



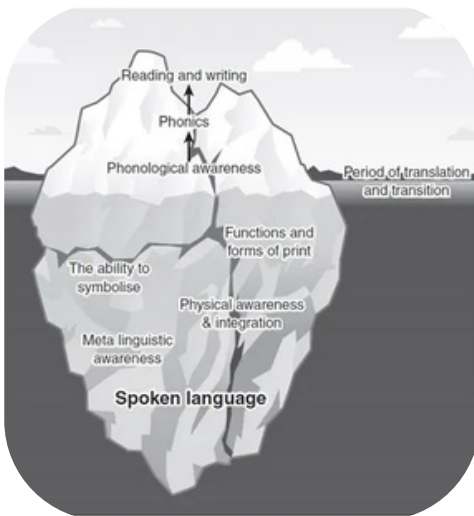
What Comes Before Phonics?

Part 3 of a three part quick read series about phonological awareness.

What do children need to understand about sounds before they are ready for Phonics?

About the AUTHOR

Fiona has taught Early Years and Key Stage 1 in London, Singapore and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead. She is now the Deputy Head Teacher at Cookham Nursery School, which is one of the three Federated Maintained Nursery Schools in the Borough.



This 3-part series will focus on all aspects of the iceberg - why each area is an essential building block towards reading and writing and explore how our settings can provide the best learning environment for children succeed.

Part 1 explained some of the terms used when we talk about phonological awareness and phonics and looked in more detail at the importance of planning for phonological awareness before phonics.

Part 2 examined the essential foundations that underpin early learning before phonological awareness can begin: spoken language skills, metalinguistic awareness, and physical awareness.

In this final part, we turn to two further building blocks that are required to make phonological awareness and phonics teaching meaningful for young children: **the ability to symbolise and an understanding of the functions and forms of print.**



The Ability to Symbolise



The ability to symbolise, put simply, means being able to use one thing to represent something else. We see this constantly in early childhood: a spoon becomes a hairbrush, a block becomes a phone, a piece of fabric becomes a superhero cape. This symbolic play uses children's imaginations and creativity. It is a crucial foundation for literacy.

To learn to read and write, children must understand that **marks and letters are symbols**. They need to make the mental leap from the concrete ("this is a cup") to the abstract ("this mark on paper means cup").



Reading and writing are both symbolic systems:

- ★ Writing is the symbolic representation of speech
- ★ Reading is the decoding of symbols
- ★ Phonics teaches the symbolic code of how letters represent sounds

This is why symbolic thinking is essential **before** phonics makes sense.



Early Signs of Symbolic Understanding

You'll see symbolic behaviour in many everyday moments:

- ★ Early gesture use
- ★ Pretend play (a block becomes a phone)
- ★ Drawing (a scribble is "mummy")
- ★ Mark-making ("this says my name")
- ★ Using signs or gestures such as Makaton
- ★ Understanding that a picture represents a real object

These behaviours show that children are beginning to understand representation — that one thing can stand for another.

Why this Matters for Phonological Awareness



These early symbolic behaviours lay the foundations for later literacy. When children have had rich opportunities to engage in symbolising, alongside this learning we can offer further experiences that help them begin to play with and understand:

- ★ Rhyme
- ★ Alliteration
- ★ Syllables
- ★ Segmenting words into sounds

Intentional teaching through adult interactions and adult-led learning will build up children's recognition that **sounds are meaningful units** that can be identified, compared and manipulated. Symbolic understanding underpins children's ability to discriminate sounds, notice patterns, and eventually break words into syllables and phonemes.



The Functions and Forms of Print

As children encounter print in meaningful contexts, they begin to understand why, where and how it is used. They start to realise that written language carries meaning and serves real purposes in their world.

This early print awareness includes recognising that writing is a symbolic system, that marks stand for ideas, and that early attempts at writing are part of learning how print works.



Before phonics can make sense, children need this conceptual foundation. They need to understand that print has different purposes (lists, labels, stories, signs), appears in different forms (books, menus, logos, digital text), and represents spoken language. When children grasp that print is meaningful and purposeful, phonics teaching has something solid to connect to.

How Print Awareness Develops

Children build this understanding through rich exposure to print, such as:

- ★ Sharing books
- ★ Watching adults model writing
- ★ Noticing meaningful environmental print (posters, labels, signs)
- ★ Recognising familiar shop signs and logos when out and about
- ★ 'Reading' well-known books to themselves
- ★ Exploring mark-making and early writing (making 'writing type' marks from left to right and top to bottom.)



The EEF...

Mark-making helps children to understand that writing is used to communicate, that marks can carry meaning and that mark-making provides opportunities for children to explore how writing works. Their evidence store shows how children should be given opportunities to experiment with making marks and early writing in meaningful contexts.





Next Time...



Continue the learning with our companion blog, **What Comes Before Phonics? Practical Activities for Early Years** — to help children build the strong foundations needed before formal phonics begins. This blog will return to phonological awareness and focus on practical activities that help children to develop this essential area of learning.

Download your copy here (release date 14th July) :

<https://www.strongerpracticehubs.org.uk/hubs/se/thvy-and-s-central-eysph/resources/what-comes-phonics-practical-activities>

Reflective Questions:

How well does your current environment nurture children's ability to symbolise — through play, gesture, mark making and imaginative exploration — and how might you strengthen these opportunities so that phonological awareness has a meaningful foundation?

In what ways do you make the functions and forms of print visible, purposeful and relevant in everyday interactions, and how can you further support children to see writing as a meaningful system that connects to their spoken language?





Resources and Further Reading:

- <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/literacy-early-years>
- <https://literacytrust.org.uk/communities/best-start-in-life/>
- https://www.google.com/search?gs_ssp=eJzj4tVP1zc0TDasyC00izc1YPSSLM9ILFFIzs9NLVZISk3LL0pVKMjlz8tMLgYAGGUOGQ&q=what+comes+before+phonics&rlz=1C1GCEB_enGB969GB969&oq=what+comes+before+phonics&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUqDAgBEC4YQxiABBiKBTIPCAAQABhDGOMCGIAEGloFMgwIA RAuGEMYgAQYigUyBwgCEAAYgAQyCAGDEAAYFhgeMggIBBAAGBYHjIICAUQABgWGB4yCAGGEAAYFhgeMggIBxAAGBYHjINCAGQABiGAXiABBiKBTINCAkQABiGAXiABBiKBdIBCjExNTU1ajBqMTWoAgiwAgHxBW1JS_PQ64R4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

Feedback:

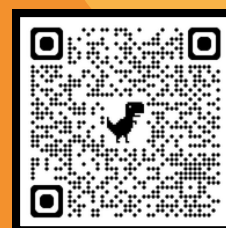


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