

Nursery Rhymes and Phonemic Awareness

by
Research and Development Staff

Sadlier-Oxford
A Division of William H. Sadlier, Inc.



Picture this: A young child sits on a parent's lap while the two of them clap rhythmically together and recite in unison:

*Hey diddle, diddle,
The cat and the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the moon;
The little dog laughed
To see such sport,
And the dish ran away with the spoon.*

The moment ends as the parent tickles the child's tummy and the two of them laugh and laugh and laugh.

If you guessed that this seemingly inconsequential event in a child's life has profound consequences—you'd be right! Research suggests that hearing, learning, and reciting Mother Goose nursery rhymes can help young children take the first steps toward becoming proficient readers.

In the playful moment described above, the child is not only experiencing the joy of words but is also implicitly developing early literacy skills—one of the most important of which is **phonemic awareness**.



PHONEMIC AWARENESS

What Is Phonemic Awareness?

Phonemic awareness is defined as “the awareness of sounds (phonemes) that make up spoken words” (Williams, 1995). Someone consciously and analytically aware of the sounds that make up spoken words would be able to hear the word *pat*, for example, in these ways: it has one syllable; it consists of the initial sound /p/ and the rime *at*; and it is made up of three phonemes, or sounds: /p/, /a/, and /t/.

Why Is Phonemic Awareness Important in Reading Instruction?

From infancy, a child gradually becomes adept at implicitly recognizing and using phonemes—in speaking and listening (Eimas, Siqueland, Jusczyk, and Vigorito, 1971). A growing majority of educators believe that when children begin reading instruction, they need to become explicitly aware that spoken words are composed of sounds and they must develop the ability to consciously and analytically hear, identify, and manipulate those sounds (Moats, Furry, and Brownell, 1998).

Research indicates that this conscious, analytical phonemic awareness and letter knowledge are the best predictors of early reading acquisition. This means that once children have some degree of phonemic awareness and letter knowledge they can

begin to decode the letter/sound correspondences that make up our written language — that is, they can begin to read (Bond and Dykstra, 1967).

What Instruction Can a Teacher Provide in Phonemic Awareness?

It has been recognized that there are several levels of phonemic awareness in which children may need explicit instruction before they can begin decoding words on a page (Blachman, 1984b; Lewkowicz, 1980; Stanovich, Cunningham, and Cramer, 1984; Yopp, 1988). Adams (1990) identifies five levels:

1. Knowledge of nursery rhymes
2. Oddity tasks
3. Blending and syllable-splitting
4. Phonemic segmentation
5. Phoneme manipulation

What Sources Can a Teacher Turn To?

Which materials are the most appropriate for instruction in the five levels of phonemic awareness? There is no definitive answer to that question, of course; but, according to Opie and Opie (1959), nursery rhymes have long been accepted as having a place in the preschool classroom and the range of rhymes that can be used is extensive. Holdaway’s observations (1979) support that finding: “Preschool teachers use nursery rhymes and songs with groups of children or the whole

class, which has a real social benefit as children chant and sing in unison.” Cullinan (1999) adds: “Mother Goose rhymes ... reinforce key reading skills, such as phonemic awareness.” And research reveals that there is a strong link between the nursery rhyme knowledge of PreK children and their future success in reading and spelling (MacLean, Bryant, and Bradley, 1987).

Nursery rhymes are not for the preschool classroom only (Samuels and Farstrup, 1992). They exert their power over all primary

children—and adults! Why? “Stop and listen to the rhymes. See how they awaken responsiveness in boys and girls. They are short, fun-filled, dramatic, pleasing to the ear, easy to remember—and oh, so hard to forget” (Hopkins, 1998).

Traditional nursery rhymes, then, can serve as rich instructional material — not only in developing the first level of phonemic awareness but also in explicit instruction at the other four levels.



MOTHER GOOSE AND PHONEMIC AWARENESS

Following are practical suggestions for using Mother Goose nursery rhymes to develop phonemic awareness in young learners.

Level One: Knowledge of nursery rhymes

✓ **Teacher Tip:** Help children develop an “ear” for rhyme and alliteration (1) by telling children that rhyming words sound the same at the end; (2) by encouraging children to listen for the initial sounds in words; and (3) by reading aloud and reciting to children and having the children themselves recite and sing nursery rhymes and poems. Choose nursery rhymes and poems that are rich in rhyme and alliteration. “Hey Diddle, Diddle,” “Little Boy Blue,” and “Mary, Mary” are just three of the many nursery rhymes that will help do the job. “Hey Diddle, Diddle,” for example, contains these rhyme pairs: *diddle/fiddle*; *moon/spoon*; and alliteration in the repetition of the initial consonant *d* in the opening phrase: “Hey diddle, diddle.”

Your school and/or public library will have collections of nursery rhymes as well as some of the many materials that have been inspired by the traditional rhymes. (See the “Nursery Rhyme Books and Materials” bibliography at the end of this paper.)

You may wish to make the world of Mother Goose really come alive in your classroom by

turning an area into Mother Gooseland with big and little books, puppets, audiocassettes, and so on. But most of all—recite and sing to children and have children recite and sing to you and to each other.

Level Two: Oddity tasks

✓ **Teacher Tip:** Continue asking children to identify rhyming words and listen for initial sounds in words. Provide instruction and practice in listening for ending and medial sounds (Bradley and Bryant, 1983). Read or recite “Mary, Mary” (or one of *your* favorite nursery rhymes) a number of times. Have children recite it until they know it well enough to say it aloud easily and playfully.

*Mary, Mary,
Quite contrary,
How does your
Garden grow?*

*With Silver Bells,
And Cockle Shells,
And pretty maids
All in a row.*

Ask the following questions to check children’s ability to do oddity tasks:

- Which word does not rhyme? *grow, row, bow* (answer: *bow*)
- Which word has a different beginning sound? *maids, does, Mary* (answer: *does*)
- Which word has a different ending sound? *and, shells, bells* (answer: *and*)
- Which word has a different middle sound? *bells, shells, maids* (answer: *maids*)

Level Three: Blending and syllable-splitting

✓ **Teacher Tip:** Model for children how to blend and syllable-split. For practice in blending, give children the phonemes that make up a word—for example, /k/ /a/ /t/—and have them blend the phonemes together to say the word—*cat* (Lundberg, Olofsson, and Wall, 1980; Perfetti, Beck, Bell, and Hughes, 1987). Read, recite, and have children recite and enjoy the language in “This Little Pig” (or another nursery rhyme of your choice):



*This little pig went to market.
This little pig stayed home.
This little pig had roast beef.
This little pig had none.
This little pig cried, Wee-wee-wee!
All the way home.*

Check children’s ability at blending and syllable-splitting by asking them to follow such directions as these:

- Say these three sounds: /p/ /i/ /g/.
- Put (blend) the sounds together and say the word they make. (answer: *pig*)
- Say the first sound you hear in the word *beef*. (answer: /b/)
- Take away /b/ in the word *beef*. Say what is left. (answer: *eef*)

Level Four: Phonemic segmentation

✓ **Teacher Tip:** Provide instruction in segmenting spoken words into individual sounds. Have children tap or clap at each sound they hear in a word (Lieberman, Shankweiler, Fischer, and Carter, 1974; Blachman, 1984a). Read, recite, and have children recite and delight in the alliterative and rhythmic language of “Shoe a Little Horse” (or a nursery rhyme of your own choosing):

*Shoe a little horse,
Shoe a little mare,
But let the little colt
Go bare, bare, bare.*

*Shoe a horse
And shoe a mare,
But let the little colt
Go bare, bare, bare.*

Have children follow these directions to practice or assess their skill at phonemic segmentation:

- Tap (or clap) for each sound you hear in the word *go*. (answer: 2 taps or claps: /g/ /o/)
- Tap (or clap) for each sound you hear in the word *let*. (answer: 3 taps or claps: /l/ /e/ /t/)
- Tap (or clap) for each sound you hear in the word *colt*. (answer: 4 taps or claps: /k/ /o/ /l/ /t/)

Level Five: Phoneme manipulation

✓ **Teacher Tip:** Model for children how to manipulate phonemes as you go about the variety of listening and speaking activities in your classroom (Lundberg, Olofsson, and Wall, 1980; Mann, 1984; Rosner and Simon, 1971). Read, recite, and have children recite and play with the language in “Little Boy Blue” (or another favorite nursery rhyme of yours):

*Little Boy Blue,
Come blow your horn;
The sheep's in the meadow,
The cow's in the corn.
Where is the boy
Who looks after the sheep?
He's under a haystack
Fast asleep.*

*Will you wake him?
No, not I,
For if I do,
He's sure to cry.*

Check children's ability at phoneme manipulation by asking them to follow directions such as these:

- Say the word *will* without /w/:
(answer: *ill*)
- Add /h/ to the beginning of the word *ill*:
(answer: *hill*)
- Say the word *fast* without /s/:
(answer: *fat*)
- Say the word *sheep* without /p/:
(answer: *sbee*)

CONCLUSION

Although phonemic awareness is a current focus of literacy discussion, it is only one part of a balanced approach to reading instruction. Yopp (1992) makes these wise recommendations about teaching phonemic awareness: make the activities playful and fun; avoid drill and rote memorization; find ways for children to interact with each other during instruction; encourage children to be curious about language and to experiment with it; and make allowance for individual differences.

As research and best practice by teachers reveal, Mother Goose is ready and willing to help young learners develop phonemic awareness, one of the first steps on the path to becoming eager, proficient readers.

Terms

alliteration the repetition of initial sounds in words (“Betty Botter bought some butter”)

blend to say the sounds in a word in a fluid way so the word is recognized and spoken as it is heard in everyday speech

manipulate to add or delete a particular phoneme or phonemes in a spoken word

oddy task a task in which one is asked to identify the discrepant member of a group of three or four spoken words based on initial, medial, or final sound

onset the initial consonant or consonants in a word (for example, the *c* in *cat*).

phoneme the smallest unit of sound in a spoken word

phonemic awareness awareness of the sounds (phonemes) that make up spoken words

phonic instruction “a system of teaching reading that builds on the alphabetic principle...of which a central component is the teaching of correspondences between letters or groups of letters and their pronunciations” (Adams, 1990)

rime the remainder of a one-syllable word when the onset is removed (for example, *at* in *cat*)

segment to pull apart phonemes in a spoken word

Nursery Rhyme Books and Materials

The following is a sampling of the many Mother Goose materials available.

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Lee Bennett Hopkins, the “Pied-Piper of Poetry,” has compiled an enchanting collection of round-the-world nursery rhymes for *Lee Bennett Hopkins MOTHER GOOSE*, published by Sadlier-Oxford. The nursery rhymes used in this paper appear in that work.

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*Complete list of references is available upon request.



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