

Ten myths about phonemic awareness

<p>Myth #1 If children know the names of the letters in the alphabet, they know about sounds.</p>
<p>Some children learn to recite the alphabet through songs and repetition. However, they may not actually know which name belongs to which letter. (Children also sometimes only learn the upper case letters). Knowing names of letters does not necessarily mean that a child knows about sounds. In fact, an over-emphasis on letter names can cause confusion about sounds. It is important for adults to explore sounds in spoken language as much as exploring letters with children. Very young children treat the spoken word for a concept as <u>part</u> of that concept (i.e. the word 'daddy' is part of the person daddy). Over time, they realise that they can treat the word as a separate thing, and that it can be broken into 'bits'. This is the basis of rhyming and other word play. Gradually children learn about the smallest elements of spoken words: sounds.</p>
<p>Myth #2 Phonemic awareness is the ability to break words into the individual sounds.</p>
<p>Phonemic awareness has been defined in a number of ways (some of which are not helpful!). A simple and useful definition is that phonemic awareness is knowing that spoken words are made up of little bits called speech sounds. Once children have this initial awareness, which is a critical first step, they can develop skills in phonemic <i>analysis</i> through experience with print. The definition in Myth #2 confuses the knowledge – phonemic awareness – with what it allows a child to do – phonemic analysis. Phonemic analysis is not a single skill; it is a complex continuum of abilities, which includes breaking words into speech sounds (segmenting a word). When children break words into sounds, they demonstrate phonemic awareness, plus other skills like vocabulary, memory and phonics.</p>
<p>Myth #3 Phonemic awareness is the same as phonics.</p>
<p>Phonemic awareness is knowing that spoken words are made up of little bits called speech sounds, that can be manipulated. Phonemic awareness is part of spoken language; it has nothing to do with letters. However, understanding that spoken words are made up of speech sounds is a critical step in learning to make the links between sounds and letters, which is phonics. Adults can help children learn by referring accurately to sounds and/or letters.</p>
<p>Myth #4 Lack of phonemic awareness is the main cause of problems in literacy.</p>
<p>Despite extensive research, we only really know the <u>predictors</u> of reading problems. We do not know the <u>causes</u> of reading problems. Although phonemic analysis skills combined with letter knowledge are useful predictors of learning to read initially, the ability that best predicts long term literacy achievement is language development, especially expressive language. As there are many skills and experiences that a child needs in order to achieve literacy, it is likely that there are multiple causes of literacy problems.</p>
<p>Myth #5 Every Year 1 class should have a structured and explicit phonemic awareness program.</p>
<p>Most children do not need specific phonemic awareness training in order to learn to read. Almost all children, however, can benefit from phonemic awareness and analysis activities that are meaningful and that help them make connections between spoken language and written language. Phonemic awareness instruction in the early years at school should be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ playful and engaging (appropriate and developmental)▪ deliberate and purposeful (systematic and explicit)▪ part of a much broader literacy program (embedded). <p>It is no tragedy if a child starts Year 1 with limited phonemic awareness. However it is a tragedy to implement a literacy program that assumes all children already have this awareness. Children who are not demonstrating phonemic awareness by the middle of first grade need to be identified and offered additional support.</p>

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Myth #6 Children cannot learn about speech sounds without letters.
This myth is very widespread. However, there is ample evidence that children can learn about speech sounds with mouth pictures, hand movements, sequenced blocks and other symbolic units. These visual and tactile aids have been used successfully in speech-language therapy for speech sound work and in emergent literacy programs. Such aids are useful for students who are confused about the difference between sounds and letters. However, this is seen as a first step only, with later steps of making links with letters necessary for literacy.
Myth #7 A phonemic awareness training program will fix up all literacy problems.
A good phonemic awareness (meaning phonemic analysis) training program can help students to develop decoding and encoding skills, but it will not 'fix' all literacy problems. This is because decoding and encoding are not central aspects of literacy throughout life. Initially, phonemic analysis skills combined with letter knowledge allow a child to decode a written word, and (if that concept is in the child's vocabulary) access its meaning. Once a child decodes a meaningful written word a number of times, the word moves into a sight vocabulary and becomes recognised as a unit (or a group of units). This is why practice is essential for reading success. For competent readers, decoding becomes less important, and becomes only one of the resources called on when a reader encounters an unfamiliar word. If a child has other learning or language-related concerns, they may continue to have literacy problems.
Myth #8 If children demonstrate problems in segmenting words, or blending sounds into words, they need a phonemic awareness training program.
Phonemic analysis is complex, develops gradually over time, and is based on others skills. Segmenting and blending sounds in spoken words are high level phonemic analysis skills, and follow developmentally after many others skills. If a child cannot segment words into sounds, it may be that earlier stages of language awareness are still developing or the child does not have adequate spoken language to support phonemic awareness. Targeting support to the individual child's needs is important.
Myth #9 Commercial phonemic awareness workbooks are the best resources for teaching phonemic awareness in the classroom program.
Phonemic awareness/analysis teaching does need to be systematic, but this does not mean a commercial workbook. In fact printed materials are unlikely to be useful – if you are learning about speech sounds in words, the words have to be <u>spoken</u> . Unfortunately there is a plethora of phonics books dressed up as phonemic awareness books! Professional development and resource books with teaching strategies are more helpful than special phonemic awareness workbooks. Accurate exploration of speech sounds in words by the teacher and some voiced computer programs (not phonics programs though), and pictures (e.g. of the mouth or sound icons, without letters initially) are the best resources.
Myth #10 All adults have good knowledge of phonemic awareness/analysis and any adult can teach it to a child.
Many adults are unable to phonemically segment a word; adults seem to give more attention to the letters and to larger sound segments (like consonant blends and syllables). Research on pre-service teachers found that only 26% could phonemically segment, but with training they could easily learn this skill. There are clear implications for pre-service training programs to prepare teachers adequately for the task for literacy instruction.