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Maryann Manning

## Celebrations in Reading & Writing

# Phonemic Awareness

*As kids learn how to read and write, their phonemic awareness will gradually develop*

When I was in school, phonemic awareness wasn't mentioned in prehistoric reading-methods courses; in fact, you don't find much written about it until the 1990s. Today, PA is mentioned in legislation, is the subject of professional development and some primary teachers have mandates for how many minutes they should focus their instruction on it.

About 10 years ago, someone asked me the difference between phonemic awareness and phonics. Though I had taught reading for many years, it took me a while to answer the question. I finally said, "Phonemic awareness is when you hear a word and can divide it into the smallest parts. Phonics is when you are looking at the letters in a word and you make sound symbol correspondences." At that moment, I wasn't sure if I had provided a good answer because I didn't know much about PA.

Since that time, I've done a lot of research on phonemic awareness with my friend, Dr. Constance Kamii. With her, I learned that even though I didn't think about PA when I was teaching reading and writing, I was still observing a child's PA development. I was evidencing PA growth when I studied my students' in-

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vented spelling. When I observed my students move along the path from not separating phonemes to becoming competent spellers, I was assessing PA.

*I have a real concern today that phonemic awareness is being viewed as a skill you teach rather than an ability that children develop as they become literate.*

### A causal relationship?

I have a real concern today that phonemic awareness is being viewed as a skill you teach rather than an ability that children develop as they become literate. I often hear an educator speaking as though there is a causal relationship between PA and learning to read. Our research found that as children begin to read and write, PA and knowledge of phonics develop gradually

and simultaneously. I want to share what we've learned about how to quickly assess a child's PA development and how to help your students become more aware of individual phonemes.

### Becoming phonemically aware

As you know, not all children become phonemically aware at the same age or grade. There are four-year-olds who can segment multisyllabic words, and six-year-olds who can't segment a one-syllable word. Although I've read about children over eight who aren't phonemically aware, I can't find them except for those with extreme written language delays. Occasionally I test an older English language learner who appears to not

have developed PA, but when someone who is fluent in the child's language asks that a word be segmented in the home-rooted language, the child proves his or her competence in PA.

### Assessing PA

You can determine the level of phonemic awareness each of your students possesses in three minutes or less. With students who have not developed phonemic awareness, you'll know within one minute.

First, demonstrate how several words can be divided into phonemes. Say, "desk," and then say, "Now I'm going to break the word into little bits." Say, "d-e-s-k." Ask the child to say the word followed by the segmented phonemes with you. Because phonemic awareness is a developmental process, many five- and six-year-old children can't segment one-syllable words even when you repeat the segmented phonemes. If the student can segment one-syllable words, follow the same process by repeating words with two syllables such as Mary, copy, monkey and zebra. When you listen to the child's segmentation of the words, you'll know the PA level.

When you ask the child to say a word like pony and then divide the word into phonemes, the child will have one of the following responses:

<b>pony</b> Level I:	No segmentation No syllables or phonemes are segmented.
<b>po-ny</b> Level II:	Segmented into syllables Words are separated by syllables.
<b>p-o-ny</b> or <b>po-n-y</b> Level III:	One syllable divided into segments Only one syllable in a word is segmented.
<b>p-o-n-y</b> Level IV:	Phonemes segmented All phonemes are segmented.

You can also observe invented spelling to determine PA level. If the child isn't writing in invented spelling that you can read, the child is at Level I and can't segment. When there is one letter for each syllable (example: mk for monkey and st for sister), the child is at Level II. If you can begin to read the invented spelling because it has the consonants and letter-name vowels and there is a mixture of letters that represent more than just a single syllable (example: cmt for cement or apl for apple), the child is at Level III. If the child is almost conventional (even if consonant blends and short vowels aren't conventionally spelled), the child is at Level IV.

### PA games

Many of the daily writing activities your students perform help them develop PA. Two PA games that can be played in kindergarten and first grade classrooms for very short periods of time are Turtle Talk and the Itty Bitty Bit game.



#### Turtle Talk.

I was introduced to Turtle Talk

by Dick Allington, president of the International Reading Association. He suggests instructing children to pretend they are talking turtles who say every word very slowly so you can hear every sound. Young children enjoy Turtle Talk, and some move their heads forward when they say each phoneme. They also like saying the words together to see who can stretch out the word the longest.

**Itty Bitty Bit.** Tell children you are going to play a game called Itty Bitty Bit. Begin by demonstrating how you can say a word in little bits. For instance, say "pencil: p-e-n-c-i-l," belaboring each sound. Ask the children to take turns choosing words and saying them sound-by-sound. Younger children may just be saying the word slowly with no phoneme segmentation; others may be dividing the word by syllables and ultimately they will segment by phonemes.

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