

## **Phonemic Awareness – Why is it important?**

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Phonics is a big word in education. You could say it's a “buzz” word. There are many phonics workbooks, programs, and games on the market. In its simplest form, phonics teaches letter/sound correspondences. Phonics helps children learn to read, spell, and write. Phonics is generally taught between Kindergarten and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Phonics is essential to teach, but phonemic awareness must be taught and mastered before students can make sense of phonics.

To say phonics and phonemic awareness is the same thing would be a mistake. Phonemic awareness is not the same as phonics. Phonemic awareness does not involve letters, only sounds. It is focused solely on spoken words. Phonemic awareness is an auditory skill and a prerequisite skill for students to become competent spellers, readers, and writers. Phonemic awareness should be taught before phonics. It will only confuse struggling readers if they are taught phonics skills before mastering phonemic awareness skills.

The majority of students will develop phonemic awareness very naturally, without direct instruction. About 20% of readers will not – they will struggle with these skills. Struggling readers have difficulty with phonemic awareness skills and will need to be explicitly taught all 7 phonemic awareness skills. Having these skills, students will realize that words can be broken into syllables, which can be broken into individual sounds.

A phoneme is a unit of sound. For example, the word dog has three phonemes, /d/, /o/, /g/, but the word home also has three phonemes, /h/, /o/, /m/. As you can see, it is not how many letters are in a word but how many sounds or units of sound are in a given word. When teaching phonemic awareness, often times students benefit from using colored tiles or felt so they can assign the sounds to something concrete.

There are 7 types of phonemic awareness skills. These may sound like simple skills, but for a dyslexic reader these skills are difficult and they are not learned unless they are directly taught.

## **7 Essential Phonemic Awareness Skills**

1. **Phoneme Segmentation:** Tell me the sounds you hear in the word *mop*? What's the middle sound in the word *cub*?
2. **Phoneme Deletion:** If you take the /t/ off the word *table*, what's left?
3. **Phoneme Matching:** Listen: do the words *snake* and *sun* start with the same sounds?
4. **Phoneme Counting:** How many sounds are in the word *tough*?
5. **Phoneme Substitution:** Change the /s/ in *sad* to /r/. What is the new word?
6. **Blending:** What word do the sounds /h/ /u/ /g/ make when blended?
7. **Rhyme:** Start with the word *cat* and tell me three words that rhyme with *cat*.

When children display reading problems in 1st grade, research shows that 74% of these kids will still be poor readers in 9th grade unless they receive explicit instruction in phonemic awareness. After phonemic awareness skills are mastered, you can start to teach phonics. If your child or student is a struggling reader they will need to be taught phonics in a systematic, explicit, and multisensory fashion. All skills should be taught to mastery and new skills should always build on previously mastered material. Repeated exposure to previously learned material is also important. This aids weak short-term memory, which is also a component to why struggling readers struggle to retain information they've learned. Lessons should contain a review component to make them cumulative in nature. Lastly, phonemic awareness and phonics are important building blocks when teaching developing readers, but other components of reading instruction includes vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

*"People are often surprised to learn that it is phonemic awareness and not intelligence that best predicts ease of learning to read."* Sally Shaywitz, *Overcoming Dyslexia*.

*"Phonemic awareness is the core and causal factor that separates normal readers from disabled readers."*  
Reid Lyon, NICHHD



If you would like to see a demonstration of phonemic awareness being taught, please email or call Kelly at READ Learning. She would be happy to coach you through these skills in order to help your student(s).

### **About Kelly**

Kelly Steinke, M.A. Ed., NBCT is the founder of READ Learning Educational Services, LLC. Kelly taught special education, primarily to students with learning disabilities, for over 15 years in the Midwest, East Coast, and Pacific Northwest. During this time she became a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT) in Exceptional Needs, earned a Master of Arts Degree in Education (Administration and Leadership), and founded her company, READ Learning Educational Services, LLC. For the past six years, Kelly has served the community as a dyslexia specialist.

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