

Making Friends With Phonemes

By: Bruce Murray (2009)

Phoneme awareness is the ability to identify phonemes, the vocal gestures from which words are constructed, when they are found in their natural context as spoken words. Children need phoneme awareness to learn to read because letters represent phonemes in words.

A phoneme is the meaning of a letter or digraph, the "mouth move" signaled by the letter. The spelling of a word – its letter sequence – is a map of the pronunciation – its phoneme sequence. To learn to read words, we have to understand this mapping.

Thus, learning to read begins by making friends with phonemes – becoming comfortable and familiar with them. Informally, children develop this familiarity in conversations about books read aloud, especially alphabet books and books of nursery rhymes. Guiding and encouraging children's attempts to invent spelling also helps children make friends with phonemes.

Children can also be taught to make friends with phonemes in explicit lessons. When we examine research-based programs for teaching phoneme identities, we find several features:

- **a focus on a basic set of individual phonemes, one at a time**
- **activities designed to make each phoneme memorable**
- **practice finding each phoneme in spoken words**

Research suggests that getting familiar with phonemes helps children make breakthroughs in learning to decode.

A focus on a basic set of individual phonemes

Children need to get a feel for each phoneme they will use in reading and spelling. Just as we do not expect children to learn to recognize all the letters at once, neither should we expect children to learn all the phonemes at once. Instead, we spend time with each phoneme they will need to read and spell words.

Where to start? Continuants phonemes such as /f/, /m/, and /s/ are easy to stretch and pronounce by themselves. Unvoiced consonants like /t/ and /p/ can come soon after. We need vowels right away, because we can't put together any word without a vowel. Long vowels are easier to identify than short vowels. However, short vowels should come early because they are typically the first to be introduced in reading lessons – since they have simple one-letter spellings.

Children do not need to be taught every phoneme. As they get used to identifying a limited set of phonemes, they will learn how to identify others.

Introduce each phoneme one at a time, setting aside from a day to a week for each one. A good introductory strategy is to use meaningful names. Meaningful names provide a familiar image of a sound similar to the sound of the phoneme in the world; for example, /z/ sounds like a buzzing bee. Children readily associate /a/ (short a) with a crying baby.

To get across the idea that a phoneme is the same "mouth move" across many different words, have children learn alliterative tongue twisters, e.g., "Nobody was nice to Nancy's neighbor Nick, but he was never nasty."

Once children learn a tongue twister, have them imitate a puppet as he "talks funny," splitting the target phoneme from the rest of the words, e.g., "N-obody was n-ice to N-ancy's n-neighbor N-ick." You can also use a stretchable action figure to give children practice in stretching the sounds. Stretch the arms and legs of the toy as children stretch the target phoneme, e.g., "Nnnnnobody was nnnnnice to Nnnnnancy's nnnnneighbor Nnnnnick."

Children could compose their own alliterations and write them with invented spelling. An excellent resource is a good alphabet book. Look for alphabet books that have multiple examples of familiar words to illustrate each letter, such as Dr. Seuss's ABC.

Activities designed to make each phoneme memorable

After children have been introduced to a phoneme, they need to stretch it, examine it, and make meaningful connections to other things they know about. Ask them to be scientists and figure out how they are making the sound with their mouths. They will need time to experiment and discover what their mouths are doing as they practice producing each phoneme.

Post illustrations of meaningful names, the real-world sounds similar to the phoneme, for review. For example, a picture of a crying baby will help children remember the phoneme /a/.

In the long run, children need to learn letters and digraphs as symbols for phonemes. Teach students to print the most common letter for the target phoneme. Then have them invent spellings for words with this letter. Daily writing opportunities with invented spelling allow children to identify phonemes and practice using correspondences they are learning.

Practice finding each phoneme in spoken words

Phoneme awareness means recognizing phonemes in their natural environment – spoken words. Children have not learned the phoneme until they can spot it in words.

For early practice, help them recognize the target phoneme at the beginning of words. For this, you might have them pick out illustrations of words beginning with the phoneme from a bulletin board. Later have them search for the phoneme elsewhere in the word. Have them choose between words related in meaning to practice the switch from meaning to sound. For example, you might ask them to listen for the sound /s/, the "flat tire" sound in words related in meaning: "Do you hear /s/ in *mice* or *rat*? In *duck* or *goose*? In *nest* or *cave*?"

Only after children recognize phonemes in words should we ask them to think of words that feature the target phoneme. For example, until they can readily find the phoneme in words, they can't search magazines for illustrations that begin with the phoneme. DaisyQuest and Daisy's Castle are excellent computer games that use state-of-the-art animation and synthesized speech to help children find phonemes in word contexts.

Blending and segmentation work with the target phoneme is very helpful in recognizing the phoneme in word contexts. Such work usually requires letters to represent the phonemes, because otherwise children have too many things to think about at once.

Creative teachers will think of many other ways to help children become familiar with phonemes. Their lessons and activities should focus on particular phonemes, make these phonemes familiar to children, and then provide practice finding the phonemes in word contexts.

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> **Topics A-Z** > **Teaching Strategies** (115)

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