

Fleming and Roden: Phonemic Awareness: You can do it in the dark

Reading research has shown that Phonemic Awareness is the most reliable early predictor of a child's reading ability, a better predictor than even a child's IQ. Phonemic Awareness refers to a person's ability to identify and manipulate the individual sounds in words. These unique sounds are called *phonemes*. A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in any language. Phonemic Awareness is an auditory and oral skill that has nothing to do with letters or written words. The word "phonemic" is rooted in the Greek word "phon," which means "sound." Reading specialists joke with students that they can practice Phonemic Awareness with their eyes closed.

It is worth noting that Phonemic Awareness is *different* from Phonics. Phonics describes the connection of the sounds of our language to the letters that represent those sounds.

In the English language, there are 44 unique phonemes or sounds. The 26 letters of our alphabet represent these 44 phonemes. An individual letter or a group of letters may represent a phoneme. For example, the letter t represents the sound /t/, and the letters c and h, when combined, represent the sound /ch/. These letters or groups of letters are called graphemes. For those who want to geek out a little - graphemes (letters) represent phonemes (sounds).

Here are three examples of good Phonemic Awareness in a young child. The child recognizes that three individual sounds, /c/ /a/ /t/, are blended when she hears the word "cat." If we asked the child to say the word "cat" and then replace the /c/ sound with a /b/ sound, she would say "bat." If we then asked the child to repeat the word "bat" and replace the /t/ sound with a /sh/ sound, she would say "bash."

Difficulties with Phonemic Awareness can cause reading and spelling problems because if a child has difficulty identifying individual sounds in words, the child will have trouble connecting those sounds to letters. Reading and spelling require accurate and efficient connections between the sounds of our language and the letters that represent those sounds.

For different reasons, the following groups of students are at risk of having poorly-developed Phonemic Awareness skills:

- Students with language processing difficulties like dyslexia
- Children who are not read to and who are not surrounded by abundant oral language use
- Some children with dialects
- Some second language learners
- Students who have a history of early ear infections

Schools appear to understand that they need to teach Phonemic Awareness skills. However, teachers tell us that they need more training about *why* Phonemic Awareness is so important and about *how* to administer and interpret Phonemic Awareness assessments. Many schools hand teachers a book of Phonemic Awareness activities and "encourage" them to incorporate the activities if and as they see fit. We have also learned about a district that purchased an excellent, research-based (and very expensive) curriculum that includes explicit, systematic Phonemic Awareness and Phonics instruction only to hear that Principals were told they could take it or leave it. At a time when we are trying to reduce state expenses, this seems like an expensive option.

Reading is one area in which too much local control, unfortunately, leads to the proliferation of individual philosophies about how to teach reading rather than the use of scientifically-validated practices and materials. According to Wyoming Department of Education data, at the end of the last school year, 45% of Wyoming 3rd graders and 47% of Wyoming 10th graders were not reading proficiently. We can do better.

To recap: Phonemic Awareness is the most reliable early predictor of a child's ability to read. If children do not have strong phonemic awareness skills, they will struggle to connect sounds to letters. The ability to accurately and quickly connect sounds to letters is critical for reading and

spelling. Phonemic Awareness instruction should be thoughtfully incorporated into regular education classrooms until at least 3rd grade. Reading specialists should include this instruction through 12th grade if assessments indicate Phonemic Awareness gaps.

Takeaway 1: Administer a valid and reliable Phonological Awareness screener to ALL K-12 struggling readers. Here are some free screening and assessment tools and instructional resources for parents and teachers.

Heggerty Phonological Awareness: <https://www.heggerty.org/download-assessments-and-resources>.

Equipped for Reading Success: Phonological Awareness Screening Test (PAST) Dr. David <https://www.thepasttest.com/>

Reading Rockets Phonological and Phonemic Awareness:
<https://www.readingrockets.org/helping/target/phonologicalphonemic>

Takeaway 2: If you are working with a struggling reader and Phonics does not seem to be “sticking” despite a tremendous amount of practice, there may be underlying Phonemic Awareness gaps.

Phonemic awareness skills are the literal foundation of reading and spelling. We have to get it right and get it right early.

—

April 21, 2020 | Reprinted with permission, Wyoming Tribune Eagle

Heather Fleming is co-founder of the nonprofit WY Lit. She is a certified structured literacy teacher and will complete her master’s degree in Reading Science at Mount St. Joseph University in Cincinnati, Ohio in 2020. Heather provides a variety of training for educators and parents of struggling readers. Email: heather@wylit.org.

Kari Roden is co-founder WY Lit. She is currently an intensive reading interventionist in Laramie County School District 1. Her expertise is in dyslexia and individualized, data-driven instruction for struggling readers. Email: kari@wylit.org.