

What is Phonological Awareness?

Phonological awareness is:

- the ability to understand that words are made up of sounds and that sounds can be combined and manipulated in various ways.
- concerned with the structure of words rather than word meanings.
- a broad term including skills such as; knowing how many words are in a sentence (word awareness), being able to produce rhyming words, breaking words into syllables (syllable segmentation) and knowing the word 'horse' is made up of the sounds /h/ /or/ /s/ (phonemic awareness).

Phonological awareness relies heavily on children developing appropriate listening skills and, in this way, is a useful tool for encouraging both aural and oral development.

Phonological awareness is clearly linked to reading acquisition. It is, in fact, a prerequisite for reading acquisition. Children with good phonological awareness skills usually develop into good readers, writers and spellers; whereas children with poor phonological awareness skills struggle with reading, writing and spelling.

Research of more than two decades has confirmed the utmost importance of phonological awareness as part of the process of learning to read. Research (Hurford, Darrow, Edwards, Howerton, Mote, Schauf, & Coffey, 1993; and Mann, 1993) indicates that the presence of phonological awareness is a hallmark characteristic of good readers while its absence is a consistent characteristic of poor readers. Phonological awareness is

more highly related to early reading than tests of general intelligence, reading readiness and listening comprehension.

Synthesis of current research has resulted in several important generalisations that demonstrate the utmost importance of teaching phonological awareness.

These generalisations are:

1. Phonological awareness is directly related to reading ability.
2. Although the relationship is reciprocal, phonological awareness precedes skilled decoding.
3. Phonological awareness is a reliable predictor of later reading ability.
4. Deficits in phonological awareness are usually associated with deficits in reading.
5. Early language experiences play an important role in the development of phonological awareness.
6. Early intervention can promote the development of phonological awareness.
7. Improvements in phonological awareness can and usually do result in improvements in reading ability.

(Smith et al, 1995; National Reading Panel, 2000; in Lane et al, 2002)

Obviously phonological awareness skills can, and should, be taught to all students in their early years of schooling to develop and enhance their literacy skills. *It is evident that for most students, explicit instruction in phonological awareness skills is obligatory, not optional.*