

Phonological and Phonemic Awareness

What Are They and Why Are They So Vital?

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When talking about early literacy, librarians are told that basic skills involve phonological awareness. Or phonemic awareness. Sometimes one of these skills is mentioned, and sometimes the other is highlighted. We've heard numerous questions about the difference between these two skills.

Most people think of phonics as the initial building blocks of literacy. In reality, there are several prerequisite skills needed before phonics instruction. These are phonological and phonemic awareness. These two words are commonly interchanged with each other, but while most people think they are the same thing, that is incorrect.

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is an umbrella term for multiple early literacy skills. It is the ability to hear and manipulate words and parts of words. These skills include identifying words in a sentence, rhyming, and syllable counting.¹ Phonological awareness prepares children to listen and differentiate words and parts of words. For instance, clapping out the syllables in words is a common method for helping children hear the different parts of a word. In addition, identifying and providing rhyming words is another essential skill of phonological awareness. These skills lend to the development of phonemic awareness.²

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate phonemes, the smallest unit of sound. The difference between

phonological and phonemic awareness is that phonological awareness is about hearing and identifying words and chunks of words; phonemic awareness focuses on individual sounds and how to manipulate them. For example, there are four phonemes in the word stop (s/t/o/p) but only three phonemes in the word shop (sh/o/p). It is not about the number of letters in a word but the sounds those letters make. Phonemic awareness skills include isolating, blending, and substituting sounds. Being able to do these skills orally leads to future literacy skills such as decoding.³

Both phonological and phonemic awareness are indicators of reading success; these initial literacy skills are vital for becoming a successful reader. The good news for librarians, parents, and educators is that game-based instruction is the easiest and best way to teach these skills; it makes learning fun and entertaining for children of all ages.⁴

Florida State University's Florida Center for Reading Research

<https://fcrr.org/student-center-activities>

This site provides downloadable materials that can be used in programs or as take-home activities for parents/caregivers with their children. For instance, under the topic of Phonological Awareness and age group Pre-K, there is the Rhymes Pocket Column that could easily be converted into a flannel board game. Put felt backings on the cards, and then choose four different rhyme cards to put across the top of the flannel board. Give out all the other cards, and ask the children to come up to the flannel board one at a time.



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Ask the entire group to say the name of the picture on the cards at the top of the flannel board and choose which one rhymes with the card the child is holding. Ask the child holding the rhyming card to put their card underneath the rhyming word.

Reading Rockets

<https://www.readingrockets.org/contentfinder?search=phonological+awareness>

The authors at Reading Rockets have been diligently working to make literacy instruction accessible for everyone. Their articles have a wide range of audiences, including educators, librarians, and parents. You can find basic guides and deep dives into all literacy skills. Their focus is that every child deserves the chance to learn how to read, so they provide information about how to help a variety of learners, such as neurodivergent learners, English language learners, and children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

University of Virginia

<https://literacy.virginia.edu/instructional-protocols>

The University of Virginia has been a trailblazer in literacy education. They have compiled a vast number of resources to aid in literacy instruction. This site provides instructional guides for all areas of literacy instruction, including how to set and manage routines to have successful sessions. They provide a lesson for each skill and how to differentiate it for individual children's instructional needs. This resource could be particularly helpful for school librarians.

Mother Goose on the Loose

<https://mgol.net/resources/>

Check out the Resources page of Mother Goose on the Loose for a short video diving a bit deeper into these topics. &

Newer Read-Alouds Supporting Phonological Awareness

- Antony, Steve. *Rainbowsaurus*. Illustrated by the author. Hodder, 2024. 32p.
- Bolling, Valerie. *Bing, Bop, Bam: Time to Jam!* Illustrated by Sabrena Khadija. Abrams, 2023. 40p.
- Brown-Wood, JaNay. *Jam, Too?* Illustrated by Jacqueline Alcántara. Nancy Paulsen Books, 2024. 32p.
- Charman, Katrina. *Hen in the Bed*. Illustrated by Guilherme Karsten. Nosy Crow, 2024. 32p.
- Evans, Lezlie. *Goats Afloat*. Illustrated by Julia Patton. Two Lions, 2025. 32p.
- Garcia, Emma. *Honk Honk Woo Woo*. Illustrated by the author. Boxer Books, 2024. 24p.
- Martin, Jr., Bill, and Sampson, Michael. *Bing! Bang! Chugga! Beep!* Illustrated by Nathalie Beauvois. Brown Books Kids, 2023. 32p.
- Mr. Jay. *Ricky, the Rock that Just Couldn't Rhyme*. Illustrated by Erin Wozniak. New Paige Press, 2023. 32p.
- Murray, Lily. *The Ballad of Cactus Joe*. Illustrated by Clive McFarland. Silver Dolphin Books, 2024. 32p.
- Sauer, Tammi. *Mary Had a Little Jam*. Illustrated by Vanessa Brantley-Newton. Union Square Kids, 2025. 32p.
- Schwartz, Amy. *Cinnamon Bun, I Love You I*. Illustrated by the author. Beach Lane, 2024. 32p.
- Sehgal, Kabir, and Sehgal, Surishtha. *Bhangra Baby*. Illustrated by Ani Bushry. Beach Lane, 2023. 32p.

References

1. Lee Branum-Martin, Sha Tao, and Sarah Garnaat, "Bilingual Phonological Awareness: Reexamining the Evidence for Relations Within and Across Languages," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 107, no.1 (2015): 111. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0037149>.
2. Timothy Shanahan, "The National Reading Panel Report: Practical Advice for Teachers." (Illinois: Learning Associates, 2005). 6–10. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED489535.pdf>.
3. Melike Ünal Gezer, "Turkey's Primary English-as-a-Foreign Language (EFL) Coursebooks: An Investigation of Emergent Literacy Tasks," *Cukurova University Faculty of Education Journal* 51, no.1 (2022): 220–236. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/1925314>.
4. M. Gregory Tweedie, Robert C. Johnson, D. William Kay, and Jody Shimoda, "Direct Phonemic Awareness Instruction as a Means of Improving Academic Text Comprehension for Adult Language Learners," *Journal of Educational Thought/Revue de la Pensée Educative* 48 no.1–2 (2015): 81–102.