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Reading Rockets

The Development of Phonological Skills

By: [Louisa Moats](#), [Carol Tolman](#)



Basic listening skills and "word awareness" are critical precursors to phonological awareness. Learn the milestones for acquiring phonological skills.

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Phonological skill develops in a predictable progression. This concept is important, as it provides the basis for sequencing teaching tasks from easy to more difficult. Table 1 outlines the relative difficulty of phonological awareness tasks. Table 2 is a more specific synthesis of several research reviews and summaries (Adams et al., 1998; Gillon, 2004; Goswami, 2000; Paulson, 2004; Rath, 2001) that ties specific ages to the typical accomplishment of those phonological awareness tasks.

Prerequisite to phonological awareness is basic listening skill; the acquisition of a several-thousand word vocabulary; the ability to imitate and produce basic sentence structures; and the use of language to express needs, react to others, comment on experience, and understand what others intend.

[Table 1. Phonological skills, from most basic to advanced](#)

Phonological Skill	Description
Word awareness	Tracking the words in sentences. Note: This semantic language skill is much less directly predictive of reading than the skills that follow and less important to teach directly (Gillon, 2004). It is not so much a phonological skill as a semantic (meaning-based) language skill.
Responsiveness to rhyme and alliteration during word play	Enjoying and reciting learned rhyming words or alliterative phrases in familiar storybooks or nursery rhymes.
Syllable awareness	Counting, tapping, blending, or segmenting a word into syllables.
Onset and rime manipulation	The ability to produce a rhyming word depends on understanding that rhyming words have the same rime. Recognizing a rhyme is much easier than producing a rhyme.
Phoneme awareness	Identify and match the initial sounds in words, then the final and middle sounds (e.g., "Which picture begins with /m/?"; "Find another picture that ends in /r/"). Segment and produce the initial sound, then the final and middle sounds (e.g., "What sound does zoo start with?"; "Say the last sound in milk "; "Say the vowel sound in rope "). Blend sounds into words (e.g., "Listen: /f/ /ē/ /t/. Say it fast"). Segment the phonemes in two- or three-sound words, moving to four- and five- sound words as the student becomes proficient (e.g., "The word is eyes . Stretch and say the sounds: /ī/ /z/"). Manipulate phonemes by removing, adding, or substituting sounds (e.g., "Say smoke without the /m/").

Table 2. Ages at which 80-90 percent of typical students have achieved a phonological skill

Age	Skill Domain	Sample Tasks
4	Rote imitation and enjoyment of rhyme and alliteration	pool, drool, tool "Seven silly snakes sang songs seriously."
	Rhyme recognition, odd word out	"Which two words rhyme: stair, steel, chair? "
5	Recognition of phonemic changes in words	" <i>Hickory Dickory Clock</i> . That's not right!"
	Clapping, counting syllables	truck (1 syllable) airplane (2 syllables) boat (1 syllable) automobile (4 syllables)
	Distinguishing and remembering separate phonemes in a series	Show sequences of single phonemes with colored blocks: /s/ /s/ /f/; /z/ /sh/ /z/.
5½	Blending onset and rime	"What word?" th-umb qu-een h-ope
	Producing a rhyme	"Tell me a word that rhymes with car ." (star)
	Matching initial sounds; isolating an initial sound	"Say the first sound in ride (/r/); sock (/s/); love (/l/)."
6	Compound word deletion	"Say cowboy . Say it again, but don't say cow ."

	Syllable deletion	"Say parsnip . Say it again, but don't say par ."
	Blending of two and three phonemes	/z/ /ū/ (zoo) /sh/ /ō/ /p/ (shop) /h/ /ou/ /s/ (house)
	Phoneme segmentation of words that have simple syllables with two or three phonemes (no blends)	"Say the word as you move a chip for each sound." sh-e m-a-n l-e-g
6½	Phoneme segmentation of words that have up to three or four phonemes (include blends)	"Say the word slowly while you tap the sounds." b-a-ck ch-ee-se c-l-ou-d
	Phoneme substitution to build new words that have simple syllables (no blends)	"Change the /j/ in cage to /n/. Change the /ā/ in cane to /ō/."
7	Sound deletion (initial and final positions)	"Say meat . Say it again, without the /m/. "Say safe . Say it again, without the /f/."
8	Sound deletion (initial position, include blends)	"Say prank . Say it again, without the /p/."
9	Sound deletion (medial and final blend positions)	"Say snail . Say it again, without the /n/. "Say fork . Say it again, without the /k/."

Paulson (2004) confirmed the hierarchy of phonological skill acquisition in 5-year-olds entering kindergarten. Only 7 percent of 5-year-olds who had not yet had kindergarten could segment phonemes in spoken words. The production of rhymes was more difficult for 5-year-olds than commonly assumed, as only 61 percent could give a rhyming word for a stimulus. Only 29 percent could blend single phonemes into whole words. Although some young students will pick up these skills with relative ease during the kindergarten year — especially if the curriculum includes explicit activities — other students must be taught these metalinguistic skills directly and systematically.

Moats, L., & Tolman, C (2009). Excerpted from *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS): The Speech Sounds of English: Phonetics, Phonology, and Phoneme Awareness (Module 2)*. Boston: Sopris West.

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