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Learning to read begins well before the first day of school. When Ron and Donna tell nursery rhymes to their baby, Mia, they are beginning to teach Mia to read. They are helping her to hear the similarities and differences in the sounds of words. She will begin to manipulate and understand sounds in spoken language, and she will practice this understanding by making up rhymes and new words of her own. She will learn the names of the letters and she will learn the different sounds each letter represents. As she gets a little older, Ron and Donna will teach her to write letters and numbers that she will already recognize by their shapes. Finally, she will associate the letters of the alphabet with the sounds of the words she uses when she speaks. At this point, she is on her way to learning to read!

When she tries to read books with her parents, at school, and on her own, Mia will learn how to learn new words by sounding them out. With more practice, she will begin to recognize familiar words easily and quickly, and she will know the patterns of spelling that appear in words and the patterns of words as they appear in sentences. She will be able to pay attention not just to the letters and words, but to the meanings they represent. Ultimately, Mia will be able to think about the meaning of the text as she reads.

WHERE DOES PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS FIT INTO THIS

PROCESS?Key to the process of learning to read is Mia's ability to identify the different sounds that make words and to associate these sounds with written words. In order to learn thread, Mia must be aware of phonemes. A phoneme is the smallest functional unit of sound. For example, the word "cat" contains three distinctly different sounds. There are 44 phonemes in the English language, including letter combinations such as /th/.

In addition to identifying these sounds, Mia must also be able to manipulate them. Word play involving segmenting words into their constituent sounds, rhyming words, and blending sounds to make words is also essential to the reading process. The ability to identify and manipulate the sounds of language is called phonological awareness. Adams (1990) described five levels of phonological awareness ranging from an awareness of rhyme to being able to switch or substitute the components in a word. While phonological awareness affects early reading ability, the ability to read also increases phonological awareness (Smith, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995).

Many children with learning disabilities have deficiencies in their ability to process phonological information. Thus, they do not readily learn how to relate letters of the alphabet to the sounds of language (Lyon, 1995). For all students, the processes of phonological awareness, including phonemic awareness, must be explicitly taught.

Children from culturally diverse backgrounds may have particular difficulties with phonological awareness. Exposure to language at home, exposure to reading at an early age, and dialect all affect the ability of children to understand the phonological distinctions on which the English language is built. Teachers must apply sensitive effort and use a variety of techniques to help children learn these skills when standard English is not spoken at home (Lyon, 1994).

HOW IS PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS TAUGHT?

To teach phonological awareness, begin by demonstrating the relationships of parts to wholes. Then model and demonstrate how to segment short sentences into individual words, showing how the sentence is made up of words. Use chips or other manipulatives to represent the number of words in the sentence. Once the students understand part-whole relationships at the sentence level, move on to the word level, introducing multisyllable words for segmentation into syllables. Finally, move to phoneme tasks by modeling a specific sound and asking the students to produce that sound both in isolation and in a variety of words and syllables.
It is best to begin with easier words and then move on to more difficult ones. Five characteristics make a word easier or more difficult (Kameenui, 1995):

1. The size of the phonological unit (e.g., it is easier to break sentences into words and words into syllables than to break syllables into phonemes).

2. The number of phonemes in the word (e.g., it is easier to break phonemically short words such as no, see and cap than snort, sleep or scrap).

3. Phoneme position in words (e.g., initial consonants are easier than final consonants and middle consonants are most difficult).

4. Phonological properties of words (e.g., continuant such as /s/ and /m/ are easier than very brief sounds such as /t/).

5. Phonological awareness challenges. (e.g., rhyming and initial phoneme identification are easier than blending and segmenting.)

Examples of phonological awareness tasks include phoneme deletion ("What word would be left if the /k/ sound were taken away from cat?"); word to word matching ("Do pen and pipe begin with the same sound?"); blending ("What word would we have if we blended these sounds together: /m/ /o/ /p/?"); phoneme segmentation ("What sounds do you hear in the word hot?"); phoneme counting ("How many sounds do you hear in the word cake?"); and rhyming ("Tell me all of the words that you know that rhyme with the word cat?") (Stanovich, 1994).

Beginning readers require more direct instructional support from teachers in the early stages of teaching. This is illustrated in the following example: The teacher models the sound or the strategy for making the sound, and has the children use the strategy to produce the sound. It is very important that the teacher model the correct sounds. This is done using several examples for each dimension and level of difficulty. The children are prompted to use the strategy during guided practice and more difficult examples are introduced. A sequence and schedule of opportunities for children to apply and develop facility with sounds should be tailored to each child's needs, and should be given top priority. Opportunities to engage in phonological awareness activities should be plentiful, frequent, and fun (Kameenui, 1995).

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