stage 7 of

Phoneme segmentation is when children break a spoken word into its individual sounds (phonemes). For example, in the word fish, a child can identify the three sounds: /f/ /i/ /sh/.

Families can support this skill by:

- Touching or moving an object (like a rock, bead, or block) for each sound heard.
- Tapping or clapping once for each sound in a short word.

This helps them attend to all the sounds in sequence and prepares them for later skills like phoneme deletion and substitution.



Watch



Nitty Gritty Phonics
"Learn How to Segment Words into Sounds"

Mystery Word Game

I am going to say a word. I want you to tell me each sound you hear in the word. Let me show you. If I say the word fox, the sounds I hear are /f/ /o/ /x/. Hold up a finger as you say each sound.



Now try to say the sounds with me. If I say moose you will say all of the sounds you hear. The sounds are /m/ /oo/ /s/. How many fingers?

Now you try it: think of a word and break apart all of the sounds while you touch for each sound. I will guess the word.

1

2

3

4

Stage 8: Phonemic Awareness - Sound Manipulation

Age Range - 5 to 7 years

Description of Stage 8

Children now begin to take words apart and change them by ear—adding, deleting, or substituting sounds to form new words. These advanced listening skills deepen their understanding that spoken words are made of individual sounds, strengthening the bridge between spoken and written language.

Phoneme Addition

Add a sound to the beginning of a word. Say *lock*, add /f/ to the beginning. Flock

Watch



Growing Primary
“Let’s Learn Phoneme Addition”

Phoneme Deletion

Beginning

Say *man* without the /m/. (*an*)

- Simple skill words (short, three letter words like): *hat, pen, big, lock, sun*
- Complex blends begin with: *br, pl, spl, fr, cr, gr, bl, squ, sw, tr, sp, str, pr, spr, cl, fl, sl, gl, sm, qu, sn, sk, st, dr*

Ending

Say *seat* without the /t/. (*sea*)

- Complex blends end with: *ct, -ft, -lb, -lt, -mp, -nd, -ng, -nk, -nt, -pt, -sk, -sp, -st*

Watch



**Blends are the most difficult to delete, avoid difficult blends until the skill is very strong.*

Louisiana Dept. of Edu.
“PA Activity - Phoneme Deletion”

Stage 8: Phonemic Awareness - Sound Manipulation

Age Range - 5 to 7 years



Phoneme Substitution

Phoneme substitution invites children to play with sounds to make new words, helping them notice how one sound change can completely transform meaning. This activity strengthens flexibility in listening and prepares them for spelling and decoding later on.

Sound Fishing

Cut out paper fish with simple pictures (cat, dog, sun, map). Use a magnetic fishing pole or stick with string. When a child “catches” a fish, have them practice substitution.

Watch



Picture Ideas: cat, bat, net, pen, fox, pig, sun, cup. mad, sad, glad

*Allow nonsense word answers.

Heggerty “Substituting Hand Motions”

Replace a sound in the word with another sound. Start with the beginning sound, then the end sound and finally the middle sound.

Beginning sound substitution: Model how to change the first sound in a word.

- “Let’s change the /m/ in mad to /s/. Now it’s sad!”
- Try together with run → sun, cat → sat.

Ending sound substitution: Change the last sound to make a new word.

- “If we change the /th/ in math to /sh/, we get mash!”
- Practice with fit → fish, put → push.

Middle sound substitution: Let’s change the middle sound in hat to /o/. Listen hot.

- *Simple:* Can you change the a in rad to /o/ (rod).
- Change middle sound in clock to /i/ (click)

Stage 9: Phonics - Sound & Letter Relationship

Age Range - 4 to 7+ years

Description of Stage 8

As children develop their phonemic awareness skills, they are also developing understanding of the “alphabetic principal” or the connections between letters and spoken sounds. When letters are used, the skill is now called phonics.

- Children usually begin to learn letters through songs like the ABC song as well as letter shapes when they play with blocks, plastic letters, and alphabetic books.
- Provide many opportunities to see, play with, and compare letters and include activities in which children learn to identify, name, and write both upper case and lower case versions of each letter.

Children typically start to recognize the shape of letters by their curves and lines and benefit by talking about the name of the letters with the sounds of the letters.

Linking Sounds to Letters

Recognition

Point to the letter that makes the /t/ sound.

Production

What sound does the letter “t” make? What is the name of the letter?



Read



Reading Rockets
“Alphabetic
Principle”

Activities



We Are Teachers
“Letter Naming
Fluency”



Description of Stage 10

Phonics is where sounds (phonemes) and print letters (graphemes) come together to build meaning and understanding (knowledge).

As children practice and recognize familiar word patterns, they read with greater fluency, expand vocabulary and strengthen comprehension.





It's perfectly okay if children spell words the way they sound at first—this “inventive spelling” shows they're listening carefully and beginning to understand how sounds and letters connect, turning sounds and letters into meaning and joy.

Build Strong Habits

- **Write for fun** – Encourage your child to write names, shopping lists, or “signs” for play areas.
- **Read every day** – Choose books with repeating patterns and point out familiar words or sounds.
- **Notice words in your world** – Read store signs, fish-camp labels, and road signs together.
- **Play word-building games** – Use letter tiles, magnets, or cards to make and change simple words.
- **Make a Beautiful Word Basket** – Collect interesting, silly, or beautiful words on slips of paper and read them together.
- **Celebrate effort** – Be silly, make a big deal of small wins and when your child spends time trying.

Continuum of Phonological & Phonemic Skill Complexity

less complex	COMPLEXITY		more complex
	<p>Word Awareness</p>	<p>Syllable Awareness</p>	<p>Phoneme Awareness</p>
<p>Sentence Segmentation How many words do you hear in this sentence?</p>			<p>Isolation What is the first/last/middle sound in <i>fan</i>?</p>
<p>Blending Listen as I say two small words: <i>rain ... bow</i>. Put the two words together to make a bigger word.</p>		<p>Blending Put these word parts together to make a whole word: <i>rock...et</i>.</p>	<p>Identification Which word has the same first sound as <i>net</i>?</p>
<p>Segmentation Clap the word parts in <i>rainbow</i>. How many times did you clap?</p>	<p>Segmentation Clap the word parts in <i>rocket</i>.</p>	<p>Segmentation How many sounds in <i>big</i>? Say the sounds in <i>big</i>.</p>	<p>Categorization Which word does not belong? <i>bus, ball, house</i>?</p>
<p>Deletion Say <i>rainbow</i>. Now say <i>rainbow</i> without the <i>bow</i>.</p>	<p>Deletion Say <i>pepper</i>. Now say <i>pepper</i> without the <i>er</i>.</p>	<p>Deletion Say <i>spark</i>. Now say <i>spark</i> without the <i>s</i>.</p>	<p>Addition Say <i>park</i>. Now add <i>s</i> to the beginning of <i>park</i>.</p>
<p>more complex</p>		<p>Substitution The word is <i>mug</i>. Change <i>m</i> to <i>f</i>. What is the new word?</p>	