

DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Providing Phonological Awareness Instruction

Susan Landry, Ph.D. • June 2007

Topic: Preschool Language and Literacy

Practice: Teach Phonological Awareness

Highlights (short version)

- What is phonological awareness
- Why it's important to teach phonological awareness in preschool
- Explanation of the levels of phonological awareness skills on the developmental continuum
- Importance of teaching all skill levels on the continuum
- Illustrations of rhyming, blending, segmenting, and other sound manipulation activities

Highlights (extended version):

- What is phonological awareness and why is it important in the early childhood years
- Difference between phonological awareness and phonics
- Overview of phonological awareness instruction in preschool and its relationship to later reading success
- Explanation of how skills progress along a developmental continuum
- Importance of progressing to the more complex skills at the highest level of the continuum in preschool

- Why teachers need professional development to learn and teach these skills
- Importance of monitoring progress, choosing instruments, using data
- Value of small-group instruction
- Embedding instruction into thematic units and during daily activities such as read alouds
- Building preschoolers' knowledge base of sounds and understanding that letters have sounds that combine to make words

About the Interviewee

Dr. Susan H. Landry is a developmental psychologist and the Michael Matthew Knight Professor in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHSC-H). In addition, she is the founder and director of the Children's Learning Institute. The institute includes 10 programs, initiatives, and partnerships and is actively involved in numerous research grants, community programs, and training activities related to the goal of promoting quality learning environments for young children.

Full Transcript (short version)

I am Susan Landry. I am a professor of pediatrics at the Children's Learning Institute at the University of Texas, Houston Health Science Center, and the director of the Institute and a program called CIRCLE, the Center for Improving the Readiness of Children for Learning and Education.

Phonological awareness is all auditory. That means children are listening, hearing sounds, and then trying to play with manipulating those sounds. For example, rhyming—cat, bat, hat—that would be a beginning area of phonological awareness for a young child to be exposed to. It's different from phonics in that it's not linked to the written word, so that a child is really just learning at this point to hear and pay attention to sounds and to be able to manipulate the sounds themselves.

The term "phonological awareness" is very descriptive of what's going on. They are, or young children are becoming very aware of sounds. And we take that for granted—phonological awareness for most adults is sort of second nature. You hear sounds, you can make the first sound of a word, but for a young child, listening for the first sounds of a word and separating it from the second part of the word like "sidewalk" or "s-ide" and putting those back together—that's a very new thing for them, a new activity to get involved in.

We're learning that phonological awareness is one of the most critical things a child needs to be

exposed to along with language building activities and print knowledge, or print awareness activities, to prepare them to be successful to learn to read. And, it's important because they are beginning to sensitize themselves to learn to hear those sounds. And reading is about making sense of written words on the page. And being able to translate a written word into sounds. So this is that beginning piece where the child starts to pay attention to the fact that there are different sounds, that words are made up of different sounds, before they get to that symbolic stage of seeing printed words and having to put that together with the sounds those printed words make.

We are learning from an analysis in reading of all of the research that has been conducted from the 1920s to present—that phonological awareness is one of the key predictors of reading success in schools if it occurs in the early childhood period. We know that there are stages of learning or a continuum of skills in the area of phonological awareness development. I often refer to a chart that shows us one sort of way of illustrating that continuum. The early stages that maybe would be occurring at the beginning of that pre-k year are things like children playing with rhyming, hearing that the ends of words sound the same, segmenting sentences into words, segmenting words into syllables. But, you want to see that in that classroom, not too late in the year, they're getting to more complex levels of the continuum, such as being able to blend the sounds in words, or segment the sounds in words. More complex and probably more important than the early stages of separating a sentence into words or a word into syllables, or being able to string out a string of rhyming words like hat, bat, sat, mat.

They also get to the point where they can take a word and if you said, "Say the word 'hat' without 'h,'" and they can go, "At." Or, "What happens if you put 'h' and 'at' together?" and they can say, "Hat." Those are critically important aspects of a continuum.

Combining sounds and letters has a great benefit because, ultimately, children need to be able to, when they read, recognize that when they see that letter on the page, that there's a sound that goes with that letter. That's what we're trying to develop in pre-k, the knowledge base around the names of the letters and the sounds letters make, and also that these words that are made up of letters have initial sounds and ending sounds.

And you're doing that by giving them all the pieces to the puzzle, and when you bring phonological awareness activities together with letter recognition and that letters have sounds, you're beginning to put the pieces of the puzzle together with them.

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There was a period of time not too long ago when some of the people in the field were worried about exposing young children to these sorts of experiences. But I think we’ve made great strides in the field in understanding it can be done in playful ways, that children do learn it, they do—when they’re exposed to it—they soak it up like sponges, they have fun with it, and it really helps their ability to learn to read.

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continuum. The early stages that maybe would be occurring at the beginning of that pre-k year are things like children playing with rhyming, hearing that the ends of words sound the same, segmenting sentences into words, segmenting words into syllables. But, you want to see that in that classroom, not too late in the year, they're getting to more complex levels of the continuum, such as being able to blend the sounds in words, or segment the sounds in words. An example would be that they're able to take a compound word like "sidewalk" and if you say to them, "What does it sound like if you say 'sidewalk' without the 'side'?" "Take away 'side' from 'sidewalk.'" And the child that can say, "Ah! 'Walk'" has developed a very important aspect of phonological awareness skills. Or if you say, "What happens if you put 'side' and 'walk' together?" and they say, "Ah! 'Sidewalk'!" That's another important area or skill in the continuum. More complex and probably more important than the early stages of separating a sentence into words or a word into syllables, or being able to string out a string of rhyming words like hat, bat, sat, mat.

They also get to the point where they can take a word and if you said, "Say the word 'hat' without 'h,'" and they can go, "At." Or, "What happens if you put 'h' and 'at' together?" and they can say, "Hat." Those are critically important aspects of a continuum.

No matter where I go in the country and talk to people about phonological awareness—early childhood coordinators, coaches, professional development people—they will say those areas of phonological awareness, the blending, segmenting, onset rime, are most often not occurring in their pre-k classrooms. "We're getting the rhyming to occur and we're getting some segmentation of words into syllables and sentences into words, and some alliteration games are going on. But those very, most important, more complex skills are not happening." Maybe because teachers are not comfortable yet, and that means we need more professional development in that area, I believe.

All children in the early childhood period can benefit from exposure to phonological awareness building activities, whether they have very strong language skills, for example, or not as strong; print knowledge is stronger, or less strong. We're really seeing that that exposure benefits all children. This is one area where children learning English as a second language can really experience success both in playing with sounds, learning to manipulate sounds, and building their English language skills.

When you think about how phonological awareness progresses, you need to think about a couple things; one, it progresses at different rates for different children. So that makes a teacher's job challenging. Not that it isn't already challenging, but they need to be aware of which children are moving along in, let's say, one aspect of the continuum and are ready to get exposed to another. And I'm not suggesting that they have to master one aspect of the continuum until they get exposed to other aspects. Another thing that should be happening is multiple aspects of the continuum are being

introduced to children.

So, one, different children learn at different rates. To understand how children are learning, I really think teachers need to be monitoring in very systematic ways the progress of the children individually. We highly recommend at CIRCLE and the State Center, that teachers have progress-monitoring instruments that are short, that they can themselves do with individual children, that they plan to do multiple times across the year, and that give them information about where to go next with individual children.

Progress-monitoring instruments are not high-stakes testing instruments. They are short measures that are really just for the teacher's benefit to help her know where to go with which children next. They need to give teachers information quickly that guides instruction. And they need to be predictive of a child learning the full range of phonological awareness skills by the end of the year.

So teachers need, and schools and Head Start programs and childcare, they need to look for instruments that have good reliability and validity data associated with it. One thing we're learning is, small groups of children in short, highly targeted activities, instructional activities, can be one of the most effective ways for children to learn this skill. A small group so you can really engage each child actively. So every child gets a turn and they get to say things and hear things and practice things with the teacher and the other children. It's a time when the teacher needs to really be aware that she's a model for the children in terms of how she says the sounds. And again, that comes from good professional development training so that she is modeling the sounds correctly so that the children have a chance to learn them from a good model.

You want phonological awareness activities embedded into other aspects of their learning, like print knowledge. When they're learning about letters, it's a perfect time to also talk about sounds. When they're having a book read. When you're doing either small or large group read aloud with the children in the classroom, number one, they're wonderful books for highlighting sounds. I just happened to bring one that's an alphabet book. You can play with sounds and many aspects of the continuum of phonological awareness with almost any book. And teachers really need to be trained in their professional development about how to integrate phonological awareness, or embed it into book reading, into snack time, into lunch time, into lining up for going out to recess.

When I think about teachers combining phonological awareness with alphabet knowledge, I think about a couple of examples of teachers I've seen that have done things in really exciting ways. One thing I've seen is a teacher who's really been exposing her children to things about a thematic unit like construction, building houses and buildings and all the...so she's got a vocabulary knowledge

base piece going in her classroom. And she's been reading books about construction, and they've been learning about who the people are—architects—and they have plans and designs. And in those lessons, instructional activities, she embeds phonological awareness activities in small groups around using those words to help children learn about letters. So they might look at “architect” and they might break the word “architect” into syllables. They might clap it or point to it. I've seen teachers do it where they write it out on a big blackboard or paper chart and the children come up and point to each of the syllables or they clap them. And then they talk about the sound, the first letter, let's say. Or they break the sound into two words, two parts like the sidewalk example.

That way the children have already been engaged with these words and these concepts and they're reading about them in their center-based activities where they're learning what they mean. And now they're learning that the actual words have letters, and those letters have names, and the words have sounds. And so I love to see this all put together for children across the day and across the week. That's one way I've seen it done very effectively.

Combining sounds and letters has a great benefit because, ultimately, children need to be able to, when they read, recognize that when they see that letter on the page, that there's a sound that goes with that letter. That's what we're trying to develop in pre-K, the knowledge base around the names of the letters and the sounds letters make and also that these words that are made up of letters have initial sounds and ending sounds.

You're doing that by giving them all the pieces to the puzzle and when you bring phonological awareness activities together with letter recognition and that letters have sounds, you're beginning to put the pieces of the puzzle together with them.