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!*  

*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**. There are some very good stand-alone programs that teach this skill. *Sounds Abound-Multisensory Phonological Awareness, Ladders to Literacy,* and *Road to the Code* are three of these programs (I am sure there are also others of which I’m unfamiliar). *Fundations* is an early reading program that incorporates phonological awareness into its reading instruction. A special program does not have to be used as long as all of the **Phonological Awareness** skills are being taught.

*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!

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