



What comes before phonics?

Part 1 of a three part quick read series about phonological awareness.

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.



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

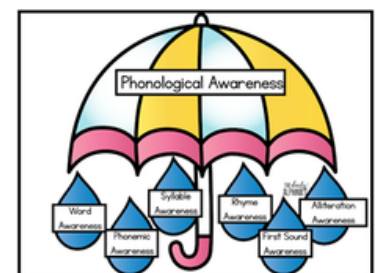
Early Years practitioners play a crucial role in laying the foundations for reading. According to the EEF Early Years Toolkit, strong early literacy development begins with rich spoken language, playful sound work, and high-quality adult-child interactions. Phonological awareness is a key part of this foundation.

What is Phonological Awareness?

Phonological awareness is a listening and speaking skill. It involves noticing and playing with the sounds in spoken language—before letters are introduced.

Children learn to:

- ★ Hear and enjoy rhyme
- ★ Hear/ clap syllables
- ★ Identify words with the same initial sound
- ★ Blend and segment sounds orally



This is all about sound, not print. It focuses on children moving from the focus of speaking being all about the meaning to 'playing with words' - recognising big chunks of sound (words, syllables) to the smallest units of sound (phonemes). We need to be intentionally teaching children to recognise aspects like rhyme and alliteration through stories, songs and rhymes by highlighting them in our modelling.

Why it matters?

EEF evidence suggests that phonological awareness in the early years plays an important role in supporting later reading development, particularly when it is developed through high-quality interaction and alongside a systematic approach to phonics. When we build these skills early, we may reduce the risk of reading difficulties later on.

What is Phonemic Awareness?

Phonemic awareness is a subset of phonological awareness.
It involves:

- ★ Hearing the smallest sounds in words (phonemes)
- ★ Blending phonemes to make words
- ★ Segmenting words into phonemes
- ★ Manipulating phonemes (e.g., changing the /c/ in cat to /m/ to make mat)

This is still an oral skill—no letters are needed - You can do phonemic awareness with your eyes closed!

So what is Phonics then?

Phonics is about print. It begins when children start learning:

- ★ That letters represent sounds (the alphabetic principle)
- ★ How to match graphemes to phonemes
- ★ How to decode words by blending sounds
- ★ How to spell by segmenting sounds and choosing the correct letters

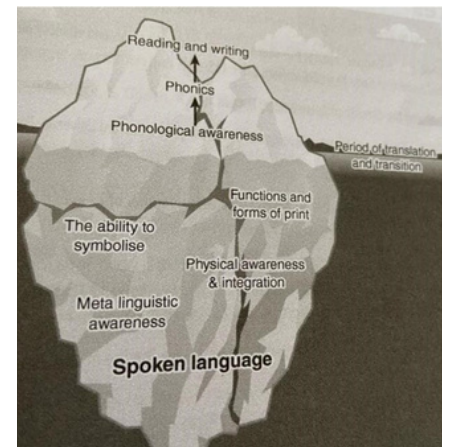
Phonics builds on phonological and phonemic awareness. EEF guidance suggests that children are best supported to engage with a structured phonics programme when they have had opportunities to develop oral language and sound awareness alongside early literacy experiences.

The Iceberg: What comes before Phonics?

Much of what prepares children for phonics is “below the surface”:

- ★ Rich spoken language
- ★ Playful sound exploration
- ★ Attention and listening
- ★ Physical skills for speech and coordination
- ★ Metalinguistic awareness (thinking about language)

These are the foundations Early Years settings can strengthen every day through high-quality interactions, songs, stories, and playful sound activities.



Reflective Questions:

How often do children in your setting have opportunities to play with sounds through songs, rhymes, and stories?

When you look at your planning, where are you intentionally developing phonological awareness before phonics?

Next time...

The next two blogs in the quick read phonological awareness series will provide an in-depth look at 'The Iceberg' and explore the essential aspects of learning before teaching Phonics. The second blog will focus on the foundational elements – spoken language, metalinguistic awareness, and physical awareness and integration. The third blog will examine the middle section of the iceberg, covering the ability to symbolise and the functions and forms of print.



To pre-order a copy of part 2 please click [here](#).

Resources and Further Reading:

- Phonological awareness | EEF. Education Endowment Foundation, Phonological awareness. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/reading-house/phonological-awareness>
- Communication and language approaches | EEF. Education Endowment Foundation, Communication and language approaches. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/toolkit/communication-and-language-approaches>
- Supporting Communication and Language in the Early Years | Education Endowment Foundation. Education Endowment Foundation, Supporting Communication and Language in the Early Years. Available at: https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/documents/ey-evidence-store/early_years_evidence_store_supporting_communication_and_language_in_the_early_years.pdf
- Neaum, S. (2025) What comes before Phonics?. London: Learning Matters Ltd.

Feedback:

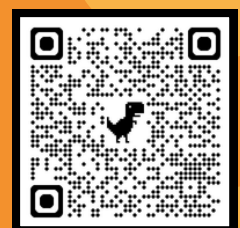


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