

Chapter I

Beginning Sound Isolation

All Reading Begins with Sounds

The greatest discovery about reading that has ever been made involves the understanding that children need to have something called *phonemic awareness* in order to learn to read. Phonemic awareness is the ability to perceive individual sounds in spoken language.

For example, this picture represents a spoken word.



You know what word I'm thinking of. I don't want to spell it. I want you to think of it only as a spoken word, not a printed word. When we think about the spoken word for this picture, and analyze it, we find that it is made up of 3 distinct and separate sounds: /h/.../ow/.../s/. This ability to hear and perceive the individual sounds in spoken language is what allows a child to understand how written language and spoken language map onto each other.

Perhaps the simplest definition of reading is knowing how to map spoken language onto printed words.

Part of phonemic awareness obviously requires the ability to *hear* the sounds. So a child with a hearing problem who is unable to actually hear speech clearly and accurately is going to have difficulty with learning to read. But it is not only a child's hearing that allows him to perceive the sounds in a spoken word. It's more than hearing. It's an awareness that language can be broken down into smaller pieces.

I learned about phonemic awareness from 5 1/2 year old Theresa who wasn't progressing along the path of reading despite her obvious intelligence and willingness. As I was working with her trying to figure out where the problem was, I pulled from the shelf a rhyming game. There was no logical reason to begin with a simple rhyming game but that's what I did. And much to my surprise, Theresa couldn't match up the rhyming pictures. And somehow this discovery—that Theresa couldn't rhyme—hit me like a ton of bricks. Instantly my intuition led me to see that there was a connection between Theresa's inability to rhyme and her struggles with learning letters and decoding simple words. This connection, as I later came to understand more fully, was in fact the role that phonemic awareness plays in the acquisition of reading.

This experience had a profound impact on me. I didn't have the right words for it—I didn't read the research or know about *phonemic awareness* until 10 years later. The only way I could express it to my colleagues at the time was to say, "We've got to teach the children to hear sounds."

And so we began to create lessons and games designed to teach children to hear the beginning sound of a word and then all the sounds of a word. And when we learned to do that, a wonderful thing happened: very young children began to read. We were starting to figure this reading thing out.

Step One: Beginning Sound Isolation

Fact: if you want a child to understand, learn and remember the sounds that alphabet letters make, he has to have an understanding of the *alphabetic principle*, that is, how sounds in spoken language map with letters in print. Fact: I didn't learn this at an institute of higher learning or read it in a book. I learned it from the preschoolers in my class.

But in order to understand the alphabetic principle, a child must first be able to perceive the individual sounds in spoken language. Not *all* of the sounds in a word (*/h/.../ow/.../s/*), just the first one (*/h/*). Once I figured out that children need to be able to isolate the beginning sound of a spoken word in order to understand, learn and remember letter-sounds, I was on fire to find fun and engaging ways to get them to do it.

I'll share with you some games to teach beginning sound isolation, but first of all I want to make it clear the underlying principle of teaching this very important phonemic awareness skill.

The best way to teach beginning sound isolation is to model beginning sound isolation. So all you have to do is find many different ways to interact with young children so that they hear you slice off the beginning sounds of many, many words. Eventually, their brains will figure out what you're doing and they'll do it on their own.

Beginning Sound Games:

1. Vocabulary basket of objects or pictures. Very young children are happy as clams to sit with an interested adult who hands them fun, curious or even common objects or pictures and lets them hold and play with them.

Teacher: Sally, this is a */b/..buffalo*. Can you say */b/..buffalo*?
or Billy, can you give me the */e/...elephant*?
or Who has the picture of the */k/...kite*?

2. Driving in the car. When my daughter was a tiny 3-year old I would ask her to name things she saw out the window.

Daddy: Penni, what do you see out the window?

Penni: I see a cow.

Daddy: Oh, you see a */c/...cow*. What else do you see? Etc....

3. Lining up for recess.

Teacher: When I call your name you may walk to the playground. Let's see. Who's sitting nicely?

/t/...Thomas. You may go.

/ch/...Charles. You may go.

/p/...Paula. You may go. Etc.....

Just be creative. You can think of lots more ways to get the children to hear you slice off the beginning sound of a word. Of lots of words.

Eventually, after enough repetitions, a child's brain will finally "get it." And he will start to isolate beginning sounds *on his own*! And that's a very good thing.

Because the moment a child generates a beginning sound from a spoken word—*on his own*—that is the moment you can know with a certainty that the child is ready to understand, learn and remember letter-sounds.

This can certainly happen when a child is 3 years old. Or 4. It just depends on how many repetitions the child needs before his brain becomes aware of the beginning sound. Will it take 50 repetitions? 150? 500?

The answer is: you don't know! You don't know how many repetitions it will take for a child to achieve this first level of phonemic awareness. You just keep doing it at appropriate times and in a fun and appropriate

manner until it happens.

I absolutely couldn't wait until a 3 year old showed me he could isolate beginning sounds. It was a day of celebration. Mostly for me. Because then I was absolutely justified in introducing that 3-year old to the alphabet letter-sounds. And, boy, is that fun!

By the way, I didn't hide the alphabet away from children until they were ready to learn it. I didn't refrain from mentioning letters or pointing them out. I simply waited until that special moment when beginning sound awareness appeared before I began to teach the alphabet letters with the expectation that the child could and would understand, learn and remember them.

In other words, I was always determined to be *developmentally appropriate*—so important for all teachers, but especially so for an early childhood educator.

A child is ready to understand, learn and remember letters only when he has sufficient phonemic awareness to isolate and identify the beginning sounds of spoken words. If the child is in my care, this will happen almost certainly before he is 4 years old.

But you know, the first grade teacher has the task of teaching 6 and 7-year olds how to read. And yet in every first grade classroom there are 2 or 3 or more children who are being taught to write and say the alphabet letters and their sounds but who in fact do not have the awareness of beginning sounds necessary to *understand* the alphabetic principle and therefore to learn and remember the letter-sounds. They'll get this awareness in a matter of hours, or days or weeks. But in the meantime, they are falling behind right from the beginning of first grade. Maybe they'll catch up. Often they won't. and this is to avoided at all costs because children who leave first grade reading below grade level are likely to be behind in reading at the end of 4th grade. And that's not a good thing.

Important Notes

1. The way you say the sounds will be how the child says the sounds. So be careful.

You need to be discrete in how you say the sounds. You need to keep them as short as possible.

Do not say /duh/...dog. Say /d/...dog. If you add a vowel sound (or schwa) after a hard consonant, the child will say it that way and eventually will read the letter "d" that way.

If a child picks up your bad habits, it will affect his decoding later on. Example: a child sounding out the word VAN might sound like this: /vuh/.../aa/.../nuh/.

Now when he blends the 3 sounds together he'll get VUHANNUH. Is that Vanna White from "Wheel of Fortune" fame? Or is it a station wagon-type vehicle with sliding side doors? Obviously there can be some confusion.

These are very simple games designed to achieve a very simple objective. Don't be fooled! This is important stuff.

2. Try to get the child to repeat the beginning sound isolation if possible.

When I find out, "Who has the /b/...buffalo?" I will ask that child Janice to say "/b/...buffalo," as she places

the plastic figurine back into my vocabulary basket. Why?

Because *her* voice has a greater impact on her learning than my voice.. The more impact, the sooner the beginning sound awareness we are waiting for will appear. It's that simple

3. You can't rush this awareness. It will happen in its own good time. Be diligent in modeling the desired awareness as many times as possible in appropriate ways—and be patient.

4. Do not ask the child, "What's the beginning sound of CAT?" That's not teaching, that's testing. And if the child isn't ready to give the correct answer, you have allowed the child to fail. This kind of questioning will undermine your efforts in the long run. A child will come back to you for more and more, if he knows he is always successful and right.

The rule is: don't ask a question unless you know you'll get the right answer.

More Beginning Sound Games

At some point the child will need more of a challenge. If he is not challenged , he will eventually lose interest in coming around for a lesson.

The following are ways in which you can continue to model beginning sounds and yet involve the child in a more challenging way.

1. Which one?

Teacher: Susan, here's a picture of an APPLE and a picture of a BANANA. This one is an APPLE. This is a BANANA.

Which one begins with /b/?

Child: BANANA.

Teacher: Right. /b/...BANANA. Can you say /b/...BANANA?

Child: /b/...BANANA.

Begin with a choice of 2 pictures or objects and then increase to 3 or more. As long as the child is identifying the correct object, you know you're on the right track.

2. Which one? (Variation)

Teacher: Laura, take the HORSE out of the basket.

Does HORSE begin with the sound /d/?

Child: No.

Teacher: Does HORSE begin with the sound /t/?

Child: No.

Teacher: Does HORSE begin with the sound /h/?

Child: Yes.

Teacher: Can you say /h/...HORSE/

Child: /h/...HORSE.

3. Which one? (Variation)

Teacher: Louis, point to the picture of the DONKEY.

Does DONKEY begin with /d/ or /m/

More Notes

1. A word about rhyming. Rhyming is considered to be a wonderful way to inaugurate phonemic awareness

training with young children.

When we rhyme two words (CAT/HAT) we are directing children's attention not to the meaning of those words—there is no relationship there—but to the sounds within those words that are the same. A child who begins to remember rhyming pairs and then starts to generate rhymes (even nonsense rhymes) on his own, is a child who is becoming aware of sounds within spoken language. Which is phonemic awareness.

So I encourage Kindergarten and preschool teachers and parents of these young ones to model rhyming often. (Remember, modeling phonemic awareness skills is the best way to teach them.)

I'm not including rhyming activities in this book simply because rhyming is not directly related to beginning reading. I am focusing in this book on those phonemic awareness skills that the child will *use* as he begins to learn and figure out the meaning of print.

2. There are approximately 45 sounds in the English language. And we can list them. But we're not trying to teach a list of sounds. Our objective is to teach the perception of sound, the awareness of sound within spoken words.

In other words, I don't have to be sure that my vocabulary basket has a picture or object for each of the 45 sounds of English. My task is to model the isolation of beginning sounds. Period.