

What comes first, the chicken or the egg, or phonics?



One of the things that we try to do at school is develop good readers. In fact, schools spend a great deal of time and money on developing effective programs and buying expensive materials to help children become good readers. This is a good thing. In our society being a good reader will help you to learn many things. However, one of the biggest misconceptions about how to teach young children to become good readers is that we must start with phonics.

Yes, phonics is important and we want children to develop good phonetic skills. However, there is something that children need to learn before phonics that will give them a strong foundation in learning how to read. It is called *phonemic awareness*. This has to do with a child's ability to hear, identify, separate, and put back together the various sounds in spoken words. It consists of a set of skills that a child needs to learn before, and sometimes while, he or she learns phonics in order to become a good reader. If one tries to teach a child phonics before he or she has good phonemic awareness skills the child will struggle learning phonics.

I remember having a conversation with a preschool teacher several years ago. We were talking about preschoolers and reading instruction. This teacher kept talking about how the preschoolers were learning the names of the letters, the sounds the letters make, and how to write them, etc. I would listen politely, but then I would bring the conversation back to the importance of preschool children learning phonemic awareness skills first. Finally, after talking for several minutes this teacher asked, "What do you mean? What are phonemic awareness skills?"

When I heard this, I tried to keep my mouth from falling open in shock. I thought to myself, how can one have a four year degree in Early Childhood Education and not even know what phonemic awareness skills are, let alone the important role they play in children learning to read?

Unfortunately, I have found this lack of understanding to be all too common even among trained teachers. They seem to know and understand the importance of phonics, but many mistakenly think that phonics is the first foundation they must teach for a child to become a good reader. In fact, learning phonemic awareness skills needs to start long before any formal schooling so that by the end of kindergarten children have developed strong phonemic awareness skills.

When we try to teach children phonics without the prerequisite phonemic awareness skills they almost always struggle. They end up trying to learn isolated phonetic rules without a context that makes sense to them. Reading becomes a chore and a gigantic puzzle. Every word is a little puzzle that must be solved. And then the child has to put all of those puzzles together to make sense of the larger sentence puzzle. Reading is not an enjoyable activity for these children.

Some people say that children learn phonemic awareness skills naturally without even being taught in a formal way. There is some truth to that, but it is not true of all children. Most children learn some phonemic awareness skills naturally, but many still need direct instruction to learn them all and to establish a strong foundation so that they can learn to become strong readers and hence, successful students.

This topic opens up some other questions. What are some specific phonemic awareness skills? What happens to those children who don't have good phonemic awareness skills? How do children develop strong phonemic awareness skills? Eventually, we will delve into those and other questions.

In His Service,
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