Beginning Sound Isolation:
The Greatest Discovery About the Beginning of Phonemic Awareness

The best way to teach beginning sound isolation is to *model* beginning sound isolation. So all you have to do is find many different ways to interact with young children so that they hear you slice off the beginning sounds of spoken words. Eventually, their brains will figure out what you're doing and they'll do it to on their own.

These are very simple games designed to achieve a very simple objective. Don't be fooled! This is important stuff.

Beginning Sound Games:

1. Vocabulary basket of objects or pictures.

Very young children are happy as clams to sit with an interested adult who hands them fun, curious or even common objects or pictures.

Teacher:	Sally, this is a /**b**/…**buffalo**. Can you say /**b**/…**buffalo**?
or	Billy, can you give me the /**e**/…**elephant**?
or	Who has the picture of the /**k**/…**kite**?

2. Driving in the car.

When my daughter was a tiny 3-year old I would ask her to name things she saw out the window.

Daddy:	Penni, what do you see out the window?
Penni:	I see a cow.
Daddy:	Oh, you see a /**c**/…**cow**. What else do you see? Etc….

3. Lining up for recess.

Teacher: When I call your name you may walk to the playground. Let's see. Who's sitting nicely?
/**t**/…**Thomas**. You may go.
/**ch**/…**Charles**. You may go.
/**p**/…**Paula**. You may go. Etc…..

Important Notes

1. Just be creative. You can think of lots more ways to get the children to hear you slice off the beginning sound of a word. Of lots of words. Eventually, after enough repetitions, a child's brain will finally "get it." And he will start to isolate beginning sounds on his own! And that's a very good thing.

2. The moment a child generates a beginning sound from a spoken word—on his own—is the moment you can know with certainty that the child is ready to understand, learn and remember letter-sounds.

3. This may happen when a child is 3 or 4 years old. It just depends on how many repetitions the child needs before his brain becomes aware of the beginning sound. Will it take 50 repetitions? 150? 500? *The answer is:* you don't know! You don't know how many repetitions it will take for a child to achieve this first level of phonemic awareness. You just keep doing it at appropriate times and in a fun and appropriate manner until it happens.

4. A child is ready to understand, learn and remember letters only when he has sufficient phonemic awareness to isolate and identify the beginning sounds of spoken words.

5. The first grade teacher has the task of teaching 6 and 7-year olds how to read. And yet in every first grade classroom there are children who are being taught to write and say the alphabet letters and their sounds who in fact don't have the awareness of beginning sounds necessary to understand the alphabetic principle and therefore to learn and remember the letter-sounds. They'll get this awareness in a matter of hours, or days or weeks. But in the meantime, they are falling behind right from the beginning of first grade. Maybe they'll catch up. Often they won't. Avoid this at all costs because children who leave first grade reading below grade level are likely to be behind in reading at the end of 4th grade. And that's not a good thing.

6. The way *you* say the sounds will be how the child says the sounds. So be careful. You need to be discrete in how you say the sounds. You need to keep them as short as possible.

   Don't say /**duh**/…**dog**. Say /**d**/…**dog**. If you add a vowel sound (or schwa) after a hard consonant, the child will say it that way and eventually will read the letter "d" that way.

If a child picks up your bad habits, it will affect his decoding later on. Example: a child sounding out the word VAN might sound like this: **/vuh/**…**/aa/**…**/nuh/**.

Now when he blends the 3 sounds together he'll get VUHANNUH. Is that Vanna White from "Wheel of Fortune"? Or, is it a station wagon-type vehicle with sliding side doors? Obviously there can be some confusion.

7. Try to get the child to repeat the beginning sound isolation if possible. When I find out, "Who has the **/b/**…**buffalo**?" I will ask that child to say "**/b/**…**buffalo**," as she places the plastic figurine back into my vocabulary basket.

   The reason for this is because your child's voice has a greater impact on learning than your voice. The more impact, the sooner the beginning sound awareness we are waiting for will appear. It's that simple.

8. You can't rush this awareness. It will happen in its own good time. Be diligent in modeling the desired awareness as many times as possible in appropriate ways—and be patient.

9. Do not ask the child, "What's the beginning sound of CAT?" That's not teaching; that's testing. And if the child isn't ready to give the correct answer, you have allowed the child to fail. This kind of questioning will undermine your efforts in the long run. A child will come back to you for more and more, if he knows he is always successful and right.

The rule is: don't ask a question unless you know you'll get the right answer.

More Beginning Sound Games:

At some point the child will need more of a challenge. If he is not challenged, he will eventually lose interest in coming around for a lesson.

The following are ways in which you can continue to model beginning sounds and yet involve the child in a more challenging way.

1. Which one?

Begin with a choice of 2 pictures or objects and then increase to 3 or more. As long as the child is identifying the correct object, you know you're on the right track.

Teacher:	Susan, here's a picture of an **apple** and a picture of a **banana**. This one is an **apple**. This is a **banana**. Which one begins with /**b**/?
Child:	**Banana**.
Teacher:	Right. /**b**/…**banana**. Can you say /**b**/…**banana**?
Child:	/**b**/…**banana**.

Begin with a choice of 2 pictures or objects and then increase to 3 or more. As long as the child is identifying the correct object, you know you're on the right track.

2. Which one? (Variation)

Teacher:	Laura, take the **horse** out of the basket. Does **horse** begin with the sound /**d**/?
Child:	No.
Teacher:	Does **horse** begin with the sound /**t**/?
Child:	No.
Teacher:	Does **horse** begin with the sound /**h**/?
Child:	Yes.
Teacher:	Please say /**h**/…**horse**/
Child:	/**h**/…**horse**.

3. Which one? (Variation)

Teacher:	Louis, point to the picture of the **donkey**. Does **donkey** begin with /**d**/ or /**m**/?

More Notes

1. A word about rhyming. Rhyming is considered to be a wonderful way to inaugurate phonemic awareness training with young children.

   When we rhyme two words (**CAT/HAT**) we are directing children's attention not to the meaning of those words—there is no relationship there—but to the sounds within those words that are the same. A child who begins to remember rhyming pairs and then starts to generate rhymes (even nonsense rhymes) on his own is a child who is becoming aware of sounds within spoken language. Which is phonemic awareness.

   So we encourage Kindergarten and preschool teachers and parents of these young ones to model rhyming often. (Remember, modeling phonemic awareness skills is the best way to teach them.)

2. There are approximately 45 sounds in the English language. And we can list them. But we're not trying to teach a list of sounds. Our objective is to teach the perception of sound, the awareness of sound within spoken words.

   In other words, you don't have to be sure you have a picture or object for each of the 45 sounds of English. Your task is to model the isolation of beginning sounds. Period.

3. Children who are having difficulty with phonics are those who do not have sufficient phonemic awareness to understand how speech maps with printed symbols.

4. Find out as much as you can about phonemic awareness. Fun phonics activities must include introduction to, and practice with, phonemic awareness. Learning to read with phonics begins with phonemic awareness.

Be sure to get our great beginning sound isolation card game that will prepare your child for phonics reading instruction.

Click here to go to our site for this game!