

Helping Our Pre-schoolers Succeed

How Can We Help Our Pre-schoolers Succeed at Reading and Writing: The importance of phonological awareness and correct pencil grip

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How Do You Keep An Eye Out For Apps?

Most parents are keen for their young children to succeed academically and see the ability to read and write early as an important goal. Unfortunately, the building blocks of reading and writing may be missed in the rush to arrive at recognisable outcomes. Missing these early building blocks can lead to problems later on. This article focuses on two pre-requisite skills: phonological awareness for reading and spelling, and pencil grip for fluent, fast and legible handwriting.

Phonological awareness

Phonological awareness is the ability to hear the sounds in words. It is a pre-requisite skill for reading and writing.

People vary a great deal in their natural ability to identify the sounds within words. Children who cannot distinguish and manipulate the sounds in words usually have difficulty recognizing and learning the letter-sound relationships which are critical to reading and spelling success. All students, whatever their natural ability, benefit from being taught phonological awareness skills.

Phonological awareness skills include:-

- 1) The ability to isolate and distinguish individual sounds (e.g., fun starts with /f/)
- 2) The ability to identify initial sounds (e.g., 'bat', 'boy', and 'bun' all start with /b/)
- 3) The ability to recognise phonemic patterns (e.g., cat, mat, fat, sat rhyme)
- 4) The ability to segment (break up) words into separate sounds (e.g., 'cat' has 3 sounds /k/ /a/ /t/)
- 5) The ability to blend (join) sounds together (e.g., /t/ /o/ /p/ make the word 'top')
- 6) The ability to delete phonemes (e.g., Say 'train' without the /t/ = 'rain')
- 7) Manipulate phonemes (What would 'milk' be if it started with the /f/ sound instead of the /m/ sound? = '/filk/')

How and when should we begin to teach phonological awareness skills?

In preschool, phonological skills can be taught through fun, age-appropriate activities and games. Oral activities can easily be played for 5 to 10 minutes while you are driving the car, making dinner or playing games. Nursery rhymes are an excellent way to develop awareness of sound, rhyme and rhythm.

Rhyming texts by authors such as Pamela Allen, Lynley Dodd, Julia Donaldson and Sheena Knowles focus on both rhyme and rhythm.

Games you can play include:

- Games with beginning sounds in words. E.g. Sun starts with ss. What does the word "Sam" start with? /s/. Say the word slowly at first. Help the child learn to hear the sounds in the word. Say, "The word ___ starts with the sound ___. What other words can we think of that start with the ___ sound." E.g. "Milk" starts with the sound /m/. What else can you think of that starts with the sound /m/?" Help out at first with some words: /m/ mud; /m/ mum..." If the child says a word like 'cat', just say, "Oops! That word starts with the /k/ sound...listen /c/a/t/. What starts with /m/?"
- Play "silly word" games with beginning sounds. E.g. use the child's name and make silly words. E.g. "Jake, if your name started with /mmm/ what would it be? Make. How about /t/? Take. How about /b/? Bake.
- Sing silly sound songs. E.g., Sing twinkle, twinkle little star with all the words starting with the /mm/ sound (minkle, minkle, mittle mar).
- Rhyming activities. Say a word like 'cat' and see how many rhyming words the child can say. E.g. "What words rhyme with cat? hat, mat, pat, sat.. See if you can come up with some "silly" rhyming words e.g., zat, dat.
- Orally segment (break up) words. This is an auditory skill based on **sounds** not letter names or spelling. E.g., Tell me the sounds in the word 'cat': = /k/ /a/ /t/ ---Tell me the sounds in the word 'shut': = /sh/ /u/ /t/ ---Tell me the sounds in the word 'place': = /p/ /l/ /ai/ /s/
- Sound changing games. Tell the child a word and give instructions how to change it. E.g. say 'milk' without the /m/.... = 'ilk'. Or, "How would you say 'sing' if /ss/ was changed to /r/?" Answer: ring.

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Pencil grip

By the time they go to school, most children have a preferred hand for holding a pencil. As we encourage our children to write, we need to focus on correct pencil grip. The most common pencil grip has three elements:

- pencil is held in a stable position between the thumb, index and middle fingers
- index finger and thumb form an open space
- pencil is held about 1cm from the tip

With a correct pencil grip, we can write quickly and neatly. Using a correct pencil grip while tracing and colouring-in provides practice. If a correct grip is not taught as soon as a child

starts to hold a pencil regularly, by the time they get to school it is hard to correct the grip.

Children with a small hand or low finger strength may find it easier to control a pencil if it is half the standard length. You can buy short pencils for 'colouring-in' or cut a lead pencil in half.

All parents are keen for their children to succeed and we need to make sure we don't miss important building blocks along the way.

