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Phonemic Activities for the Preschool or Elementary Classroom

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Activities that stimulate phonemic awareness in preschool and elementary school children are one sure way to get a child ready for reading! Here are eight of them from expert Marilyn Jager Adams.

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This article features activities designed to stimulate the development of phonemic awareness in preschool and elementary school children. The activities originally appeared in the book [Phonemic Awareness in Young Children: A Classroom Curriculum](#).

Listening to sequences of sounds

From chapter 3: Listening games

Objective

To develop the memory and attentional abilities for thinking about sequences of sounds and the language for discussing them.

Materials needed

Objects that make interesting, distinctive sounds. Some examples follow:

banging on wall/table/lap	opening window or drawer
blowing	pouring liquid
blowing a whistle	ringing a bell
blowing nose	rubbing hands together
clapping	scratching
clicking with tongue	sharpening a pencil
closing purse	slamming a book
coloring hard on paper	smashing crackers
coughing	snapping fingers
crumpling paper	stamping
cutting with a knife	stirring with teaspoon
cutting with scissors	tearing paper
dropping (various things)	tiptoeing
drumming with fingers	turning on computer
eating an apple	walking
folding paper	whistling
hammering	writing on board
hopping	writing with a pencil
noisy chewing	

Activity

In this game, the children are challenged first to identify single sounds and then to identify each one of a sequence of sounds. Both will be very important in the language games to come. The children are to cover their eyes with their hands while you make a familiar noise such as closing the door, sneezing, or playing a key on the piano. By listening carefully and without peeking, the children are to try to identify the noise.

Once the children have caught on to the game, make two noises, one after the other. Without peeking, the children are to guess the two sounds in sequence saying, "There were two sounds. First we heard a _____, and then we heard a _____."

After the children have become quite good with pairs of noises, produce a series of more than two for them to identify and report in sequence. Again, complete sentences should be encouraged.

Remember that, to give every child the opportunity to participate mentally in these games, it is important to discourage all children from calling out their answers until they are asked to do so. In addition, both to support full participation and to allow assessment of individual students, it is helpful to switch unpredictably between inviting a response from the whole group and from individual children of your designation.

Note: Because of the importance of the skill exercised through this game, invest special care in noting every child's progress and difficulties. Extra opportunities should be created to work with children who are having trouble with the concept of sequences or in expressing their responses.

Variations

- With the children's eyes closed, make a series of sounds. Then repeat the sequence, but omit one of the sounds. The children must identify the sound that has been omitted from the second sequence.
- Invite the children to make sounds for their classmates to guess.
- These games also offer good opportunities to review, exercise, and evaluate children's use of ordinal terms, such as first, second, third, middle, last. It is worth ensuring that every student gains comfortable, receptive, and expressive command of these terms.

Nonsense

From chapter 3: Listening games

Objective

To develop the children's ability to attend to differences between what they expect to hear and what they actually hear.

Materials needed

Book of familiar stories or poems

Activity

Invite the children to sit down and close their eyes so that they can concentrate on what they will hear. Then recite or read aloud a familiar story or poem to the children but, once in a while, by changing its words or wording, change its sense to nonsense. The children's challenge is to detect such changes whenever they occur. When they do, encourage them to explain what was wrong. As the game is replayed in more subtle variations across the year, it will also serve usefully to sharpen the children's awareness of the phonology, words, syntax, and semantics of language.

As illustrated in the following list, you can change any text in more or less subtle ways at a number of different levels including phonemes, words, grammar, and meaning. Because of this, the game can be profitably and enjoyable revisited again and again throughout the year. Even so, in initial plays of the game, it is important that the changes result in violations of the sense, meaning, and wording of the text that are relatively obvious. Following are some examples of the "nonsense" that can be created within familiar poems and rhymes:

<i>Song a sing of sixpence</i>	Reverse words
<i>Baa baa purple sheep</i>	Substitute words
<i>Twinkle, twinkle little car</i>	Substitute words
<i>Humpty Dumpty wall on a sat</i>	Swap word order
<i>Jack fell down and crown his broke</i>	Swap word order
<i>One, two shuckle my boo</i>	Swap word parts
<i>I'm a tittle leapot</i>	Swap word parts
<i>The eensy weensy spider went up the spouter wat.</i>	Swap word parts
<i>One, two, buckle my shoe Five, six, pick up sticks</i>	Switch order of events
<i>Little Miss Muffet, eating a tuffet Sat on her curds and whey</i>	Switch order of events
<i>Goldilocks went inside and knocked on the door.</i>	Switch order of events
<i>The first little piggy built himself a house of bricks.</i>	Switch order of events

Note: Don't forget to switch unpredictably between asking the whole group or individual children to respond.

Clapping names

From chapter 6: Awareness of syllables

Objective

To introduce the children to the nature of syllables by leading them to clap and count the syllables in their own names.

Activity

When you first introduce this activity, model it by using several names of contrasting lengths. Pronounce the first name of one of the children in the classroom syllable by syllable while clapping it out before inviting the children to say and clap the name along with you. After each name has been clapped, ask "How many syllables did you hear?"

Once children have caught on, ask each child to clap and count the syllables in his or her own name. Don't forget last names, too! It is easy to continue clapping other words and to count the syllables in each. If a name has many syllables, you may need to let children count the syllables as they are clapping.

Variations

- Ask the children to clap and count the syllables of their first and last names together.
- After determining the number of syllables in a name, ask the children to hold two fingers horizontally under their chins, so they can feel the chin drop for each syllable. To maximize this effect, encourage the children to elongate or stretch each syllable.
- As follows, this activity can be done to a rhythmic chant, such as "Bippity, Bippity Bumble Bee":

Bippity, bippity bumble bee, Tell me what your name should be.

(Point to a child; that child responds by giving his name. Class repeats name out loud. Continue with one of the following:)

- "Clap it!" (Children repeat name, enunciating and clapping to each syllable.)
- "Whisper it!" (Children whisper each syllable while clapping.)
- "Silent!" (Children repeat name, silently enunciating syllables with mouth movement.)

Finding things: Initial phonemes

From chapter 7: Initial and final sounds

Objective

To extend children's awareness of initial phonemes by asking them to compare, contrast, and eventually identify the initial sounds of a variety of words.

Materials needed

Picture cards

Activity

This game should be played as an extension of Activity 7B: Different Words, Same Initial Phoneme. [Editor's note: this activity is found in the authors' book]. Spread a few pictures out in the middle of the circle. Then ask the children to find those pictures whose names start with the initial sound on which they have just been working. As each picture is found, the child is to say its name and initial phoneme as before (e.g., *f-f-f-f-ish*, */f:f:f:f/, fish*).

Variations

- As the children become more comfortable with the game, spread out pictures from two different sets, asking the children to identify the name and initial phoneme of each picture and to sort them into two piles accordingly.
- Pass pictures out to the children; each must identify the initial phoneme of her or his picture and put it in the corresponding pile. This game works well with small groups.
- Sound-traition: Pass pictures of objects or animals to the children, naming each picture and placing it face down on the table or carpet. Children take turns flipping pairs of pictures right side up and deciding if the initial sounds of the pictures' names are the same. If the initial sounds match, the child selects another pair; otherwise, another child takes a turn. This game works well with small groups.

Word pairs I: Take a sound away (analysis)

From chapter 7: Initial and final sounds

Objective

To help the children to separate the sounds of words from their meanings.

Activity

By showing the children that if the initial phoneme of a word is removed a totally different word may result, this activity further helps children to separate the sounds of words from their meanings. With the children seated in a circle, explain that sometimes when you take a sound away from a word, you end up with a totally different word.

To give the children an example, say "f-f-f-ear," elongating the initial consonant, and have the children repeat. Then say "ear," and have the children repeat. Ask the children if they can determine which sound has been taken away and repeat the words for them (i.e., f-f-f-ear – ear – f-f-f-ear – ear).

In this way, the children are challenged to attend to the initial phonemes of words even as they come to realize that the presence or absence of the initial phoneme results in two different words. Across days, gradually work up from the easier initial consonants to harder ones. Sample word lists are provided at the end of the chapter.

Note: Most children can identify the "hidden word" but have a great deal of difficulty in identifying what is taken away. Children may also be inclined to produce rhyming words rather than to focus on initial sounds. With this in mind, take care not to flip back and forth between the activities involving rhyming and initial sounds.

Variations

- To help the children notice that the initial sound makes a big difference in the words' meanings, ask them to use each word in a sentence.
- When the children are comfortable with this game, play it with game 7I: Spider's Web. [Editor's note: this activity is found in the authors' book].
- Call the children to line up by naming their first names without the initial sound (e.g., [J]-onathon). The children have to figure out whose name has been called and what sound is missing. You may want to delete initial blends as a unit until after blends have been introduced in Chapter 8 (e.g., [St]-anley).

Word pairs II: Add a sound (synthesis)

From chapter 7: Initial and final sounds

Objective

To introduce children to the challenge of synthesizing words from their separate phonemes.

Activity

Seat the children in a circle, and begin by explaining that sometimes a new word can be made by adding a sound to a word. As an example, say "ox," and have the children repeat it. Then ask what will happen if they add a new sound to the beginning of the word such as f-f-f-f-f: "f-f-f-f-f...ox, f-f-f-f-f...ox, f-f-f-f-f-ox." The children say, "fox!" You should then explain, "We put a new sound on the beginning, and we have a new word!"

Until the children catch on, you should provide solid guidance, asking the children to say the word parts with you in unison (e.g., "ice...m-,-, ...ice...m-m-m-ice...mice"). Again, it is appropriate to work up gradually, across days, from the easier initial consonants to harder ones and, only after the latter are reasonably well established, to consonant blends (e.g., *mile-smile*).

Variations

- Invite the children to use each word of a pair in a sentence to emphasize the difference in their meanings.
- When the children are good at this, play it with 7I: Spider's Web. [Editor's note: this activity is found in the authors' book].

Two-sound words

From chapter 8: Phonemes

Objective

To introduce the children to the challenges of analyzing words into phonemes and of synthesizing words from phonemes.

Materials needed

- Blocks
- Two-phoneme word cards

Activity

These two-sound games serve to introduce the procedure and logic of the more difficult phonemic analysis and synthesis activities that follow. In addition, two-sound words provide an unfettered medium for giving children practice with the sounds of the various phonemes, both in isolation

and as blended together in phonologically minimal words.

In view of this, it is more helpful to revisit them as needed by individuals or by the group than to dwell too long in any given session. Because of their foundational importance, however, it is critical that every child grasp this concept before moving on to the more advanced activities.

On the first day, it is sufficient to do analysis only. On subsequent days, begin with analysis and shift to synthesis. Similarly, for the first few days, it is wise to separate play with initial consonant words from play with final consonant words for clarity. Once the children have caught on, the two types of words could be freely intermixed. Finally, because the short vowels are so much more variable and less distinctive in both sound and articulation, their introduction should be deferred until the children are reasonably comfortable with long-vowel words.

Again, to clarify the children's image of the phonemes and to support their ability to distinguish them one from another, it is valuable to ask them to feel how their mouths change position with each sound or to look at their mouths in a mirror while saying the words. In addition, as in all of the phonemic awareness activities, it is important to ensure that the students are familiar with each word used in these exercises. If you suspect that any of your students are not, it is wise to review the word's meaning and usage.

Note: To play these games, each of the children should have two blocks. In addition, you should have two blocks of your own and a set of pictures of two-phoneme words. Also, before beginning, it is important to have read the introduction to this chapter.

The analysis game

A child picks a card and names what it depicts. For this example, let us assume that the child chooses a picture of a hair bow. You would repeat the word, but slowly and with a clear pause (about a half-second interval) between its two phonemes (e.g., "b..ō"). Then all the children should repeat the word in this same manner, "b..ō..." To show that the word *bow* consists of two separate sounds, the teacher now places blocks in two different colors underneath the picture as she enunciates the sound represented by each.

The children then repeat the word sound by sound while representing the sounds of the word, left to right, with their own blocks. The children should repeat the sounds while pointing to the respective blocks and then the word, pausing slightly less between phonemes with each repetition. (e.g., "b..ō..., *bow*, b..ō..., *bow*, b..ō, *bow*, b-ō..*bow*").

The synthesis game

This game is just the reverse of the analysis game and likewise requires that you model the procedure before turning it over to the children. Choose a picture and place it face down so the children cannot see it. Then name the picture, phoneme by phoneme (e.g., "b..ō"), while placing the blocks beneath the picture. While pointing to their own blocks, the children must repeat the phonemes over and over and faster and faster as they did in the analysis game. When they believe they know the identity of the picture they should raise their hands. The teacher may then ask the group or any individual to name the picture. After resolving any disagreements, the picture is held up for all to see.

After modeling several words in this way, pass the challenge to the children. For each new picture, help them agree on its name and give them time to analyze it on their own. To gain a good sense of who is and is not catching on, ask one or more individuals to share his or her solution to each word. Then the whole group should repeat the solution together, voicing the separate phonemes of the word as they point to their corresponding blocks.

Variations

- Extend the exercise to unpictured words. At the outset of each analysis challenge, be sure to use each word in a sentence for the sake of clarity (e.g., "Chew. Please *chew* your food before you swallow it. Chew.") Similarly, ask the children to use each word in a sentence as part of the wrap-up of each synthesis challenge.
- Later, this game can be used to teach the alphabetic principle by replacing the colored block with letter tokens. If you choose to do so, however, bear in mind that to convey the essential logic of the alphabetic principle, it is best that all words include one letter for each sound, left to right. With this in mind, avoid words with silent letters or digraphs. Use only short vowel words, and, among those, only those that are spelled with two letters (e.g., *in* and *am* are fine, but not *edge* or *itch*).

Note: All of the words in the following lists consist of only two phonemes. Nevertheless, due to the vagaries of English, the spellings of many involve more than two letters. For this reason, showing the words' spellings will only confuse the issue for now. The following are examples of two-sound words with initial consonants and long vowels:

day	bee	bye	bow /bō/	boo
hay	fee	die	doe	chew
jay	gee	guy	go	coo
may	he	hi	hoe	do
pay	knee	lie	low	goo
ray	me	my	mow	moo
say	pea	pie	no	shoe
way	see	rye	row /rō/	two
	she	sigh	sew /sō/	who
	tea	tie	show	you
	we	why	toe	zoo

The following are examples of two-sound words with final consonant sounds and long vowels:

ace	each	ice	oak
ache	ease		oat
age	eat		own
aid	eel		
ail			
aim			
ape			
eight			

The following are examples of two-sound words with final consonant sounds and short vowels:

add	edge	ick	odd	up
am	Ed	if	off	us
an		ill	on	
as		in		
ash		is		
at		it		
		itch		

Troll talk II: Phonemes

From chapter 8: Phonemes

Objective

To reinforce students' ability to synthesize words from their separate phonemes.

Activity

This activity is analogous to that presented in 6E: Troll Talk I: Syllables, [Editor's note: this activity is found in the authors' book] except that the troll describes his treats phoneme by phoneme instead of syllable by syllable. Everyone sits in a circle, and the teacher tells a tale:

Once upon a time, there was a kind, little troll who loved to give people presents. The only catch was that the troll always wanted people to know what their present was before giving it to them. The problem was that the little troll had a very strange way of talking. If he was going to tell a child that the present was a bike, he would say "b-i-k." Not until the child has guessed what the present was would he be completely happy. Now I will pretend to be the troll. I will name a surprise for one of you. When you figure out what it is, it will be your turn.

Choose one child and pronounce the name of the present, phoneme by phoneme. When the child guesses the word, she or he is to name a present for somebody else. Work up from short (two- and three-sound) words to longer ones as the children become more adept at hearing the sounds. It is best to limit the game to only four or five children on any given day or it becomes a bit long. Examples of gifts include the following:

ape	cheese	moose	soap
bean	desk	pan	stool
book	dog	pea	stump
bow	dress	pen	tie
bread	eel	phone	train
brick	glass	shoe	truck
broom	ice	skate	

Note: If the students are not familiar with trolls, then substitute another person or creature from folklore such as a leprechaun, unicorn, or elf.

Variation

- Each child gets from one to three "secret" pictures. They may now give the things in the pictures as "presents," one thing at a time, to another child by sounding out the word. The child who receives the present has to guess what it is before she or he can have the picture.

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