



Phonemic Awareness and Playing With Sounds

What to do: Read this document to learn about key elements of phonemic skill development: the ability to isolate, blend, segment, and manipulate sounds) Work with school-day staff to clarify any questions you may have. Then follow the suggested steps for playing with sounds to have fun supporting phonemic awareness in your out-of-school time program.

Why it matters: In any language, a phoneme is the smallest unit of sound. Phonemes combine to make new sounds and ultimately to make words. Phonemic awareness is the foundation for all future reading endeavors. It's what helps readers tell one word from another.

Isolate Sounds

- Isolating sounds is the ability to recognize the separate phonemes (sounds) in a word.
 - *Cat* has three phonemes: /k/ - /a/ - /t/.
- When working with students on this skill, it's easiest for them to recognize sounds before being able to produce them.
 - Which of these pictures begins with the sound /m/?
- Isolating beginning sounds is the easiest, then final sounds, and lastly medial (middle) sounds.
 - What is the first sound in *sun*? /s/
 - What is the final sound in *clock*? /k/
 - What is the medial sound in *map*? /a/

Blend Sounds

- Blending sounds is the ability to hear separate sounds and combine them to make a word.
 - /k/ - /a/ - /t/ = cat
- When working with students on this skill, it's easiest for them to blend words with initial continuous sounds:
 - f, h, l, m, n, r, s, v, w, y, z
- Later, they can work on stop sounds:
 - b, c, d, g, k, p, t
- Lastly, have students blend words with consonant blends:
 - e.g., sol, sp, -mp, -st, cl, bl, pr

Segment Sounds

- Segmenting sounds is the ability to hear a whole word, tap or count out the phonemes in the word, and say each phoneme in isolation.
 - *Cat* has three sounds; they are /k/ - /a/ - /t/.
- Shorter words are easier than longer words.
 - *At* vs. *splat*



Manipulate Sounds

- Manipulating sounds is the ability to form different words by adding, deleting, or substituting sounds in a given word.
- Easiest to more difficult:
 - Adding sounds is the easiest skill, followed by deleting sounds, and lastly by substituting sounds.
 - Shorter words are easier than longer words; words with consonant blends are more difficult than single consonants.
 - Initial sounds are easiest, followed by final sounds, and lastly medial sounds.
 - Add initial sound: Say *ant*. Now say *ant* with a /p/ at the beginning.
 - Add final sound: Say *car*. Now say *car* with a /t/ at the end.
 - Delete initial sound: Say *ran*. Now say *ran* without the /r/.
 - Delete final sound: Say *clamp*. Now say *clamp* without the /p/.
 - Delete medial sound: Say *plain*. Now say *plain* without the /l/.
 - Substitute initial sound: Say *bag*. Now say *bag* but change the /b/ to /r/.
 - Substitute final sound: Say *sad*. Now say *sad* but change the /d/ to /p/.
 - Substitute medial sound: Say *clock*. Now say *clock* but change the /o/ to /i/.

More Ways to Play With Sounds

Additional terms that are good to understand when helping students develop their phonemic awareness are “onset” — the initial phonological unit of any word (e.g., “c” in *cat*), and “rime” — the string of letters that follows (e.g., “at” in *cat*). Look for these concepts in the following language games you can play with emerging readers:

Rhyming and Word Families

Build phonological awareness by introducing children to the common elements in word families.

- Read literature with rhyming patterns, like *There’s a Wocket in My Pocket* or other Dr. Seuss books. Ask students to recall some of the rhyming pairs.
- Build word family charts by creating word lists with the same rimes: /at/ = bat, cat, sat, and rat.
- Odd Word Out: Provide three words and ask students to eliminate the word that doesn’t rhyme (e.g., coat, stick, and boat).
- See the Collect Resources section on the Onset-Rime Games page of the Reading Rockets site for additional activities: <https://www.readingrockets.org/classroom/classroom-strategies/onset-rime-games>.

Word, Syllable, and Phoneme Counting

Ask students to count the number of sounds in a word, syllables in a word, or words in a sentence.

- The word *shut* has three sounds: /sh/ - /u/ - /t/.
- The word *banana* has three syllables: ba-na-na.
- The sentence “I ate cereal for breakfast” has five words.



Sound Synthesis

Provide students with a selection of phonemes that, when put together, make a familiar word.

- It starts with /m/ and ends with /an/; put it together and it says ... (man).
- Put these sounds together to make a word: /gr/ - /a/ - /b/ = grab.

Sound-to-Word Matching

Ask students to either pull sounds from words or confirm that a certain sound is present.

- What is the first sound you hear in the word *fish*? (/f/)
- Is there a /b/ in *ball*? Is there a /g/ in *rug*?

Where Is the Sound?

Recite a word to students and ask them to identify the location of a particular sound: either the beginning, middle, or end of the word.

- Where do you hear the /b/ in *bat*? (At the beginning)
- Where do you hear /g/ in *bug*? (At the end)
- Where do you hear /a/ in *cat*? (In the middle)

Sound Segmentation

Ask students to break a word apart into sounds. Students can do this orally or on paper. You can also use [Elkonin sound boxes](#) as a visual tool to show each sound or phoneme in a separate box. The student can move a small object like a coin or toy car into the box when then hear that sound.

- What sounds do you hear in the word *sit*? (/s/ - /l/ - /t/)
- What sounds do you hear in the word *chip*? (/chi/ - /i/ - /p/)

Word Manipulation Through Phoneme Deletion

As students become good at phonemic awareness activities, increase the demand by challenging them to remove a phoneme from a word or divide compound words.

- Say *hot dog* without the word dog ... (hot).
- If I said *blast* without the /b/, I'd have ... (last). If I said *stink* without the /t/, I'd have ... (sink).
- What sound do you hear in *meat* that is missing in *eat*? (/m/)

Letter-Sound Association

Ask students to identify the letter that makes the sound in a particular position in a spoken word.

- What letter goes with the first sound in the word *dog*? (d)
- What letter goes with the last sound in the word *kite*? (t)

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