

## **CHAPTER 5**

# **Learning Phonics: Strategies That Support Beginning Readers and Writers**

**L**earning phonics is not something children do in a vacuum. It occurs within the context of family and school environments that influence whether or not children are successful. Virtually all children come to school having had some exposure to print during their daily lives; however, the nature and extent of this exposure varies widely. It is no surprise that children's ability to learn phonics is related to the frequency and quality of their informal experiences with written and oral language. The concepts presented in this chapter provide a foundation for phonics and continue to develop along with phonics. Children begin to develop these concepts at home and in school settings with early-childhood caregivers and teachers. They learn best when the adults who care for them *plan* for the activities and experiences to happen in relatively informal and enjoyable ways rather than as a set of rigidly prescribed, formal lessons.

## **Strategies for Developing the Foundations of Reading and Writing**

*Print awareness* involves an understanding that reading and writing represent ideas, knowledge, and thoughts. At-

tention to print is an important first step toward developing an understanding of what it means to be a reader and writer, even though it may or may not predict an ease of understanding the relations between the sounds and symbols of written language. Adults promote children's print awareness by providing print rich environments and by being responsive to young children's questions and comments about print.

*Print concepts* are the arbitrary conventions that govern written language, such as spaces between words, directionality, and punctuation. Developing an understanding of how print works is essential to make sense of written language. Adults promote an understanding of print concepts when they move their hand from left to right while reading a familiar phrase or sentence, point to individual words to help children associate the spoken and written forms, call attention to the need to put spaces between words while



*A student creates a story at a literacy center.*

writing a note or list dictated by a child, and respond to children's questions about periods or question marks they have noticed during reading or writing.

*Functions of print* involves knowledge of how print is used for everyday purposes, such as writing notes and letters, reading newspapers and magazines, making and using lists, and using a television guide. Children who realize the functional relevance of written language are more likely to be motivated to explore its use for their own purposes. Adults include children in functional activities involving print, such as clipping coupons from a supermarket circular, writing a note to a friend, writing a list of things to do, and reading a menu at a restaurant.

*Knowledge of narrative structure* involves understanding the nature of stories and how they are constructed. Knowledge of the structure of stories is important because most of the material used to teach reading to young children is written in narrative form. Children are likely to understand material presented in a form with which they are familiar. Reading and rereading storybooks aloud to children is one of the best ways to build a sense of stories. Storytelling by adults and children is entertaining and is a natural way to reinforce and extend children's conceptions of how characters, plot, setting, and other story elements work together to form narratives.

*Literacy as a source of enjoyment* refers to the development of a positive attitude toward reading and other literacy experiences. Children who have positive attitudes and expectations about reading are more likely to be motivated to learn to read. Adults can share books of all types: stories, informational books, and poetry. This is one of the best ways to promote a sense that reading is fun. Books that contain humor and language play provide enjoyment while fostering a sensitivity to language. Anyone who reads the title is not surprised that Joseph Slate's alliterative rhyming animal alphabet story, *Miss Bindergarten Gets Ready for Kindergarten* is a big hit with young children. Having paper, writing instru-

ments, and books available for children's pretend play and independent exploration allows them to explore these materials on their own terms. Drawing and writing often become an integral part of pretending as children explore their use for self-expression.

**It seems that opportunities to engage in extended discourse in the home build skills in producing extended discourse of precisely the type that is needed for high levels of literacy. (Snow & Tabors, 1996, pp. 76–77)**

*Extending vocabulary and language patterns* involves the development of vocabulary and linguistic patterns children need to make good predictions about print. This book emphasizes the idea that making sense of print requires the use of a combination of semantic, syntactic, and graphophonic cues along with background knowledge. Children who have an abundance of opportunities to expand their language and linguistic repertoires are more apt to recognize words unknown to them as readers and to make sense of what they read. Participation in read-aloud activities in family and school situations, and in interesting talk at school and at the family dinner table appear to

have a major influence on children's language abilities and their background knowledge.

## **Strategies That Support Learning the Alphabet**

Although children's ability to recognize the letters of the alphabet is an excellent predictor of first- and second-grade reading achievement, this knowledge probably reflects more about a child's general knowledge about books and print than the fact that he or she can name letters. In fact, children do not need to know all of the letters of the alphabet or know them in any particular order before they begin learning to read and write. The best practice is to help children identify letters and numbers in an enjoyable way

as they acquire the broader concepts about print and books they will need as a foundation for literacy. The following are some tips for doing this:

- Focus on letters that have special meaning for children, such as the letters in their own names. This is more effective than simply teaching one arbitrary letter per week.
- Teach the alphabet song. This is fun for children and it gives them something to rely on when they attempt to use simple dictionaries or try to locate particular letters on alphabet charts.
- Post children's names in places that will help them identify them. Occasionally point to the letters, spelling their names for them.
- Print each letter of a child's name on separate cards or pieces of paper. Scramble them and let the child reconstruct his or her name as he or she matches the cut up version to a complete one.
- Read alphabet books on a regular basis and make them available for children to browse through on their own. Encourage children to work with a buddy and read together.
- Encourage children to experiment with letter forms. Use clay, finger paint, chalk and chalkboard, felt and sandpaper letters, alphabet puzzles, and wood and magnetic letters.
- Keep alphabet charts at children's eye level so that they can be referred to easily.
- Place children's names on index cards or place them in a pocket chart so that they can be removed and read closely. Use only a few names at a time. Ask children to locate their own names, find the names that start with the same letter or end with the same letter, and identify a particular letter that you display.
- Make simple picture dictionaries available.

- Help children make a class alphabet book or an individual alphabet book.

## **Strategies That Support Phonemic Awareness**

Activities promoting phonemic awareness help children perceive their language as a series of sounds that they can pay attention to, segment, and categorize. Activities should be playful and game-like, much like the way children manipulate the language of songs, chants, and rhymes on their own. Keep the atmosphere informal and avoid putting children under any stress, which might make them retreat from participating and thus do more harm than good. Here are some ideas:

- Include nursery rhymes, poems, and storybooks with patterned rhymes in your daily read-aloud repertoire.
- Read poetry and stories that contain alliteration and word play, including alphabet books.
- When reading or chanting a familiar poem or rhyme, pause before a rhyming word and let children fill in the rhyme.
- Create your own simple rhymes and invite children to try some as well.
- Encourage and praise children's self-initiated attempts to memorize very simple rhymes and songs.
- When children are familiar with the concept of rhyme, make or purchase games that feature rhyming words. Children may match pictures that rhyme or they may use a bingo-type game board to cover pictures that rhyme with one drawn from the box.
- Invite children to clap the number of syllables they hear in someone's name. First say the name, then repeat it with the children as they clap with you; John

gets one clap, Mary gets two, Jonathan gets three, and so on.

- Help children to identify similarities in sounds. Model the following in a “sing-song” manner:

*Ball* is a word that starts like *boy*.

*Boy/ball; boy/ball.*

Can you think of a word that starts like *boy*?

When a child responds correctly (for example, *Bill*) repeat:

*Bill* is a word that starts like *boy*.

*boy/Bill, boy/Bill.*

Can you think of a word that starts like *boy*?

Encourage children to join subsequent rounds. After they grasp the idea, consider moving on to medial and final sounds. Keep the words simple and stress the sound clearly as well as its placement in the word (beginning, medial, or end).

- After children have a sense of what it means to attend to component sounds in words, invite them to try the following: Slowly stretch the sounds of short words with two or three sounds, such as *see* (2), *cat* (3), or *dish* (3). As you say each word, push a penny, small tile, or blank card forward for each sound heard: /c/ is one sound; /a/ is two; /t/ is three. Model this several times before you ask children to try it. Encourage children to use this stretching technique when they are attempting to spell words on their own.

## Strategies That Support Phonics

All of the activities recommended in support of phonemic awareness also relate directly to phonics. On the following page are some other recommendations.

- Take advantage of opportunities to discuss interesting sound–letter patterns in literature that you are reading aloud. Keep in mind that during the first or second reading of a book or story, it is best to respond to the content. That is, discuss the plot, characters, and ideas for information and enjoyment. After that, you may want to ask children if they have noticed anything special about certain words. Help them to establish the relations among words or parts of words that look and sound alike. Encourage this kind of “noticing” of written language in reading and writing activities throughout the day.
- Invite children to watch as you write messages and lists. Think aloud as you model the use of phonics to help with spelling. For example: “We need to make a list of the things we need to plant our seeds.” Emphasizing the /d/, say, “*dirt* starts just like *dog*. I need to start with a *d*.” You will not do this with every word or letter, but do enough so that children get the idea of how writers think when they spell. As children become knowledgeable about phonics, call on them to help when you think aloud. Let them tell the part they know as you fill in the rest.
- Use children’s names to point out similarities and differences in the way they look and sound. Choose pairs such as *Jamal* and *Jennifer*. Have children notice how they look and sound alike at the beginning, middle, and end.
- Encourage children’s attempts to write. Most often, the writing gradually moves from scribbling and forming strings of letters to an attempt to represent sounds with letters. When this occurs, encourage children to stretch the word, thinking about the way it sounds and the letter(s) that come to mind. Some children aim for “correctness” from the beginning. Give help, but let them know how much you value their

own attempts. Encourage children to write the part they do know and leave the rest for your help later. Writing the sounds they hear helps children internalize phonics. Make special attempts to acknowledge a child's "thoughtful" reasoning when his or her attempts appear logical to the child but produce unconventional spellings. For example, it would seem logical to begin the word *city* with an *s* or *truck* with *chr* at the beginning (Most young children pronounce it this way). As young children sort through these things, they need to know that their attempts are valued and show their ability as thinkers.

- When a child inquires about a word, use the opportunity to point out sound-letter relationships: "This one begins with *s*. It says *salt*. This one begins with *p* and says *pepper*."
- As you listen to children read, avoid immediately telling them words they do not know or read incorrectly. You might ask them to think about what makes sense and then look at the word together to sound it out. Help children divide words into manageable chunks rather than sounding out words letter by letter.
- Involve children in word-making activities (Cunningham & Cunningham, 1992) in which children are guided in creating words from letters they are given. During this 15-minute activity, children make 12 to 15 words, beginning with two-letter words and continuing with three-, four-, five-letter, and longer words until the final word is made. The final word (a six-,

**The teacher's job is to find out what understandings a particular child has and to use whatever materials or instruction can best help that child, and not be rigidly doctrinaire about his or her methods.... Some children have lots of content but desperately need help with form; others need content; still others, form and content. (Juel, 1993, p.135)**

seven-, or eight-letter word) always includes all the letters they have that day. For example, from the word *spider*, children are guided in making the words *Ed*, *red*, *rid*, *sip*, *pie*, *pies*, *dies*, *side*, *ride*, *ripe*, *rise*, *pride*, and *drips*. Start by allowing children to work in small groups or pairs. Give constant feedback.

- Involve children in various sorting activities. Play games that require them to sort pictures into categories according to their beginning, medial, or ending sounds. Word sorting involves categorizing words with the same rhyming families, vowel generalizations, or other language pattern under study. Children enjoy manipulating picture cards and word cards. In contrast to worksheets, sorting involves children with a large number of examples and requires them to think analytically and critically. Simply adjust the level of the activity to the children's level of development (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 1996).
- Develop a strategy of predicting, using multiple cueing systems. Using a familiar selection, choose a word and cover it with your finger or a piece of paper. Or, simply write a sentence, covering one word. Ask children to predict what words might fit in the empty slot. Write down each word as it is given. If a child offers a word that does not make sense, discuss it. At this point they are using semantic and syntactic cues. Uncover the first letter of the word. With the children's help, go through the list, eliminating each word that will not fit now that they have more information. Now, they have added phonics to the decoding cues they are using. Finally, uncover the whole word and examine it with the children to confirm or correct their predictions. Here is an example:

Bill likes to eat (pizza).

The children offer: hot dogs, ice cream, hamburgers, steak.

The teacher lists the words given.

The first letter is uncovered and it is the letter *p*.

The children go through the list, only to discover that none of the words will fit.

They list new words. Now they should only give words beginning with the letter *p*.

The word is uncovered so that they can confirm or correct their predictions.

(Note: If the word begins with a consonant blend, uncover the blend rather than just the first consonant.)

## Strategies That Support Onset-Rime Analogies

Keep in mind that the analogy strategy is limited by the knowledge of onsets and rimes learners have stored in their memory. For example, a learner who does not have the word *can* stored in his or her memory will be unable to use the analogy strategy to identify *pan*. Obviously, the greater the number of words with varied rimes learners have in their reading vocabularies, the more useful the analogy strategy. Wylie and Durrell (1970) identified 37 phonograms that could be found in almost 500 primary-grade words. These high-utility phonograms are: *ack, ail, ain, ake, ale, ame, an, ank, ap, ash, at, ate, aw, ay, eat, ell, est, ice, ick, ide, ight, ill, in, ine, ing, ink, ip, it, ock, oke, op, ore, ot, uck, ug, ump, and unk*. This is a useful list for generating activities. Some suggested activities follow:

- Play simple consonant-substitution games: Start with a known word such as *cat*. Using the chalkboard, demonstrate what happens when the *c* in *cat* is substituted for other consonants. You might find it helpful to chant the following in a sing-song manner:

You take the *c* away from *cat*, put in *p* and you get *pat*.

You take the *p* away from *pat*, put in *f* and you get *fat*.

Continue in this manner, making as many words as you can that children are likely to have in their listening vocabularies. After the children have caught on, pause before saying the new word and see if they can identify it. Continue doing the same with other known words with high-utility phonograms.

**Our vision of an ideal classroom, one consistent with the types of classrooms excellent teachers have been telling us about in our research, includes authentic reading and writing as well as opportunities to hone the skills that comprise reading and writing, with all of the educational opportunities doled out in doses appropriate to the needs of particular students. (Pressley, 1994, p. 166)**

- Using a known word, have students generate as many words as they can that rhyme with it. Write down each word. Guide children to notice the similarities. For example: Here is the word *ride*. Can you think of some words that rhyme with *ride*? When a rhyming word does not conform to the spelling pattern, simply write it down. Guide children to notice the difference. Then move that word into another column to show that it gets sorted differently.
- Play “I Am Thinking of a Word.” It begins like *ball* and rhymes with *tack*. What could it be? Have children guess orally first. After they have caught on, have them write the word independently and then share what they have written. Remember to stick to words that are within the children’s listening vocabularies. Using nonsense words or words with which they are unfamiliar may confuse children, rather than help them link these activities to real reading.
- Guide children to use onset-rime analogies with other word identification strategies linked to meaning. Write a sentence on the board, such as, *Mother put the \_\_\_\_\_ on the table*. It begins like *dog* and rhymes with *wish*. What could it be?
- The following activity is designed for learners who have experienced difficulty in their initial attempt at

learning to read. Involve children in word-study activities in which they work closely with words, segmenting them, analyzing them, and discussing them. This kind of activity not only makes the patterns in language visible, it helps children store the fully analyzed words into their memories for use in forming analogies. Gaskins et al. (1996–1997) suggested that teachers model and provide guided practice in self-talk strategies similar to the one following, which was designed to help students learn words containing rimes for use with onset-rime analogies:

The teacher begins by giving the word orally. This makes it easier for students to focus on the sounds:

1. The word is \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Stretch the word. I hear \_\_\_\_\_ sounds.

Students are shown the word and it is analyzed in terms of what students already know about language patterns. For example:

3. I see \_\_\_\_\_ letters because \_\_\_\_\_.
4. The spelling pattern is \_\_\_\_\_.
5. This is what I know about the vowel: \_\_\_\_\_.
6. A word that rhymes with this one is \_\_\_\_\_.

Or, another word on the word wall\* with the same vowel sound is \_\_\_\_\_.

Learning to read is not something that begins in Grade 1 or starts with memorizing the alphabet. From infancy, children are emerging as literate human beings. Virtually

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\*The word wall consists of a list of key words that are high-frequency words in English and have common spelling patterns. The words are posted for all to view.

everything they learn about language and about their world contributes to their becoming literate. The everyday activities during which children observe adults using print to accomplish tasks and in which children involve literacy in their play are among the most powerful literacy lessons a child can have. Sharing books and engaging in interesting conversations with responsive adults provide the foundation for children's interest in learning to read. These experiences stimulate children's curiosity and inform and motivate their personal explorations with print.

Teachers can select from a wide variety of instructional activities to promote students' phonemic awareness, knowledge and use of phonics, and use of onset-rime analogies for reading and writing. In selecting activities, teachers must be mindful of the age and developmental levels of students, the need to keep instruction engaging for young learners, and the need to create a context that allows children to make connections between the activities in which they are engaged and their use in meaningful literacy acts.

# PH is for Phonics



## Teaching Phonics Today A Primer for Educators

Dorothy S. Strickland

This resource illuminates the black hole of contention that surrounds phonics with information that will help educators make wise instructional decisions.

Strickland sets forth the issues that focus on phonics and the controversy they inevitably arouse; offers ways in which reading instruction, particularly the teaching of phonics, has changed in recent years; and provides suggestions for helping children learn to use phonics as a key component of their overall reading development. Suggestions for curriculum development and for articulating the phonics program to parents and the community are also included. [March 1998 book club selection]

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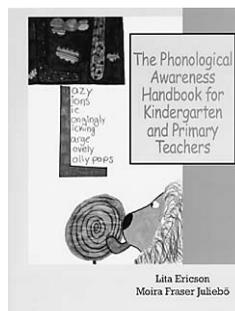


## The Phonological Awareness Handbook for Kindergarten and Primary Teachers

Lita Ericson  
Moira Fraser Juliebö

This handbook offers a practical and comprehensive means of teaching and monitoring children's development of phonological awareness in the classroom. The authors provide answers to frequently asked questions about phonological awareness, offer a possible teaching sequence, and suggest a variety of activities to enhance children's phonological awareness. [June 1998 book club selection]

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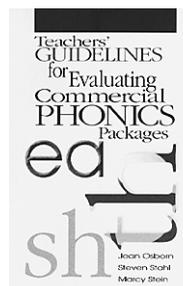


## Teachers' Guidelines for Evaluating Commercial Phonics Packages

Jean Osborn  
Steven Stahl  
Marcy Stein

This publication can help teachers and other potential users of phonics packages make informed decisions about whether they should purchase a product and, if so, what they should look for before buying. The suggestions in this booklet are based on research on phonics instruction and on a careful analysis of more than 20 commercial phonics packages. The booklet also includes a discussion of the characteristics of good reading instruction and a series of useful questions to ask when evaluating commercial products.

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