Cognus

EARLY YEARS TEAM

Why Phonological Awareness Matters in Nursery Education

When we think about early literacy, many people jump straight to phonics. But before children are ready for phonics, they need a strong foundation in **phonological awareness**. This is the ability to recognise and manipulate the sounds of spoken language—without looking at letters or print. Teaching phonics too early—before children have developed strong **phonological awareness**—can lead to several issues:

Cognitive Overload- Phonics requires children to connect sounds to written symbols. If they haven't mastered listening and sound discrimination, this extra step can overwhelm them and cause confusion.

Poor Sound Discrimination- Children who skip phonological awareness may struggle to hear differences between sounds (e.g., /b/ vs /d/). This makes blending and segmenting words difficult later.

Increased Frustration and Low Confidence- If phonics feels too hard, children may become frustrated, disengage from reading activities, and develop negative attitudes toward literacy.

Risk of Mechanical Learning- Starting phonics too early can lead to rote memorisation of letter-sound correspondences without true understanding of how sounds work in spoken language.

Gaps in Language Development- Phonological awareness activities (rhymes, syllable clapping, sound games) also build vocabulary and oral language. Skipping this stage can limit broader language growth.



What is Phonological Awareness?

Phonological awareness is an umbrella term that includes skills like:

- **General sound discrimination:** experiencing and identifying environmental and instrumental sounds
- **Listening to and identifying sounds** in words.
- **Recognising rhymes** and creating rhyming words.
- **Clapping out syllables** in names and objects.

- **Segmenting and blending sounds** orally.

These skills are all about hearing and playing with sounds, which is why they are perfect for nursery-aged children.



Why Start with Phonological Awareness?

Children in nursery are still developing their speech and listening skills. Teaching phonics too early—before they have mastered listening and sound discrimination—can lead to frustration. Phonological awareness:

- Builds **auditory discrimination**, helping children notice differences in sounds.
- Supports **language development**, as children learn patterns in speech.
- Prepares children for phonics later, making the transition smoother and more successful.

Practical Ways to Teach It

- **Listening walks and sound stories:** Identifying sounds made by vehicles, animals, weather etc
- **Exploration with instruments:** playing with instruments of different pitch, engaging with varying rhythms and volumes
- **Nursery rhymes and songs**: Encourage children to listen for rhymes and repeat them.
- **Sound games**: "I spy with my little eye, something beginning with…" (but focus on sounds, not letters).
- **Syllable clapping**: Clap out the beats in names or objects (e.g., "ba-na-na").
- **Alliteration activities**: "Silly snakes slither slowly" – play with words that start with the same sound

The Key Message

Phonological awareness is the **listening foundation** for reading and writing. By focusing on these skills in nursery, we give children the tools they need to succeed when phonics comes later. Phonics should come at the end of a long developmental journey, not the beginning. Before children can learn to decode, they need strong listening, speaking, and phonological awareness skills. This pre-phonics stage is vital because it builds the ability to hear and manipulate sounds, which is essential for reading any alphabetic writing system. Teaching phonics too early—before children can tune in to sounds and respond—means phonemes and digraphs will not make sense and learning

literally falls on deaf ears. When phonics is introduced at the right stage, usually when children are in their Reception year following high quality phonological awareness development from their Nursery experiences, it becomes a powerful tool for literacy success.