



Is your child ready to learn to read?

By Linda Balsiger, M.S., CCC-SLP

If your child is entering first grade this fall, it is important that they have the basic skills needed for learning to read. Some of these skills are taught explicitly in kindergarten. Other underlying skills relate to the ability to hear and manipulate sounds in words, or *phonological awareness*. Children with poor phonological awareness have difficulty working with sounds in the context of words, even once they have learned basic sound-letter associations. Core deficits in phonological awareness are a hallmark of dyslexia, a language-based learning disability.

Let's take a look at the basic skills and abilities needed before entering first grade:

Phonological Awareness Skills

- **Syllable Awareness** – Even before kindergarten, your child should be able to distinguish individual syllables in words, by “clapping” to the beat of each syllable.
- **Rhyming** – By age 4, a child should be able to select which two words rhyme, from a set of 3 words. They should also be able to produce a rhyming word (real or nonsense) for a given word. For example, given the word *cat*, acceptable answers are: *bat, zat, mat, rat, glat*.
- **Sound Isolation** – A kindergartener should be able to tell you that the word *bug* begins with the “b” sound. They should also be able to generate words or find pictures or objects in their environment that begin with a given sound.
- **Blending** – Blending is the ability to blend distinct sounds into words. If you give your child the sounds “c”, “a”, and “t” (slowly pausing between each sound), they should be able to tell you this represents “*cat*”. Longer words require the use of phonological memory in addition to phonological awareness, because the child must “hold” those sounds in memory before blending them into a word.
- **Segmenting** – Segmenting is the reverse of blending. A child should be able to break the word “*cat*” down into its individual sound units or phonemes: “c”, “a”, and “t”.
- **Elision** – Elision is the ability to delete sounds from words. Ask your child what word you get if you take the “p” sound out of “*pin*”. They should respond “*in*”. These tasks become more challenging with consonant clusters. For example, the word “*snap*” without the “n” is “*sap*”. Deficits in elision are a red flag for dyslexia, and children who have difficulty with this task are at definite risk for a reading disorder.



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Learned Skills

These skills are taught in kindergarten. Without them, your child is not ready to begin first grade.

- **Alphabet** – A child should be able to both recite and write the alphabet, in the proper sequence.
- **Sound-Letter Associations** – When given an alphabet letter, your child should be able to tell you the sound that goes with that letter. Conversely, when given a sound, they should be able to write the corresponding letter. It is important that a child know both the long and short vowel sounds.
- **Early Reading** – By the end of kindergarten, a child should be able to blend sounds to read simple 3 letter short-vowel words, such as: *van, top, bin, mud*. Make sure they can read words with a variety of short vowels in the middle.

If you have concerns about your child's reading readiness, an evaluation is the first step in determining whether they have an underlying disorder related to reading. The evaluation will assess the skills discussed here, as well as other aspects of phonological awareness, phonological memory, and efficiency and accuracy of linguistic retrieval. It will determine whether your child is on track, behind, or if they have an underlying disorder that requires specialized intervention and treatment. Early intervention is critical for children who are at risk for reading disorders, and early identification of problems can ensure that your child gets the help they need before they begin first grade.

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