



What comes before phonics?

Part 2 of a three part quick read series about phonological awareness.

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

About the **AUTHOR**

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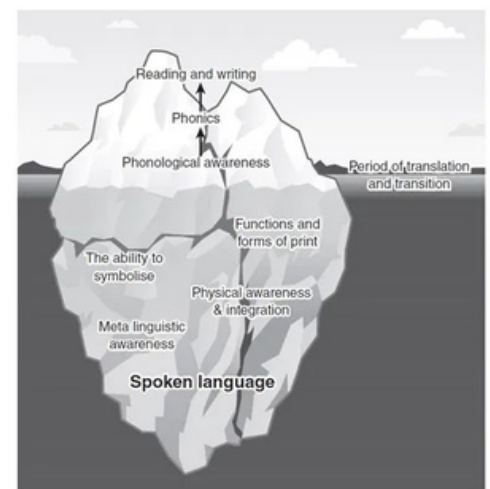


Spoken Language

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

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.

In Part Two, we look at the bottom of the iceberg – spoken language, metalinguistic awareness and physical awareness and integration.



Children's spoken language and their ability to listen, understand, and respond form the foundation of all learning. Spoken language is the primary tool we use for thinking, communicating, and making sense of the world. A strong grasp of language — hearing it, using it, and playing with it — builds the essential foundations for phonics, reading, writing, and wider learning. Our role as adults is crucial. Children develop language through rich, responsive interactions with the people around them. We support this by consistently:

- ★ Engaging in back-and-forth conversations
- ★ Listening carefully and extending children's ideas
- ★ Creating purposeful 'talk times'
- ★ Providing high-quality, meaningful interactions throughout the day



The EEF suggests that spoken language is fundamental to early learning and literacy and that the number and quality of conversations children have with adults and peers is crucial.

- ★ “Spoken language underpins the development of reading and writing.”
- ★ “High-quality adult-child interactions are key to developing children’s language.”

EEF research indicates that strong oral language skills may support areas such as:

- ★ Vocabulary development
- ★ Understanding stories and instructions
- ★ Early phonological awareness
- ★ Later reading comprehension

Metalinguistic Awareness

Metalinguistic awareness is about supporting children to think and talk about language itself. It helps them move beyond using language simply to communicate and

towards noticing how language works. This shift is an important step towards phonics, where children begin to explore and analyse the sounds within words.

This awareness can be nurtured through rich interaction, story sharing, and playful language experiences. Activities such as nonsense rhymes, tongue twisters, experimenting with mouth shapes, and making up rhyming words encourage children to listen closely to the sounds in language. These playful experiences help children begin to break words into sounds — all through listening, rather than focusing on written letters.

The EEF’s *Preparing for Literacy* guidance suggests that oral language activities can support phonological awareness, including recognising and manipulating sounds in words. This aligns with drawing children’s attention to patterns, sounds, and word structures during playful talk. When children play with sounds, notice patterns, or talk about words, they are developing the analytical skills needed for phonics. This helps children shift from simply *using* language to *thinking about* language.



From the EEF's phonological awareness resources:

Engaging in conversations, listening to stories and being exposed to rich language helps build vocabulary and comprehension skills. Singing songs and reciting nursery rhymes enhances oral language development and phonological awareness and introduces rhythm, rhyme and the sounds and patterns of language.

Stella Jones, Director of Town End Research School.

Physical Awareness and Integration

Physical development plays a significant role in children's ability to engage with learning. Evidence suggests that a range of physical skills help children feel secure, regulated, and ready to learn across the curriculum.

- ★ Balance supports confident, automatic movement. When children no longer need to concentrate on staying upright or steady, they can direct more attention to thinking and learning.
- ★ Proprioception (awareness of the body in space) helps children coordinate movement and feel grounded. Children with insecure proprioception often seek movement. Crossing the midline supports left-to-right tracking — an important foundation for reading and writing.
- ★ Eye movements are closely linked to balance and are essential for tracking text.
- ★ Speech relies on coordinated motor movements of the mouth, tongue, and breath.
- ★ Reading requires well-developed ocular motor control.
- ★ Writing depends on both gross motor stability and fine motor skill development.

The EEF's *Preparing for Literacy* guidance highlights the importance of wider developmental foundations, noting that children benefit from opportunities to develop gross and fine motor skills. Their Early Years Toolkit also reports that physical activity approaches can improve self-regulation, concentration and social development, all of which support children to participate confidently in learning.



Reflective Question:

Are you planning with metalinguistic awareness in mind? When it's the focus, practitioners can maximise learning by being clear about their objectives.

Next time...

In Part Three, we'll explore children's ability to symbolise, along with the functions and forms of print — key understandings that develop before formal phonics begins.

Resources and Further Reading:

- Preparing for Literacy: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/literacy-early-years>
- Oral Language Interventions: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/oral-language-interventions>
- Supporting Physical Development: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/evidence-store/physical-development?approach=teaching-the-skills-needed-for-mark-making-and-letter-formation&utm_source=/early-years/evidence-store/physical-development&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=site_searchh&search_term
- Self Regulation: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/early-years-toolkit/self-regulation-strategies>
- Collaborative Talk: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/evidence-store/communication-and-language-b?approach=teaching-through-collaborative-talk-2&utm_source=/early-years/evidence-store/communication-and-language-b&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=site_searchh&search_term
- Neam,S.(2025)What Comes before Phonics? London:Learning Matters Ltd

Feedback:

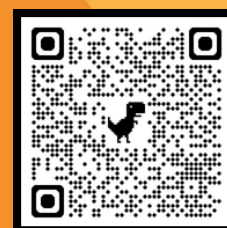


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