

# Phonological awareness and reading

eTale 2022



The authors review research about whether phonological awareness precedes or follows learning to read. They conclude that children become aware of phonemes as a result of learning to read. However, children are aware of syllables and detect rhymes and alliterations before they start to read.

**Authors: Usha Goswami & Peter Bryant**

Source: Goswami, U. & Bryant, P. (2016). Phonological awareness and reading. Chapter 1 in a book Phonological Skills and Learning to Read. ISBN: 978-1-315-69506-8 (ebk).

This book chapter is about phonological awareness and its relationship to reading. The authors review research about whether phonological awareness precedes or follows learning to read. They conclude that children become aware of phonemes as a result of learning to read. However, children are aware of syllables and detect rhymes and alliterations before they start to read.

## What is phonological awareness?

- Virtually any 3 or 4 year old child understands a simple, spoken word like 'cat'; however, if you ask them about the sounds in that word, they will find it difficult to answer the question.

- However, after approximately a year or so, these children have to learn to read and write words as well as to speak them, and that may mean the component sounds in these words take on a new significance.
- Alphabetic letters represent sounds, and strings of letters by representing a sequence of sounds can signify spoken words.
- However, we cannot assume that children's awareness of sounds (or 'phonological awareness') plays an important part when they learn to read and write.

## **Relationship between phonological awareness and reading**

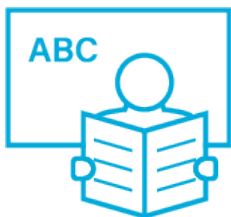
There are two possibilities:

1. Children learn how to divide words up into their constituent sounds because they are taught to do so when they learn to read.
2. Before children learn to read, they may build up phonological skills that then affect how well they learn to read.

## **Phonemes and other speech units**

- The first and perhaps the most obvious approach is to break a word up into its syllables.
- The second approach involves much smaller phonological segments; this divides words into phonemes.
- A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound that can change the meaning of a word.
- The importance to the child of learning how to use the relationships between single letters and single phonemes ('grapheme-phoneme correspondences') has been widely recognised.
- The third approach is to divide words up into units that are larger than the single phoneme (units that themselves consist of two or more phonemes) but smaller than the syllable.

- It is usually possible to divide a syllable into two parts: an opening (or the onset) and an end (or the rime section).
- These are sometimes called intra-syllabic units.
- Words rhyme when they share common rimes.
- To know that there are categories of words that end with the same sound is a form of phonological awareness.
- Some studies show evidence that children become aware of phonemes as a result of being taught an alphabet.
- However, there are also other ways of becoming aware of phonemes.
- Young children stumble surprisingly badly when they have to make phonological judgements that depend on an explicit awareness of phonemes.
- However, there is evidence that children can delete a single phoneme in a word provided that this phoneme is the onset of the word.
- It has been found to be easier for young children to tap out the syllables rather than the phonemes of words.
- Overall, these results support the general idea that explicit knowledge about syllables precedes reading while an awareness of phonemes follows it.
- This evidence seems to support the notion that reading causes phonological awareness rather than the other way around.
- There is also evidence that children can detect rhyme and alliteration before they begin to read.



## **Conclusions and implications**

Children's progress in learning to read is probably the most

important cause of awareness of phonemes. Children can easily judge whether words have the same onset and whether they have the same rime, and these are judgements that they can make some time before they learn to read. It is likely that the awareness of intra-syllabic units (which comes before learning to read) plays a causal role in children's success in reading.