

< Encouraging reading and writing

# 9 ways to build phonological awareness in pre-K and kindergarten



By Kelli Johnson, MA



## At a Glance

- Kids in pre-K and kindergarten can play with words, rhymes, and syllables they hear in everyday speech to prepare for reading. This is called phonological awareness.
- Parents and caregivers can introduce phonological awareness during reading, singing, or play activities.
- Kids who struggle with these kinds of activities may be showing early signs of reading issues.

There are a few ways kids in pre-K and kindergarten can get ready to read. One way is by noticing and playing with the words, rhymes, and syllables they hear in everyday speech. This called **phonological awareness**.

Kids also start to tune in to the individual sounds or phonemes in words. This is called phonemic awareness. The more you can build on these early “pre-reading” skills, the more prepared your child will be for the challenge of learning to read.

### 1. Listen up.

Good phonological awareness starts with kids picking up on sounds, syllables and rhymes in the words they hear. Read aloud to your child frequently. Choose books that rhyme or repeat the same sound. Draw your child’s attention to rhymes: “Fox, socks, box! Those words all rhyme. Do you hear how they almost sound the same?”

It also helps to point out repeated sounds. For example, if you’re reading *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*, ask

your child to listen to the /fffff/ sound in *fish*. (Really stretch the sounds out at first.) Outside of story time, try pointing out other words that start with the /fffff/ sound, just like in the book.

## 2. Focus on rhyming.

Ask your child to pick out the rhyming words in books without your help. Ask, “Did you hear a word that rhymes with *fox*?” Teach your child nursery rhymes and practice saying them together. Or say four short words, like *log*, *cat*, *hog*, *frog*. See if your child can pick out the word that doesn’t rhyme.

## 3. Follow the beat.

Make syllables easier to understand by clapping the “beats” your child hears in words. Let’s say you choose the word *elephant*. Pause as you say each syllable — e-le-phant — and clap out each syllable together. You can also get your child up and moving by having your child stomp or jump with each syllable.

## 4. Get into guesswork.

Guessing games such as “I spy” can be used to work on almost any phonological skill. Want to practice noticing what sounds word begin with? Try “I spy something red that starts with /s/.” Want to work on rhymes? “I’m wearing something warm that rhymes with *boat*.”

## 5. Carry a tune.

Singing in general is a great way to get kids rhyming. There

are also good songs teachers use to focus on other kinds of phonological and phonemic awareness skills. “Apples and Bananas” is a fun one. You can search online for more songs about phonemic awareness or ask your child’s teacher for recommendations.

## 6. Connect the sounds.

Sound blending is an important skill for early readers. They need to put sound units – phonemes – together to be able to read a word smoothly. You can help your child start working on this by putting together sounds of different words. Ask your child to connect the beginning sound with the rest of a word. For example, say, “Start with /p/ and add /ig/. What do word do you hear if you put them together?”

## 7. Break apart words.

Have your child work on hearing a word and taking it apart. Start by using compound words such as *cowboy*, *baseball* or *firefly*. Tell your child, “Say the word *cowboy*. Now take away *boy*. What word is left?”

You can also use LEGO bricks to make this point. Give your child two attached LEGO bricks to represent parts of the word. Then have your child physically take the Lego pieces apart while removing part of the word.

## 8. Get creative with crafts.

Kids respond to hands-on learning. Try making a collage of items that start with the same sound using pictures from magazines. Sock puppets can be another fun way to work on these skills. Make one that likes to munch on words that

start with a certain sound. Let your child have fun “feeding” the puppet different objects or pictures that start with that sound.

## 9. Search online.

There are many resources and ideas online to work on phonological and phonemic awareness skills. Check out YouTube for teaching videos, Pinterest for games and crafts, or the app store for nursery rhymes, sound games, and songs.

Whatever you do, keep the activities short and fun. If your child finds one activity too difficult or boring, try something different. If you find that activities of this type are too hard, **talk to your classroom teacher**. Your district’s early childhood department may also be able to help you get extra help.

## Key Takeaways

- There are many ways to include sound play in your daily routine with your child.
- Kids who play with sounds, syllables and rhymes when they are young are gaining important reading readiness skills.
- If these skills are really difficult for your child, you may want to seek extra support in this area.

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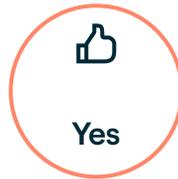
## About the Author



**Kelli Johnson, MA** is an educational speech-language pathologist, working with students from early childhood through 12th grade.

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