

DEVELOPING PHONEMIC AWARENESS

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Most children start school already knowing that words are made up of different sounds, are aware of words that rhyme and can identify the beginning sound of a word. This is known as phonemic awareness. Educational research in the past twenty years has identified that one of the principal barriers to learning to read and spell effectively is lack of phonemic awareness.

Children with Specific Learning Difficulties usually have trouble with one or more of these skills or concepts. Many cannot break words down into their sounds, nor “put together” a series of sounds to make a word. Rather, they try to memorise the WHOLE word, which often leads to misplaced or omitted letters.

They also see each word in isolation and are often unaware of the patterns that exist in the English language which can usually be used to predict how a word should be pronounced or spelled. Unfortunately the English language has many exceptions to its “rules” which causes problems for most students, but particularly students with SLD.

Fortunately there are many simple activities and games that PARENTS can undertake to help their children develop phonemic awareness. It is important that these should always be treated informally and as “fun” activities, such as playing I Spy on a long car trip or creating a scrap book on a rainy afternoon, rather than seen as “lessons”.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The English language is based on words made from 44 sounds, created from 26 letters (the alphabet). These letters consist of two groups, consonants and vowels.

We use the letter sounds when reading and working out the spelling sequence of a word and the letter names when spelling aloud.

Whilst most consonants have only one sound, the vowels have several sounds and also combine with each other or a consonant to make new sounds. These variations create the most common “stumbling blocks” for the majority of SLD students.

CONSONANTS

Most consonants only make one sound. The exceptions are **c** (which can say either **k** as in **cat** or **s** as in **city**); **g** (which can say either **g** as in **got** or **j** as in **gym**); **s** (which can say either **s** as in **sit** or **z** as in **busy**) and **y** (which has three sounds, **y** as in **yet**, **i.e.** as in **my** and **ee** as in **happy**).

Consonant blends are when two or more consonants are said together, but do not change their sound, such as **st**, **gr**, **pl** and **str** at the beginning and **nd**, **mp** and **nk** at the end of a word or syllable.

The letter **h** combines with other consonants to make six completely new sounds. These are **ch**, **sh**, **ph**, **wh** and the two sounds of **th** (as in **they** and **with**). These new sounds are called consonant digraphs.

VOWELS

The vowels are **a**, **e**, **i**, **o** and **u** and sometimes **y**.

All vowels have at least two sounds: The short sound as in **bag**, **beg**, **big**, **bog**, **bug**, and the long sound (their name) as in **make**, **me**, **find**, **go**, **tune**. As well, **a**, when it is a syllable by itself, usually says **u** (as in bus). Examples include **along**, **Mia**, **billabong**

Vowels and consonants also combine in different ways to make a variety of new sounds such as in **boy**, **her**, **now**, **car**, **draw** and **light**. These variations are not normally introduced until late in Year 1, often cause difficulty for SLD students and are not covered in this article.

From the very beginning, it is important that children realise that vowels can say more than one thing. If you only teach **a** says “**a**” (as in **cat**), then this can be very confusing for children who have **a** in their names such as Maria or Paul.

The easiest way to introduce this idea is to explain that everyone in your family has their own name, but each person can say lots of different things. In the same way, letters have names, some only say one thing, but other letters say more than one thing.

Therefore, if you are teaching a letter such as **y**, say its name and then explain that it makes three sounds and that when you see it in a new word, you need to try

each of the sounds you know it makes to successfully work out the word.

SINGLE SOUNDS

To teach the single sounds, the best method is to allow the child to make a scrapbook and add extra pictures of interest over a period of time. A loose-leaf folder is best as this allows for extra pages to be added and also for the pages to be reordered if required (for example, put in alphabetical order at a later date.).

Initially have the child leaf through old brochures and magazines and cut out any pictures, which are of interest such as foods, animals, transport, and toys. These are then placed in a box and used when appropriate. At this stage, do not use pictures that start with a consonant blend, for example **tree**, as it is easier for the child to identify the beginning sound if there is only a single consonant.

Start with the beginning sounds of family members and a photo of that person. Write the letter at the top of the page. For example if the child's name is Bobby, write both **B** and **b** at the top of the page, paste a photo of Bobby on the page and then go through the box of pictures and take out any pictures that start with **b**. The child then pastes these on the page, saying both "b" and the word. However, do NOT write the word under the picture, as the emphasis is on the child listening, not seeing. Other pictures can be added at a later date, as they are found.

When teaching letters that say more than one sound, use a different page for each sound and ensure that the pictures used match the sound for that page. An excellent family activity is playing the well-known game I Spy, but using the beginning sound, rather than the letter name.

RHYMING

The ability to identify rhyme is also an area of difficulty for some SLD children. It is an important skill as many of our spelling patterns are based on rhyme. Fortunately this skill is relatively easy to learn. For example, if a child can spell **day**, he can easily learn to spell words such as may, say, pay, way, play, stray and spray but must also be taught the exceptions **grey** and **they** (which still rhyme) as sight words.

Activities

- thinking of as many words as possible to rhyme with a given word (both real and nonsense words are allowed),
- playing I Spy but as "I spy with my little eye, something rhyming with"

SYLLABLES

Children need to learn to break words into syllables as well as breaking words into the individual sounds. The easiest way to learn about syllables is clapping or tapping to match each syllable. For example, the name David has two syllables, so the child would clap twice as he says the name and someone else counts the claps. As the child develops skill and understanding, he can put one finger down for each syllable and then count the number of fingers used.

Activities

- Clapping the names of different members of the family and identifying the number of syllables in each name.
- Clapping the names of friends, animals, favourite foods, sports, toys, books, etc
- Making a scrapbook. Cut out pictures from magazines and sort them into groups according to the number of syllables. Write the number of syllables at the top of each page and paste all pictures with that number of syllables on to that page. If a loose leaf binder is used, extra pages can be added for each number
- As a family take turns to name animals, foods, birds, car makes, etc
 - > with one syllable: e.g. dog, cat, horse, cow,
 - > with two syllables: e.g. tiger, lion, giraffe,
 - > with three syllables: e.g. elephant, kangaroo, koala, goanna, platypus

CONCLUSION

Finally, remember that phonemic awareness is about HEARING, not seeing. The extra listening experiences that parents can provide using "fun" activities will allow SLD students the opportunity to develop their basic phonemic awareness. So, enjoy the games and activities, have quality time with your child, whilst giving him or her a solid foundation on which to build phonemic awareness, phonics and language patterns – all skills and understandings which must be in place, in order for the child to become a confident and competent reader and speller.

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