

INTRODUCTION

Phonological awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate parts of spoken language independently of their meaning.¹ Promoting phonological awareness with young children involves encouraging play with words and sounds (e.g., rhyming or inventing silly words) to help build awareness of important sound characteristics such as phonemes, syllables, and tone that distinguish meaning across words. These sounds may vary across languages. In English phonemes influence the meaning of words (e.g., changing “dog” to “log”), while in Chinese meanings vary depending on syllables and tone. Phonological awareness skills are generally interrelated across languages that have similar sound systems.² If, however, two languages have very different sound systems, children may need more practice and support in learning skills specific to each language.³

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Children with disabilities who are [dual language learners](#) (DLLs) can learn phonological awareness skills in multiple languages, but are more likely to have difficulty generalizing skills from one language to another without explicit and systematic instruction in both the home language and in English.⁴ Phonological awareness consists of different skills, such as rhyme and syllable awareness, recognizing first sounds in words and manipulating smaller units of sounds—like phonemes. The role a specific phonological awareness skill plays in helping children learn to read may vary for different languages. Nursery rhymes have been used successfully to promote early phonological and print-related skills in young children with different kinds of disabilities, including vision impairment, hearing impairment, developmental disabilities, physical disabilities, and language delays.⁵ For other types of phonological awareness skills, children with disabilities may benefit from more direct and explicit instruction.⁶



- 1 National Early Literacy Panel, *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel*. (Washington, DC: National Center for Family Literacy, 2009).
- 2 Alisha K. Wackerle-Hollman, Lillian K. Durán, and Alejandra Miranda, “Early Literacy Skill Growth in Spanish-Speaking Children With and At Risk for Disabilities in Early Childhood,” *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 40, no. 1 (May 2020): 24–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0271121420906469>.
- 3 Xigris T. Soto, Andres Crucet-Choi, and Howard Goldstein, “Effects of a Supplemental Spanish Phonological Awareness Intervention on Latinx Preschoolers’ Dual Language Emergent Literacy Skills,” *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology* 29, no. 3 (August 2020): 1283–1300. https://doi.org/10.1044/2020_AJSLP-20-00029.
- 4 Soto, Crucet-Choi, and Goldstein, “Supplemental Spanish Phonological Awareness,” 1283–1300; Wackerle-Hollman, Durán, and Miranda, “Early Literacy Skill Growth,” 24–38.
- 5 Carl J. Dunst, and Ellen Gorman, “Nursery Rhymes and the Early Communication, Language, and Literacy Development of Young Children with Disabilities,” *CELLreviews* 4, no. 3 (2011): 1–11.
- 6 Dunst and Gorman, “Nursery Rhymes,” 1–11.

Rhyming experiences. Engaging young children with disabilities in social routines that involve nursery rhymes, rhyming games, and songs enhances children’s phonological awareness skills. These types of activities are enjoyable for young children and provide opportunities for developing critical communication *skills such as* joint attention and turn-taking.⁷



Explicit phonological awareness instruction. Small group or individual intensive instruction is a promising approach to improving phonological awareness skills for preschool children with disabilities.⁸ Explicit instruction is typically lead by an adult who chooses materials, models correct answers, and provides feedback on children’s responses.⁹ Children are taught an easier skill before moving on to learn a more challenging one and tasks are broken down into smaller skills as needed.¹⁰ With infants and toddlers, adults can help children develop sensitivity to the sounds of language by engaging in lap games, fingerplays, and other word play activities during social routines.



WHY PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS IS IMPORTANT?

Phonological awareness in English and other alphabetic languages helps children learn to read and write because they are learning the sounds associated with words and letters. For children with and without disabilities, the ability to blend and segment phonemes is related to later reading and writing skills.¹¹ Early phonological awareness interventions can be especially beneficial for children with disabilities.¹² Young children with disabilities often struggle with learning literacy skills that are auditory-based and more abstract (such as phonological awareness). These children do better with learning more concrete skills, such as print and word awareness and letter recognition.¹³



WHAT CAN PROGRAMS DO?

Education staff (e.g., teachers, home visitors, family child care providers) can use the Framework for Effective Practice and individualization tiered approach described in the Introduction to the Big 5 for All: Highly Individualized Teaching Supplement to plan instructional strategies that support learning for all children as well as more individualized and intensive supports for individual children. When implementing activities, staff also need to regularly monitor how well a child is responding to the supports provided. They can use this information to adjust the amount and types of supports, depending on the child’s progress.

7 Dunst and Gorman, “Nursery Rhymes,” 1–11.

8 NELP, Developing Early Literacy.

9 Samantha A. Gesel, Lauren M. LeJeune, and Christopher J. Lemons, “Teaching Phonological Awareness to Preschoolers with Down’s Syndrome: Boosting Reading Readiness,” *Young Exceptional Children* 24, no. 1 (March 2021): 39–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1096250619865953>.

10 Green, et al., “Progress in Language and Literacy” 249–59.

11 NELP, Developing Early Literacy.

12 Wackerle-Hollman, Durán, and Miranda, “Early Literacy Skill Growth,” 24–38.

13 Green, et al., “Progress in Language and Literacy,” 249–59.

Education staff should promote children’s phonological awareness in English and in the child’s home language.¹⁴ They can easily incorporate songs, rhymes, and word play in children’s home languages into interactions with individual children, routines, and small or large group activities such as music, motor play, and circle time. If staff only speak English, they can work with multilingual paraprofessional staff, family, or community members to volunteer at playing simple games with children, including games that involve rhyming, segmenting, blending, and first sounds in a child’s home language.



SELECTING GOALS: BEHAVIORS AND SKILLS THAT SUPPORT PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF) goals associated with phonological awareness appear in the Language and Communication domain and the Emergent Literacy subdomain for infants and toddlers. For preschoolers, phonological awareness goals are in the Literacy domain and the Phonological Awareness subdomain. Goals for infants and toddlers that address phonological awareness are attending to, repeating, and using some rhymes, phrases, or refrains from stories or songs. Goals for preschoolers include demonstrating awareness that spoken language is composed of smaller segments of sound.

Education staff and families can use these goals to promote children’s phonological awareness skills in English and in the home language. A broader goal may need to be broken down into smaller, clearly defined steps. This makes it easier to see how well a child is progressing for each individual step and adjust types of support as needed.

INDIVIDUALIZING INSTRUCTION: PARTNERING WITH FAMILIES

Education staff can invite families to share songs and rhymes in children’s home languages and embed these into daily group care activities. They can learn about sound characteristics of families’ home languages and discuss similarities and differences with English. Staff can also read books with rhyming or alliterative text in English and in the home language. Home visitors can encourage families to sing songs and rhymes in the home language and engage in sound play activities with children at home, in the car, or on walks. They can share suggestions and model sound games where children can clap or jump to syllables, guess words broken down into smaller sound parts, or guess words that start with a same sound.



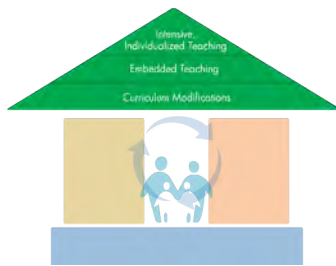
TEACHING STRATEGIES: FOUNDATIONAL PRACTICES

Effective practices for supporting phonological awareness for all children include singing songs, chants, and rhymes and encouraging children to play with the sounds of language.

Please refer to the [Planned Language Approach Big 5 resource on phonological awareness](#) for examples of specific ways to support phonological awareness skills with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

¹⁴ Soto, Crucet-Choi, and Goldstein, “Supplemental Spanish Phonological Awareness,” 1283-1300; Wackerle-Hollman, Durán, and Miranda, “Early Literacy Skill Growth,” 24–38.

TEACHING STRATEGIES: HIGHLY INDIVIDUALIZED TEACHING AND LEARNING



Curriculum modifications. When a child may need more support to listen to rhymes, or engage in word games, education staff can make some simple changes to materials and interactions that can increase children's participation in rhyming and word play activities that promote phonological awareness. For ideas on what you can do when a child may need more support in developing phonological awareness, take a look at [Curriculum Modifications: An Introduction](#).

Examples of modifications to help children engage in rhyming and word play during everyday activities and routines include the following:

- Follow the child's interests. Use children's favorite songs, rhymes, and books with rhyming or alliterative text. Have children guess names of favorite objects broken down into syllables. Use children's names in sound games and chants to support playful routines, like the cleanup song.
- Provide visual cues. Use pictures and real objects that have names which rhyme or start with a same first sound. Have children guess names of visible objects broken down into syllables. Add gestures and signs to words and sounds to help children with hearing loss recognize sounds. Sit face-to-face so children can see your lips and facial expressions.
- Simplify the task. Play sound games with sounds that are easy to pronounce (i.e., long vowels, lip consonants such as "m", "p", "b"). Have children fill in the last word in songs and nursery rhymes. Offer a choice of a correct and incorrect word when asking children to identify words that rhyme or start with a same sound.
- Sequence turns. Let a child say a rhyming word, or guess a word broken down into syllables, after another child has provided a model.
- Adult support. Imitate children's cooing and babbling and introduce new sounds. Sing and recite rhymes with children. Clap along with children when breaking down words into syllables. Exaggerate endings of words that rhyme, and first sounds in words.
- Modify the environment. Reduce background noise in the room. Find a quiet time and place to engage in word play with children who have a hearing loss or difficulties with attention.



Curriculum Modifications in Action: Amari

Camila always enjoyed her home visits with Nyala and her 2-year-old son, Amari. Amari had mild hearing loss and one of his language learning goals was to repeat short phrases from familiar songs and rhymes. Nyala and her husband, Gyasi, spoke both Amharic and English at home but were most comfortable speaking Amharic. During the early home visits, Nyala had shared songs and rhymes in Amharic with Camila. In turn, Camila had shared songs and rhymes in English with Nyala. Camila suggested Nyala choose a quiet spot in the house away from traffic noise to interact with Amari face-to-face so he could hear more easily and watch her lips. During the last home visit, Nyala showed Camila how well Amari was able to sing favorite songs in Amharic and English along with Nyala. The next step toward Amari's goal was for Nyala to begin a phrase and wait for Amari to fill in the last word. Nyala had tried a few times, but Amari still needed her help. Camila suggested providing pictures or props related to the last words as hints or offering a choice between words.

Embedded teaching. Some children may not be readily meeting their goals, even when provided with modifications and adaptations during regular activities and routines. They may need more systematic learning opportunities to help them make progress. Education staff can work with families and service providers in planning ways to embed instruction on individual phonological awareness learning objectives more frequently into daily activities.

Education staff can use an [activity matrix](#) to plan for how a child’s specific learning objective will be addressed in an activity.

They will also need to plan specific [teaching loops](#)—what they will say or do, the kind of support they will provide to help a child be successful, how they expect the child to respond, and what kind of feedback they will provide to the child.

Home visitors can help families create simple activity matrices that identify times during the day that offer opportunities to promote their child’s learning goal. They can explain and demonstrate how to use teaching loops and provide feedback on the family’s use of strategies.

Intensive, individualized teaching. Children who struggle significantly with phonological awareness may need more individualized and intensive teaching in English and the child’s home language.

Embedded Teaching in Action: Andres

Anika and Clara had gathered quite a collection of songs and rhymes in the five languages children in their family child care program spoke at home. Families had been excited to share their children’s favorite songs and rhymes. Anika had also located and purchased online CDs of songs in various languages. Children enjoyed the songs and were learning new words in the different languages. Fifteen-month-old Andrés, however, bounced happily to the rhythm of the chanting but was not repeating any words, even when listening to his favorite songs. Clara had sat Andrés on her lap to encourage him to sing along, but that didn’t seem to work, either. His mother, Sofia, had recently shared her concern that Andrés was not talking much at home, unlike his older sister, who had used many words in Spanish and English when she was the same age. Sofia mentioned how much Andrés enjoyed songs and musical activities and agreed with Anika to build on his interest to encourage Andrés to say words from familiar songs and rhymes. They made activity matrices, one for home and one for the group setting, that identified the best times to embed songs and rhymes into daily routines, like singing a song while washing hands or taking a walk and reading picture books of songs and rhymes before naps. They discussed how they would highlight a word from the song and ask Andrés directly to repeat it. They made plans to meet again in two weeks to share their observations and notes.

Education staff may continue to use modifications to promote engagement and embedded learning to offer increased opportunities. They also may need to use a more specialized teaching strategy to help the child make progress on a learning goal or objective. Effective phonological awareness interventions typically involve individual or small group explicit instruction led by adults who provide support and feedback to children and break down tasks into smaller skills as needed.¹⁵

¹⁵ Green, et al., “Progress in Language and Literacy,” 249–59.

Intensive, Individualized Teaching: Tala:

Aaron shared notes with Tala's mother, Diwata, from the past two weeks of small group sessions with 5-year-old Tala, who had mild language delays in English and Tagalog, her home language. Tala was making good progress on her learning goal of identifying first sounds in familiar words. Diwata added that at home, Tala was now identifying first sounds in words that began with T, the first sound in her name, both in English and Tagalog. At the beginning of the school year, Aaron had tested the 4-year-old children on their phonological awareness skills so he could help children like Tala get ready for reading instruction in kindergarten the following year. Aaron introduced word games daily during circle time to help children practice blending and segmenting syllables in words and identifying first sounds. To help Tala identify first sounds in words, he would call on other children first so she would have models to follow. Tala still struggled with identifying first sounds, so Aaron created an activity matrix with times when he would tell Tala to listen for the beginning sound of her name before saying the word when writing her name on her artwork and the attendance sheet at sign-in. He also discussed ways for Tala's parents, Diwata and Alon, to play sound matching games in Tagalog at home. But the data were clear: Tala needed more explicit and structured practice. Nicole, the speech-language pathologist, suggested working in a small group with Tala and two other children who also needed more direct prompting and feedback. She showed Aaron how to exaggerate the first sound of words by stretching or repeating and contrasting words that start with the same sound, versus words that start with a sound that is different. She also shared some education apps specifically designed to support phonological awareness that Aaron could use with children on their laptop. The three children were responding quite well. In the next session, Aaron planned to decrease the support and see how they would do on their own.

SUMMARY

Engaging young children in rhyming experiences and providing explicit instruction on phonological awareness skills in children's home languages and in English are two proven approaches to help children who have disabilities and who are DLLs and have disabilities, including children with hearing loss, develop phonological awareness. Education staff can work closely with families and service providers to address children's individual needs. Families can share songs, rhymes, and sound games in children's home languages with education staff and education staff, can embed these into daily group care activities. Home visitors can encourage families to sing songs and rhymes and play sound games with children at home and in the community.

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