THE IMPORTANCE OF PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

There are many reasons that a young child can struggle to learn to read – some reasons are language-related and some are literacy-based. Very often, weaknesses in ***Phonological Awareness*** are a significant cause of literacy difficulties. Teaching phonological awareness in the early grades, especially in Kindergarten, is fundamental. As a parent, it is really important to know how phonological awareness is being taught to your child.

In 2000, the National Reading Panel (part of the National Institute of Health) completed a study of all the research that had been done on reading development over the years. They published their studies in several ways – two of the best publications are linked here, one is a parent guide and one is for teachers.

Don't be intimidated by the teacher guide – it is very readable and can give a parent a lot of great information!
https://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/Documents/PRFbrochure.pdf
https://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/prf_k-3/Documents/PRFbooklet.pdf

Phonological Awareness was found to be one of the fundamental areas that a young child needs in order to become an expert reader. The research has shown that a child needs approximately 20 hours of specific direct phonological awareness teaching to be prepared to be a good reader.

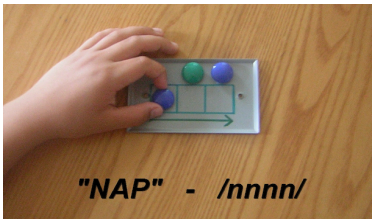
Phonological Awareness is a purely language skill. It is a fundamental language component of the reading process. Phonological awareness helps a student to hear and work with the sounds of words. It is often called a *Lights-Out Activity*, because it is about listening to sounds – no letters are involved. ***Phonological Awareness*** describes a set of skills, which is built like a ladder, with skills from easiest to most challenging.

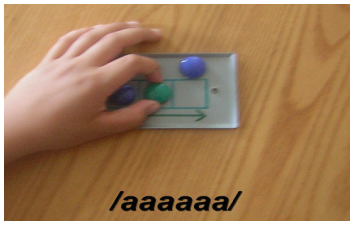
These are some of the skills (starting with the most basic)**:**

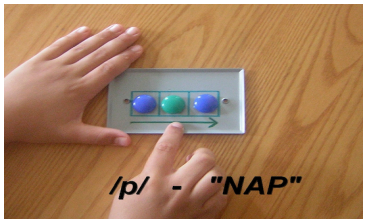
- ✓ Awareness of words in sentences (**I can ride my bike.**)
- ✓ The concept of syllables within words
- ✓ First-middle-end sounds in words
- ✓ Awareness of rhyming, which is often called 'onset-rime' (**m-at**)
- ✓ The ability to blend sounds into a word (**c-a-t > cat**) and to segment a word into its sounds (**cat > c-a-t**). *Check out the pictures below*
- ✓ The ability change or manipulate sounds in words (change **hop > hot**).

A Segmenting Activity – Called *Say-it-and-Move-it*

(notice there are no letters – the magnets are used for the sounds)







Research also shows that each level of phonological awareness relates to ***Reading*** and ***Writing*** skills.
For example:

- Knowledge of syllables can directly assist the ability to read multi-syllable words.
- Being able to rhyme benefits reading unfamiliar words, which have rhyme patterns that a student has learned (knowing **mat** helps you to learn **cat/sat/bat/hat**).
- Blending sounds into words has a strong connection with decoding.
- The ability to segment sounds relates to spelling.

For all of its importance as an essential early literacy skill, Phonological Awareness may not receive the instructional focus it needs. A child who struggles to develop phonological awareness will need core instruction with the entire class, as well as small group or individual intervention as needed. He or she may need more than the 20 hours recommended by the National Reading Panel.

As a parent, you should ask your child's teacher how ***Phonological Awareness*** instruction is done in the classroom. You should ask about all of the skills mentioned above, and you should also find out if there is a specific program or curriculum that is used. Also find out how phonological awareness is tested and how testing helps the teacher decide what to teach.

As a *critical consumer*, decide if you think all of the bases are being covered.

There are several curricula that target ***Phonological Awareness***. One common curriculum is called *Heggerty*. It has some very good components, but sometimes it is not taught as faithfully or completely as it could. Another good program for older students is called *Equipped For Reading Success*.

*In conclusion, please recognize that **Phonological Awareness** is one of the important areas of teaching early literacy. Children who struggle with phonological awareness will be at-risk as early readers and writers. Older children who struggle with reading fluency very often show phonological awareness weaknesses that have remained.*

Early Phonological Awareness Instruction and Intervention is very important. It can help to prevent later difficulties. Be proactive! Your child only has these early learning chances once!

Feel free to contact me at *Linguistic Foundations* if you would like more information about ***Phonological Awareness***, as well as options for instruction and testing. Thank you for your time and Best of Luck!

Steve MacCormack