

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS & THE DEVELOPMENT OF LITERACY

Over recent times, there has been an increase in awareness that a number of children have difficulty learning to read and spell due to inadequate phonological awareness skills. Phonological awareness refers to the ability to identify, segment and manipulate sounds in words when reading and spelling. Stackhouse and Wells (1997) state that phonological awareness is a strong predictor of literacy development. Careful monitoring of children's phonological awareness development is needed to ensure successful development of literacy skills.

All children in Term 3 or Term 4 of preschool can have their phonological awareness skills assessed to gauge their readiness for school. All children of school age can have their phonological awareness skills tested at any time.

There are four main aspects of phonological awareness development that should be in place before entering Grade 1.

1. RHYME

For a child to be able to rhyme they need to have an understanding of, and be able to divide words into, onset and rime. The onset of a word is the initial sound or consonant blend before a vowel. The rime is the vowel and any consonants following the vowel. For example, in 'hat', /h/ is the onset and 'at' is the rime, for 'bread' /br/ is the onset and 'ead' is the rhyme.

The ability to identify rhyming words and later on to produce words that rhyme are important steps towards literacy. Mastering rhyme facilitates reading and spelling by analogy. If a child knows that *cat* and *mat* rhyme (have the same endings) then by analogy *sat* should also rhyme (and also have the same ending). This is an efficient way of learning how to spell. For example, if a child can spell *cat* and *mat*, they would know *sat* rhymes and therefore is likely to be spelt the same.

2. SEGMENTING WORDS INTO SOUNDS

Children learn to identify beginning sounds then final sounds and lastly sounds in the middle of words. The understanding that words are made up of sounds and the ability to identify the letters that match the sounds is required if a child is to learn to read or write. This awareness helps a child 'sound out' unfamiliar words in order to successfully spell the word.

3. BLENDING

This is an important step in literacy development as children are required to join syllables or sounds together to produce understandable sounds and words. The ability to master this skill is highly predictive of later literacy development (Stackhouse and Wells, 1997). If children can blend together the sounds that they have just sounded out, it assists their reading (e.g. 'h-a-n-d' Oh, that says 'hand').

4. MANIPULATION

After children have developed skills to identify all the sounds within a word and

the ability to blend some of those sounds together, the next step is the ability to manipulate the sounds to create new words. The development of this skill enables the child to speak, read and write unfamiliar words by drawing on knowledge of known words (e.g. If I know how to spell 'take' then Kate must be spelt 'K-a-t-e' because I can hear that the /t/ and /k/ sounds have just swapped places.).

In addition to these 4 aspects of phonological awareness, children must also be able to recognise all of the letters of the alphabet and their accompanying sounds in order to develop literacy skills.

The Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test (SPAT) provides the following Australian norms for acquisition of phonological awareness skills. At least 80% of the children studied had acquired these skills in the timeframe specified.

Skill	Age acquired				
	5yrs	5-6yrs	6-7yrs	7-8yrs	8-9yrs
Syllable Identification e.g How many syllables in banana?	Emerging	Mastered			
Identifying rhyming words e.g does 'cat' rhyme with 'bat'	Emerging	Mastered			
Production of rhyming words (e.g. Tell me another word that rhymes with 'me')		Emerging	Mastered		
Identifying the first sound in words e.g the first sound in 'dog' is 'd'	Emerging	Mastered			
Identifying the last sound in words		Emerging	Mastered		
Breaking up small words into sounds		Emerging	Mastered		
Blending individual sounds to make words		Emerging	Mastered		
Ability to take away the first sound in words e.g 'what does 'fish' say without the 'f'			Emerging	Mastered	
Breaking up words containing blends into individual sounds e.g 'snake' , 'pram'				Emerging	Emerging
Blends: Delete First sound e.g 'what does 'snake say without the 's'				Emerging	Emerging
Blends: Delete 2 nd sound (e.g. What does 'pram' say without the /r/?)					Emerging



Adapted from Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test, Roslyn
Neilson , 1995.