

Developing Phonological Awareness from *Handprints*

Identifying Beginning and Ending Consonant Sounds

Research shows that children who have trouble hearing sounds in words are likely to have difficulty learning to read. This ability to detect sounds in oral language is called *phonological awareness*. Phonologically aware children understand that our spoken language is made up of sentences, words, syllables, onsets and rimes, and finally, individual sounds. They can blend isolated word parts (sounds, onsets and rimes, and syllables) into words or can say words slowly to hear the individual sounds, or phonemes. Children without these abilities will clearly be at a disadvantage when attempting to use print cues in reading and writing.¹

Hearing initial consonant sounds is one of the first ways children develop phonological awareness. By associating key words with letters, children can connect a letter with a sound it makes. Then the process of identifying initial sounds becomes a matching process rather than an attempt to isolate the sound a letter makes.

Locating and identifying final consonant sounds is another step in developing phonological awareness. This should only be attempted when students can easily locate and identify initial sounds. Children may confuse beginning and ending sounds at first; however, it is generally easier for children to identify initial and final consonant sounds in words than medial vowel sounds.

Hearing Onsets and Rimes

An onset is the consonant sound(s) at the beginning of a syllable (the /c/ in *cat*; the /sw/ in *swing*). A rime consists of the vowel sound in a syllable and any sounds that follow it (/at/ in *cat*; /ing/ in *swing*).

Researchers have discovered that children read unfamiliar words most easily by comparing them to words they already know. For example, a student trying to read *bat* would compare it to the known word, *cat*. In order to make this analogy, children need to be able to segment words into onsets and rimes (*b-at*, *c-at*) and to recognize

rhyiming words. They also need a good supply of sight words. This method of teaching phonetic decoding through analogies is called analytic phonics.

There are several reasons why, in the early stages of learning to read, many children find it easier to make onset-rime analogies than to decode new words one sound at a time (*b-a-t*). First of all, sequential decoding puts more demands on the auditory sequential memory. For example, children might confuse the order of the sounds or forget the sound altogether (read *tab* for *boat*). In addition, many early emergent readers are able to attend to only one- or two-letter cues in a word, usually the first and, possibly, the last letter. Finally, in order to decode a word sequentially, from left to right, the individual vowel sound must be included, but the vowel sounds are more difficult to discriminate between and remember than the consonant sounds and are therefore harder to decode, especially for beginning readers.

Hearing Consonant Combinations

After students have learned to identify most initial and final consonant sounds, they are ready to learn consonant combinations: two-letter blends and digraphs. A blend is two or more consonants, elided together, but both of which are heard. A consonant digraph is two or more consonants which make one sound.

After becoming familiar with the sounds of consonant blends and digraphs, students learn to use these combinations to complete analogies, adding two letters to the ending or beginning of known words (*too – tooth*; *at – flat*) or changing an initial letter to two initial letters (*see – free*).

Hearing Vowel Sounds

Although many children find it easier to read words through analogy at first, some reading researchers suggest that eventually good readers develop the ability to decode sequentially. In order to decode words one sound at a time, students must be able to recognize vowel sounds. Children tend to learn vowel sounds later than consonant

sounds. Vowel letters can have several sounds; these sounds are similar to each other and therefore difficult for children to discriminate between. Also, vowel sounds are usually in the middle of a word, which is the hardest position for children to hear.

Counting Syllables

Another example of phonological awareness is the ability to identify the number of syllables in a word. Listening for the “beats” in spoken words prepares children for future encoding and decoding of multi-syllabic words.

Using Sight Words

Students expand the supply of high-frequency words that they can recognize by sight by using these words in context (with language cues) and with pictures (meaning cues). This core of known words will be a base upon which students build their knowledge of how words are made and taken apart.

Ann Staman, *Handprints Book C Teacher's Guide*, available from Educators Publishing Service.

References

² Teachers can enhance their students' phonological awareness through many activities. Together with students, teachers can clap syllables; read nursery rhymes, poetry, and jingles; sing rhyming songs; play games with adding, subtracting, and substituting sounds (begin everyone's name with /t/, /v/, etc.); and practice listening to words that begin with the same sounds.