Sound and Spell: A Caregiver's Guide to Foundational Reading Skills

NYC Public Schools, District 15
Rafael T. Alvarez, Superintendent









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Phonemic Awareness & Phonics Activities

How to use this section of the guidebook:

1. Keep it short: Practice 5–10 minutes a day.
2. Follow your child's pace: Use the section that matches what they're learning in school.
3. Start with sounds: Play listening games—rhymes, clapping syllables, first/last sounds.
4. Add letters: Connect sounds to letters, blend to read, and segment to spell.
5. Use daily moments: Read signs, labels, and books—ask "What sound/letter do you hear?"
6. Make it fun: Play together and praise effort, not just right answers.

Most importantly, stay connected: Use the guide to practice what the teacher shares from school.



Questions Families Can Ask Teachers:

1. What sounds are the children practicing this week?
2. Which letters or letter-sounds should I focus on at home?
3. How do I know if my child is making good progress with sounds and early reading?
4. Are there books, songs, or rhymes that would be good to use at home?
5. When my child is reading or playing with sounds, what should I listen or look for?
6. What's the best way to encourage my child if they get stuck or feel frustrated?

Pre-Kindergarten (3K/4K)

Overview and What You Can Expect to See



What's new and important to know about students in Pre-Kindergarten:

Listening

- Children practice listening to stories, songs, and directions.
- They begin to understand simple questions and follow one- or two-step directions.
- Listening helps them build vocabulary and begin to understand story ideas.

Speaking

- Children use words and short sentences to share their needs, feelings, and ideas.
- They retell familiar experiences or parts of a story in their own words.
- They practice asking questions and joining simple conversations with friends and adults.

Reading

- Students explore books—turning pages, looking at pictures, and noticing print.
- They begin to recognize letters, especially those in their own name.
- They notice that words are made of sounds and may play with rhymes or beginning sounds.
- Reading at this stage is about joy, curiosity, and building early print awareness.

Writing

- Children use drawings and marks to share ideas.
- They begin to write letters or letter-like shapes, often starting with their name.
- They experiment with letters and sounds, sometimes using inventive spelling.
- Writing is about expression—showing “I have something to say!”

Pre-Kindergarten (3K/4K)

Beginning of the Year

<u>In the CLASSROOM</u>: What skills are students learning?

- Listening to and joining in with songs, rhymes, and chants.
- Hearing rhymes or noticing when words start the same
- Looking at the letters in their own name and recognizing them in different places.

<u>At HOME</u>: What activities can I do to support learning at home?

<u>Sing and Rhyme Together</u>

1. Sing favorite songs or nursery rhymes.
2. Play with rhyming words (“cat – hat – bat”).
3. Repeat songs often so your child can join in.

Nursery Rhymes

<u>LINK</u>

<u>Name Hunt</u>

1. Show your child their name on papers, or labels
2. Talk about the letters you see.
3. Encourage them to “write” their name with crayons or markers (even if it looks like scribbles at first).



<u>Letter Shapes</u>

1. Use playdough, sticks, or pipe cleaners to make letter shapes.
2. Talk about the lines and curves in each letter.
3. Start with the letters in your child’s name.



Pre-Kindergarten(3K/4K)

Middle of the Year

In the CLASSROOM: What skills are students learning?

- Noticing words in sentences (like their name).
- Playing games with first sounds in words.
- Beginning to recognize letters and letter sounds.

At HOME: What activities can I do to support learning at home?

How Many Words

1. Say a short sentence like “I love pizza.”
2. Child claps, jumps, or stomps once for each word. Use blocks or toys to stack one for each word you say (“The dog runs” = 3 blocks)
3. Child says a sentence for you to count together.



Same Sound Hunt

1. Pick a sound (like /b/).
2. Look around your home, at the park, or on the train for things that start with that sound.
3. Say the words together (ball, book, bag).
4. Try a new sound on your next outing!

Tongue Twisters are a good way to practice too!

Alphabet Explore

1. Spread out a few letter cards or magnets.
2. Name the letters together.
3. Play matching games (“Find another A”).



Pre-Kindergarten(3K/4K)

End of the Year

In the CLASSROOM: What skills are students learning?

- Clapping out the beats in words (like their name).
- Beginning to recognize letters and connect them to sounds.
- Recognizing more letters and saying the sounds they make.

At HOME: What activities can I do to support learning at home?

Clap the Beats

- Say a word like ba-na-na.
- Clap for each part: ba (clap), na (clap), na (clap).



Name Beats

- Say your child's name slowly (An-drew).
- Clap or tap the beats together.

Alphabet Fun

- Sing the alphabet song together.
- Play with letter magnets, puzzles, or cards.
- Practice naming letters and saying their sounds.



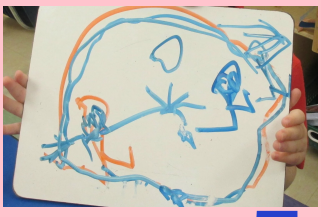
Telling Stories Through Pictures

Talk with your child first about a story they want to tell. Have your child draw a picture of that story. Ask questions about the details of their creation.

1. What is your story about?
2. Who is in it and what happens?
3. Was there a problem in your story?

Share: Have child "read" their story out loud.

Note: You can use multiple pages to reinforce the idea that stories have parts.



Kindergarten

Overview and What You Can Expect to See



What's new and important to know about students in Kindergarten:

Listening

- Children will learn to listen with focus during stories, lessons, and conversations.
- They'll begin to follow multi-step directions and understand key details.
- Listening becomes a tool for building vocabulary and background knowledge.

Speaking

- Children will practice expressing their ideas in complete sentences.
- They'll learn to ask and answer questions, retell stories, and share opinions.
- Speaking is supported with new vocabulary and opportunities for discussion.

Reading

- Students will explore how print works—understanding letters, sounds, and words.
- They'll practice sounding out simple words and recognizing high-frequency words.
- They'll begin to read short texts with support and talk about what they read.

Writing

- Children will use drawings, letters, and words to share their thoughts.
- They'll practice writing their name, labels, and short sentences.
- Inventive spelling is expected as they learn to connect sounds to letters.

Kindergarten

Beginning of the Year

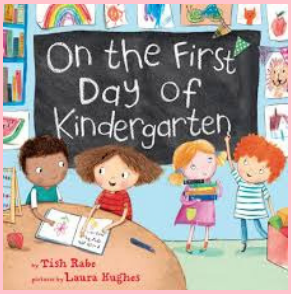
In the CLASSROOM: What skills are students learning?

- Recognizing most uppercase and lowercase letters and their sounds
- Practicing letter formation, adding spacing in between words in sentences, and use of paper
- Identify beginning, middle, and ending sounds in words.

At HOME: What activities can I do to support learning at home?

Retell simple stories using pictures.

1. Read to your child a short, fun, engaging book.
2. Review the story. What happened in the beginning, middle, and end?
3. Ask questions about a story ***(who, what, where)***



Guess My Word *(blending)*

1. Parent says sounds slowly: /s/ … /u/ … /n/.
2. Child puts them together (sun).

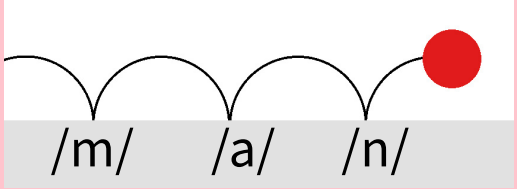
To build knowledge, show your child a picture of the sun or observe the bright sky together (never look directly at the sun).



Bounce the Sounds *(segmenting)*

What You Need: A ball, or something that bounces

1. Say a word like "man".
2. Your child can bounce or tap a ball one time for each sound in the word.



Kindergarten

Middle of the Year

In the CLASSROOM: What skills are students learning?

- Blending sounds to read simple words (e.g., cat, dog).
- Segmenting, or breaking words into sounds to spell simple words.
- Reading simple decodable books with support.
- Can write name, simple words, and beginning to write phrases.

At HOME: What activities can I do to support learning at home?

Clap the Syllables

1. Say the word slowly (e.g. banana)
2. Model clapping each syllable while saying (ba-na-na)
3. Have your child try it again without the support.

Note: When possible, build vocabulary by providing the object or picture of the object.



Odd One Out

1. Say three words ***(cat, cap, dog).***
2. Ask: "Which one doesn't start the same?"

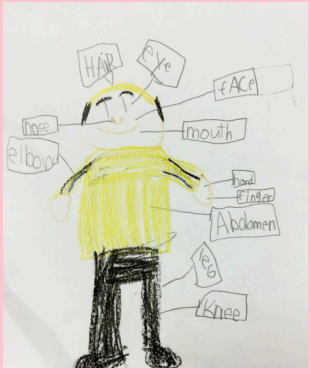
You can also try this activity with changing the end sound later in the school year.

Online Game!

LINK

Small Writing Opportunities

1. Self Portrait with Labels
2. Notes & Cards: Encourage them to write a short note to a family member or friend ("I love you," "Thank you," etc.).
3. What's in My Room? Have child label their toys, books, or room items with simple words.



Kindergarten

End of the Year

In the CLASSROOM: What skills are students learning?

- Decoding simple CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words.
- Reading appropriate high-frequency or sight words
- Writing simple sentences with support.

At HOME: What activities can I do to support learning at home?

Read the Room

1. Label objects around the room, starting with common words (e.g. bed, rug, clock)
2. Label more challenging words, allowing child to practice sounding out letters (e.g. lamp, cabinet)
3. Model "reading the room." Then ask child to play along.



Sight Word Bingo

Sight words are words that do not follow typical English-language patterns/rules.

1. Print board from the link provided.
2. Say the word, use the word in a sentence, say the word again.
3. Play until the entire board is covered.

Online Bingo Boards!

Create A Memory Book

1. Have your child talk about what he/she learned in kindergarten.
2. Practice writing memories on paper or cards. Use pictures to help tell the story first and then add words.

This allows your child to practice writing, practice reflecting, and making sense of a story in order while practicing spelling and phonics knowledge.

See an Example!

Grade 1

Overview and What You Can Expect to See



What's new and important to know about students in Grade 1:

Listening

- Children strengthen their ability to listen closely to stories, instructions, and discussions.
- They begin to pick up on main ideas and important details.
- Listening helps them build background knowledge and make connections.

Speaking

- Students practice speaking in longer, more detailed sentences.
- They learn to retell stories with a beginning, middle, and end.
- Students build confidence sharing ideas, asking thoughtful questions, and joining conversations respectfully.

Reading

- Children apply phonics skills to sound out words more fluently.
- They read short books and passages, working toward greater accuracy and expression.
- Students begin to discuss characters, settings, and events, and can answer simple comprehension questions.
- They continue to grow their sight word knowledge to support smooth reading.

Writing

- Students write complete sentences with capitalization and punctuation.
- They begin to write short stories, notes, or explanations with a clear idea.
- Spelling becomes more accurate, though phonetic/inventive spelling is still part of the process.
- They use writing to share their own experiences and show what they've learned.

Grade 1

Beginning of the Year

In the CLASSROOM: What skills are students learning?

- Counting how many parts are in a word (like pic-nic = 2).
- Putting sounds together to make words (s–u–n = sun).
- Using letter sounds to read and spell short words (cat, frog).

At HOME: What activities can I do to support learning at home?

Syllable Sort

What you need: A variety of common objects, numbers on index cards

1. Place a variety of objects in a pile along with cards labeled, 1,2,3, 4.
2. Ask your child to say the object name out loud, clap the syllables they hear and match it to the number on the card.



Make & Break

What you need: Letter cards or fridge magnets.

1. Build a word with a digraph (two letters that make one sound), such as ship.
2. Swap the beginning (chip, whip, tip).
3. Have child read the new word.



Memory Vowel Match

What you will need: Index cards and objects or pictures.

1. Make cards with vowel teams and matching picture/word cards (rain, boat, pie).
2. Play memory by matching the word with the picture.

Free Printable Activities



Grade 1
Middle of the Year

In the CLASSROOM: What skills are students learning?

- Reading longer words with vowels (bike, home).
- Breaking bigger words into smaller chunks to read them. Recognizing vowel patterns.
- Reading more common words by sight (said, have, where).

At HOME: What activities can I do to support learning at home?

Bossy "R"

1. Talk about how "R" can be bossy.
2. Practice saying words with the "bossy R."
3. Practice writing and sorting words based on spelling.



Word Hunt *(high-frequency word practice)*

What you need: paper folded into six pieces, marker, Post-its

1. Write six words on Post-its, three review and three challenging.
2. Place words around the house.
3. Give child game board (a place to put their word) after they've found them.

Note: Talk to your child's teacher to ask which words your child needs to practice more.

How to Play!

Acting Endings (-s, -es, -ed, -ing)

1. Give child an action word on a flashcard to act out (e.g., jump)
2. Child acts out the word on the card while adult guesses the word.
3. Once the word is identified correctly, child spells out different forms of the word based on the use in a sentence.
    a. *"Jan jumped down the street."*
    b. *"Christopher jumped yesterday when playing hopscotch. "*

Review Song

Grade 1
End of the Year

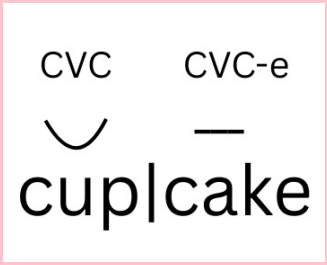
In the CLASSROOM: What skills are students learning?

- Reading more words smoothly and quickly.
- Using sounds and word parts to figure out new words.
- Writing short sentences with words they know.

At HOME: What activities can I do to support learning at home?

Shopping List Hunt

1. Create a grocery list together with some special items.
2. Label spelling patterns within words (see picture to the right for an example)
3. Explain what happens to the vowels based on the pattern (e.g. **/u/** in cupcake is short because its a ***closed syllable***)



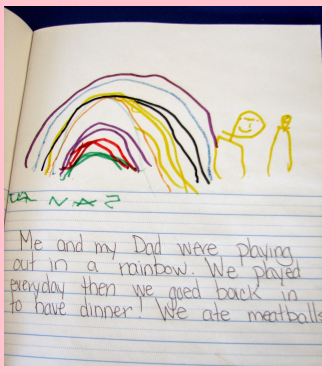
Sound Detective:

1. Give your child a “magnifying glass."
2. Hunt for words in books or around the house that have a particular sound or spelling pattern.
3. Practice writing by recording all the words they sound with that particular pattern.



Journal Writing:

1. Have your child document the last few months of Grade 1. This could start with a prompt such as:
   a. "Today I did _____."
   b. Favorite moments of this week include ____"
2. Have your child read the moments out loud to you. You can celebrate all the words spelled correctly and all the sentences with proper capitalization and punctuation.



Grade 2

Overview and What You Can Expect to See



What's new and important to know about students in Grade 2:

Listening
- Children listen for deeper understanding—grasping key details and the "big idea."
- They follow multi-step directions more independently.
- Listening helps them compare information, make inferences, and grow vocabulary.

Speaking
- Students practice explaining their thinking clearly and giving reasons to support ideas.
- They retell and summarize stories with important details in order.
- They join discussions by building on others' ideas and speaking respectfully.

Reading
- Children move toward reading with fluency—greater accuracy, expression, and speed.
- They tackle longer texts, including stories and informational books.
- Students begin to notice text structures (like problem/solution or cause/effect).
- They answer questions that require deeper thinking, like why something happened.

Writing
- Students write organized pieces with a beginning, middle, and end.
- They expand writing to include stories, informative pieces, and opinions.
- Students edit for capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and grammar with support.
- Writing shows more detail, voice, and logical connections between ideas.

Grade 2

Beginning of the Year

In the CLASSROOM: What skills are students learning?

- Reading more words quickly and easily.
- Noticing word parts that change meaning (like unhappy or played).
- Breaking bigger words into smaller chunks to read them.

At HOME: What activities can I do to support learning at home?

C, K, CK, K-E Spelling Game *(Spelling patterns)*
Watch the video for more information.

1. Give your child a word with a /k/ sound at the end (e.g., stick, magic, plastic, think)
2. Give think time.
3. If the word ends in -ck, put a thumb up. If not, put a thumb down.
4. Mark how many times your child identified the correct spelling of the /k/ sound.

How to Play!

Roll & Write *(Spelling patterns and application to writing)*
Have a list of words your child is working on. Roll a die. The number that appears on the top will indicate your next step.

1 = rainbow write (use different colors for the word)
2 = write with eyes closed
3 = say each sound as you write
4 = clap the syllables first
5 = write three words in a silly sentence
6 = underline the pattern in three words

Virtual Dice



Say & Write *(Spelling patterns)*

1. Say a short sentence with target spelling words. (e.g. The bike is by the lake.)
2. Have your child write it down.
3. Ask them to rewrite the story, adding 3–5 new words with the same spelling pattern. (e.g.The bike is by the lake. I will take a cake and a kite.)
4. Have your child mark the patterns within the words and explain.



Grade 2
Middle of the Year

In the CLASSROOM: What skills are students learning?

- Using shorter forms of words (can't, they're).
- Adding different endings to words (helpful, slowly).
- Learning that same letters don't always sound the same — like ea in meat, bread, and great."

At HOME: What activities can I do to support learning at home?

Synonym/Antonym Challenge *(Building Vocabulary)*

1. Say a word (happy).
2. Ask for a synonym (glad) or antonym (sad).
   - Challenge child by asking them to use new word in a sentence.



Error Detective *(Spelling patterns and revising)*

1. Write sentences with intentional spelling mistakes. (e.g."The boy rode his byke to the lake.")
2. Have your child find and fix the errors, explaining the spelling rule.
3. Have your child write a new sentence with the same spelling rule.



Word Chains with Patterns

1. Start with a word (hit).
2. Change one letter or sound at a time to create a chain of new words (hit → hot → hop → hope → rope).
3. Continue with replacing letters until the chain is long. Each time, challenge yourself to creating a longer chain than the time before.



Grade 2
End of the Year

In the CLASSROOM: What skills are students learning?

- Reading longer words more smoothly and quickly.
- Recognizing tricky words with silent letters (knock, comb).
- Building new words by adding beginnings and endings (redo, kindness, helpful).

At HOME: What activities can I do to support learning at home?

Word Jar (*Building vocabulary)*

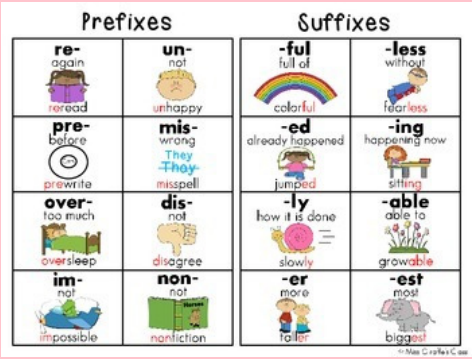
1. Keep a jar where your child writes down new or interesting words.
2. At the end of the week, pick two - three words to review and use in fun sentences.



Build-a-Word Workshop *(prefixes/suffixes)*

1. Provide base words and affixes: play, un-, re-, -ing, -ful.
2. Ask your child to create as many new words as possible and use them in sentences.

Extension: Turn it into a timed challenge to see how many words they can make in three - five minutes.



Write & Read *(Writing, spelling, synonyms, fluency)*

1. Give your child time to write a creative story.
2. Ask your child to underline five words they think are tricky to spell or words with long vowels, blends, or digraphs.
3. Underline a word and ask your child to replace it with a synonym.
4. Have your child read their story aloud to you.

Prompt Ideas!

Resources for Caregivers

If you'd like to learn more about phonemic awareness, phonics, and how these skills develop as children learn to read, we've included a list of resources to support families. These materials are designed to help you choose activities to try at home, provide background on what your child is learning in school, and answer common questions about reading instruction. For guidance tailored to your child's specific needs, be sure to talk with your child's teacher about the best ways to support learning at home.



Why Sounds Matter

An overview of phonemic awareness and phonics

What is Phonemic Awareness?

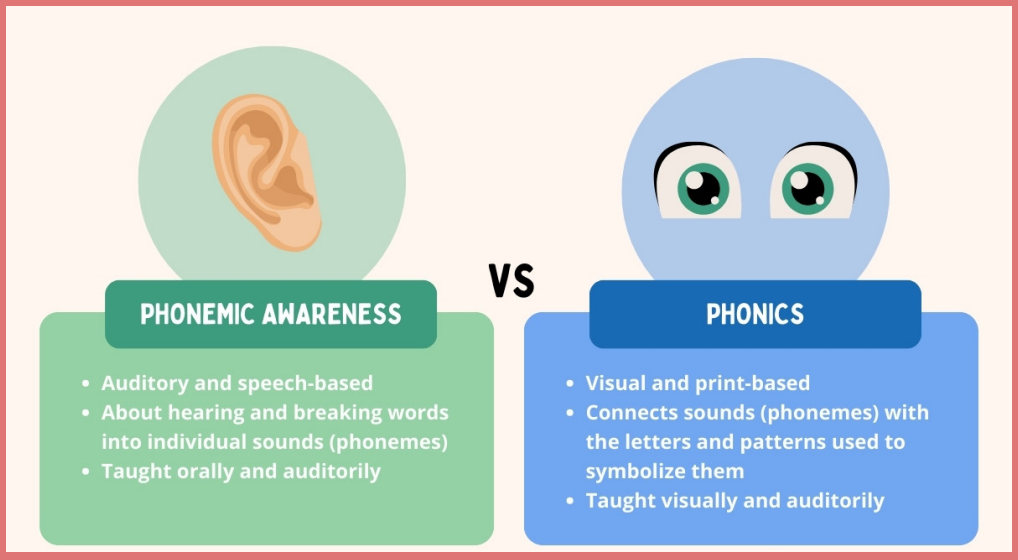
Before children learn to read, they first learn to listen to and play with the sounds in words. This is called *phonological awareness*. It begins with fun activities like clapping out parts of a word (ba-na-na), finding rhymes (cat/hat), and hearing the first sound in a word (ball starts with /b/). **Phonemic awareness** is the most advanced level of phonological awareness. It's when children can hear and work with the smallest sounds in words.

Watch for More Information!

LINK

What is Phonics?

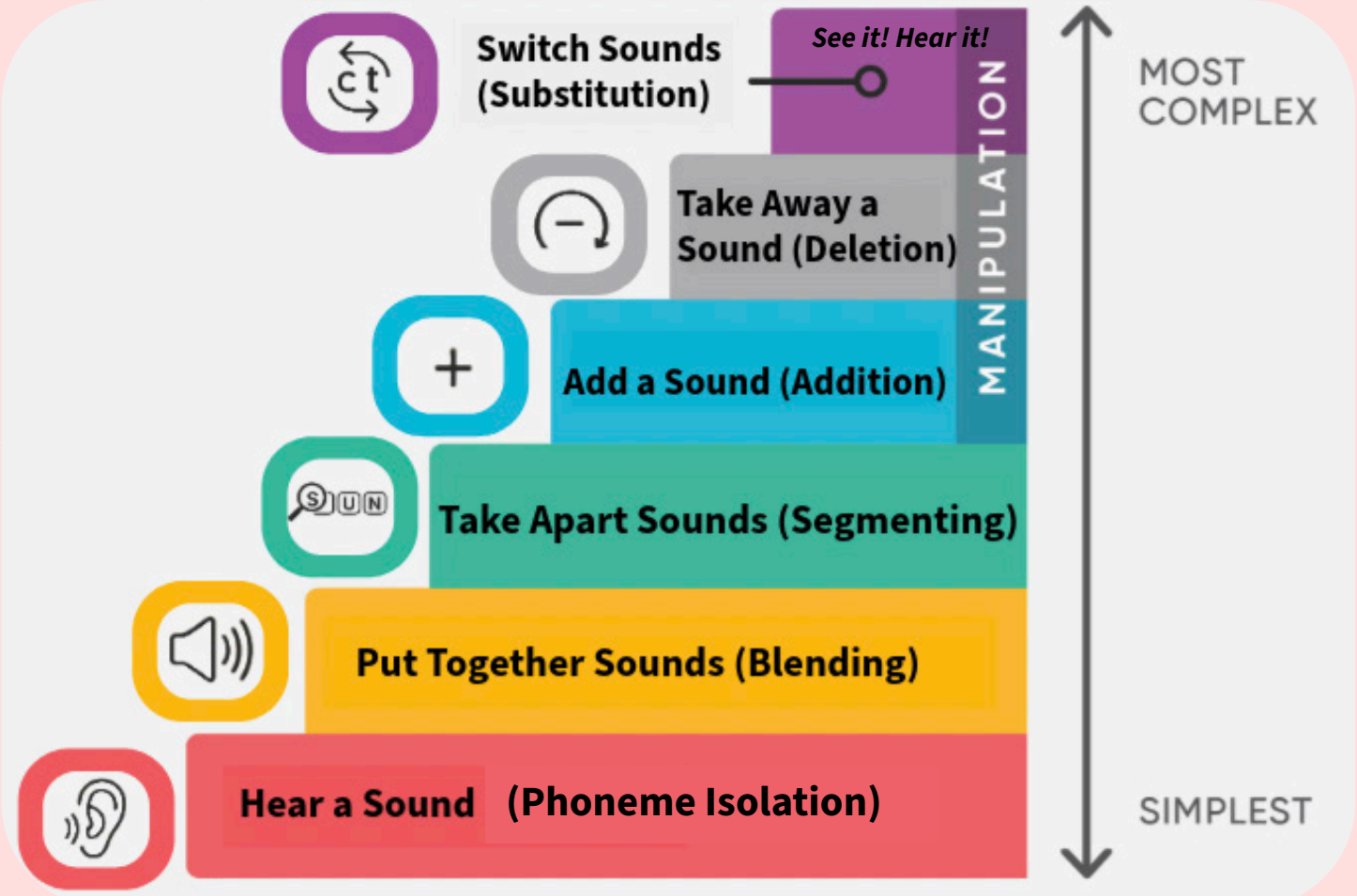
Phonics is about learning how letters and sounds work together to make words. It helps children understand that each letter (or group of letters) has a specific sound. Phonics helps kids connect what they hear with the letters they see, making it easier to read and spell. It's an important step in becoming a confident reader!



Understanding the Building Blocks

A reference guide to understanding phonemic awareness and phonics progression and instruction.

Learning to read begins with understanding how words are built. Use the chart below to track your child's skills and knowledge of words. Talk with your child's teacher to get a better understanding of what your child is currently learning in school.



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The QR codes listed above are example videos for the above skills.

Skills Progression and Overview by Grade

Pre-Kindergarten Skills

Focus: Hearing and playing with sounds. Beginning to understand that letters make sounds.

Phonological/Phonemic Awareness – Hearing and playing with sounds in words.
e.g. Recognizing rhymes, hearing the first sound in a word, or clapping out syllables.



Letter Recognition – Knowing the letters of the alphabet and being able to name them.

Letter-Sound Correspondence – Connecting letters to the sounds they usually make.
e.g. "b" makes the /b/ sound.

Print Awareness – Understanding that words on a page have meaning.
e.g. Knowing the difference between letters and words, and reading from left to right.

Oral Language Skills – Talking, listening, and learning new words.
e.g. Talking about ideas or stories you hear.

Rhyme and Alliteration Awareness – Hearing or making words that sound the same or start with the same sound. *e.g. "cat" and "hat" rhyme; "big ball" starts with the same sound.*

Kindergarten Skills

Focus: Helping your child recognize letters and the sounds they make, practice putting sounds together to read words, and start writing words using those sounds.

- Letter recognition (uppercase and lowercase)
- The relationship between letters and their sounds (consonants, short vowels)
- Blending and Segmemting
- CVC reading and writing (consonant–vowel–consonant words)
- High-frequency words (including irregular words)
- Double final consonants: -ff, -ll, -ss, -zz
- Common digraphs: sh, the, ch, wh, ck
- Intro to word families (e.g. -at, -an, -it)



Spelling Learning Progression by Grade

Grade 1 Skills

Focus: Long vowels, common spelling patterns, and building vocabulary.

- Review/solidify short vowels, digraphs, blends
- Final e (CVCe → long vowel patterns)
- Consonant blends (bl, st, scr, etc.)
- Beginning r-controlled vowels (ar, or, er/ir/ur)
- Vowel teams (ai, ay, ee, ea, oa, ow [long o], igh, ie)
- Other vowel patterns (oo, ew, ou, ow [as in cow], oi, oy)
- Endings (-s, -es, -ed, -ing)
- Compound words
- Two-syllable words (VC/CV, V/CV, VC/V patterns)



Grade 2 Skills

Focus: Helping your child understand different vowel sounds, break words into parts (syllables), and learn how word beginnings, endings, and roots change meaning.

- All syllable types (closed, open, silent e, r-controlled, vowel team, consonant-le)
- Complex vowel teams (au, aw, ew, oo, oi, oy, ou, ow, ea [bread], ie [chief])
- Soft c / soft g rules (cent, city, gym, giant)
- Silent letters (kn, wr, mb)
- The use of ea, oo, ou, ow
- Prefixes and suffixes (un-, re-, -ful, -less, -ly)
- Contractions (can't, don't, won't)
- Regular multisyllabic word decoding (using syllable division rules)



Terms to Know

Sky Writing
The technique of practicing writing using straight arm and two fingers mimicking the use of a pencil.

Phoneme
The smallest unit of *sound*. This can be one letter /a/ or multiple letter /ch/.

Grapheme
A grapheme is a letter or group of letters that represent a sound. It's the *written* part of a sound.

Blending
The process of combining individual sounds to form a word. ***/c/ /a/ /t/*** come together to make the word ***cat***.

Segmenting
The process of breaking a word down into individual sounds. The word **dog** is broken up into **/d/ /o/ /g/**.

Syllable
A part of a word that has one vowel sound.
Example: "ba-na-na" has 3 syllables.

Rhyme
Words that sound the same at the end.
Example: "cat" and "hat"

Vowel
A letter that makes a sound in every word and is usually A, E, I, O, or U (sometimes Y).
Example: "a" in "cat," "o" in "dog"

Consonant
A letter that is not a vowel.
Example: b, c, d, f

Spelling Pattern
The way letters are arranged in a word.
Example: "CVC" means Consonant-Vowel-Consonant like cat or dog.

Terms to Know

CVC Word
A word with the pattern Consonant-Vowel-Consonant.
Example: “cat,” “dog”

VC/CV Pattern
A spelling pattern where a word is divided between vowels and consonants for syllable division.
Example: “nap/kin”

Silent Letter
A letter that is written but not pronounced.
Example: “k” in “knight”

Sight Word / High-Frequency Word
Words that appear often and may not follow regular phonics rules.
Example: “the,” “said”

R-Controlled Vowels
When a vowel is followed by the letter r, the sound of the vowel changes. For example, in the word car, the a doesn’t sound like the short a in cat—the r controls it and makes it sound different.

Compound Words
A compound word is made when two smaller words are put together to make a new word. For example, sun + flower = sunflower.

Prefix
A group of letters added to the beginning of a word that changes its meaning.
Example: “un-” + “happy” = unhappy (not happy)

Suffix
A group of letters added to the end of a word that changes its meaning.
Example: “play” + “-ing” = playing

Synonym
A word that means the same or almost the same as another word.
Example: “happy” → “glad”

Antonym
A word that means the opposite of another word.
Example: “hot” → “cold”