



Figure adapted from Schuele, C. M. & Boudreau D. (2008). Phonological Awareness Intervention: Beyond the Basics. *Language Speech & Hearing Services in Schools* 39(1) 3–20.

Phonological Awareness

Children often begin preschool at a time when they are just getting familiar with the English language and are unaware of the fact that words are made up of sounds. Doing phonological awareness activities in preschool help children learn to distinguish individual sounds, or phonemes, within words. This important skill is a prerequisite before children can learn to associate a sound with a letter (phonics) and manipulate sounds to blend words (during reading) or segment words into sounds (during spelling). Oftentimes children who have difficulties with phonics instruction do so because they are still learning the skills of phonological awareness.

The NIPUN Bharat guidelines that were shared in 2021 clearly state that phonological awareness is one of the key components of foundational language and literacy that must be developed in young children. Phonological awareness refers to the ability to identify and manipulate the sounds in spoken language. It is a crucial skill for children to acquire in their early years, as it is a precursor to reading and writing.

Phonics instruction, which means associating letters to sounds, is built on the foundation of phonological awareness. For example, if children have not had exposure in attending to sounds in words, have difficulty discriminating sounds in words, cannot segment sounds within words, or do not understand what is meant by the term 'sound' then phonics instruction can be difficult. Children must be able to identify sounds that are common in words like sun, soap, and seed. Children must be able to have an auditory discrimination for the /s/ in the words sun, soap, and seed before it makes sense to them that the letter 's' stands for this sound in these words.

Most of the phonological awareness activities that are conducted with children are oral. They are playful in nature and provide an engaging way for children to discriminate the sounds that make up words. For example, oral blending activities help children to hear how sounds are put together to make words. These activities will lead to decoding, in which children begin sounding out or blending words independently. Children who have difficulty orally blending words will have difficulty sounding out words while reading. The oral blending exercises follow a progression:

- Blending larger word parts or syllables.
- Blending onsets and rimes.
- Blending whole words sound by sound.

The oral segmentation helps children in spelling words. It involves children separating words into sounds. These exercises begin with:

- Segmenting larger word parts or syllables.
- Segmenting onsets and rimes.
- Segmenting whole words sound by sound.

Children who have difficulty orally segmenting words will have difficulty breaking apart words in order to spell them. You can tell if children are developing the necessary segmentation skills when they begin asking questions such as “What stands for the /f/ sound in fish?” or “What stands for the /ch/ sound in cheese?”

In the foundation stage, oral blending and oral segmentation activities are focused on more because they lead to early reading and writing skills. In addition to these tasks, sound discrimination activities will help children to focus on specific sounds in words. For example, children are asked to listen for vowel sounds. Since vowel sounds are necessary for decoding, and children’s early invented spellings often omit vowels, much practice must be provided to help children hear these sounds in words.

Activities where children practice listening for specific consonants at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of words also help in developing this skill. For example, identifying if the /g/ sound is in the beginning, middle, or end in words such as dog, goat and seagull.

Lastly, it must be noted that phonological awareness is not the same thing as phonics. Phonological 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 phonological awareness activities, are purely oral and lay the foundation for phonics.