

Sound Play at Home: Simple Games to Build Early Reading Skills

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Children who have difficulty hearing and working with sounds in kindergarten are more likely to struggle with learning to read (Ehri, 2023; Landerl et al., 2022). The good news is that families can make a big difference. With just a little knowledge and a few simple activities, you can help build your child's early reading skills at home. In this brief, we will share what phonological awareness is and walk you through three easy, everyday activities to try together.

What Is Phonological Awareness?

Phonological awareness is your child's ability to hear and play with the sounds in spoken language (Rice et al., 2022). It includes noticing that speech can be broken into smaller parts—like sentences, words, parts of words, and individual sounds. Phonological awareness also helps children recognize patterns of sounds and connect sounds to letters.

Think about Charlie Brown. All he hears from his teacher is “wahwahwahwah”—a continuous string of sound. However, we know that his teacher was speaking in full sentences. Pretend his teacher said,

“Today is Monday. The swings are open. We will go to music after recess.”

We can break this string of sounds into parts of different sizes. The big parts are sentences—words put together to convey a meaning. In this example, there are three sentences: 1: *Today is Monday*, 2: *The swings are open*, and 3: *We will go to music after recess*. Next, we can break it into medium parts—words. There are 15 words in total. Each word can be broken into small parts—sounds. There are a few different ways to break words into sounds.



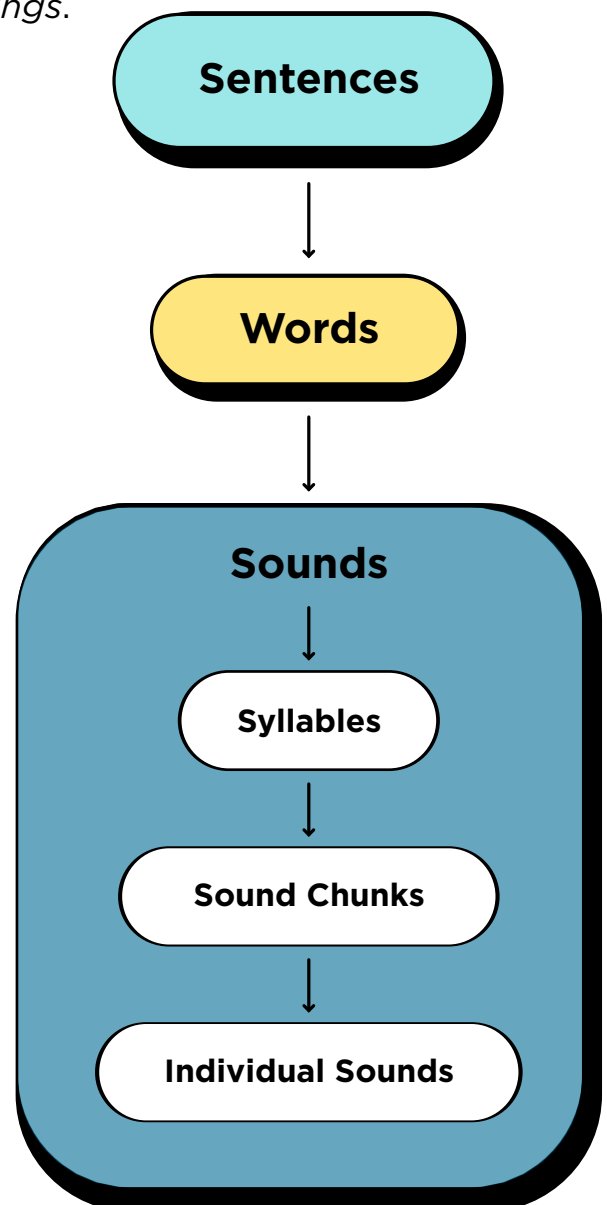
Phonological awareness is your child's ability to hear and play with the sounds in spoken language.

Syllables. A syllable is a short word or part of a word organized around a vowel. You can find a syllable every time your chin drops when you say a word. Take the word *music*, which can be broken into two syllables or parts: *mu* + *sic*. Your chin drops when you say the vowel sound in each part. However, *swings* only has one syllable because your chin drops just once.

Sound Chunks. Sound chunks are when we group more than one sound together. Even though *swings* has just one syllable, we may break it into sound chunks: *sw* + *ings*. Sound chunks often help us when we are rhyming because the ending chunk sounds the same in other words. Some words that rhyme with *swings* include *rings*, *things*, and *wings*.

Individual Sounds. Finally, words can be broken into individual sounds. Of all the phonological awareness skills, this is the hardest to learn. For example, the word *open* is made of four sounds = *o* + *p* + *e* + *n*. This is pretty easy when each letter makes a sound, but sometimes more than one letter is needed to make a single sound. For example, the word *swings* has five sounds = *s* + *w* + *ee* + *ng* + *z*, even though it has six letters. This is one reason breaking words into individual sounds can be tricky.

Remember, phonological awareness is your child's ability to hear and play with the different-sized sounds in spoken language. Strong phonological awareness builds the foundation for confident reading, better spelling, and overall literacy success. Families can help children develop these skills through short, playful sound games woven into everyday routines.



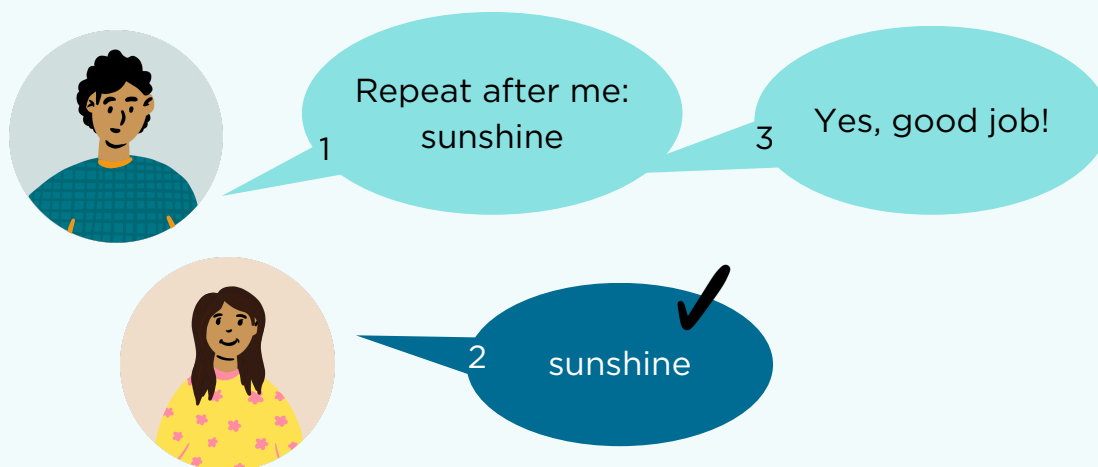
Three Phonological Awareness Play Routines

Helping your child build early reading skills does not have to feel like homework. In fact, meaningful learning often happens through play. These short, spoken routines help children hear, notice, and work with sounds in words. You can play with big sounds (whole sentences), medium sounds (words), and small sounds (syllables, word chunks, or individual speech sounds). The goal is simple: build your child's comfort and familiarity with sounds while having fun together. Just a few minutes a day makes a difference.

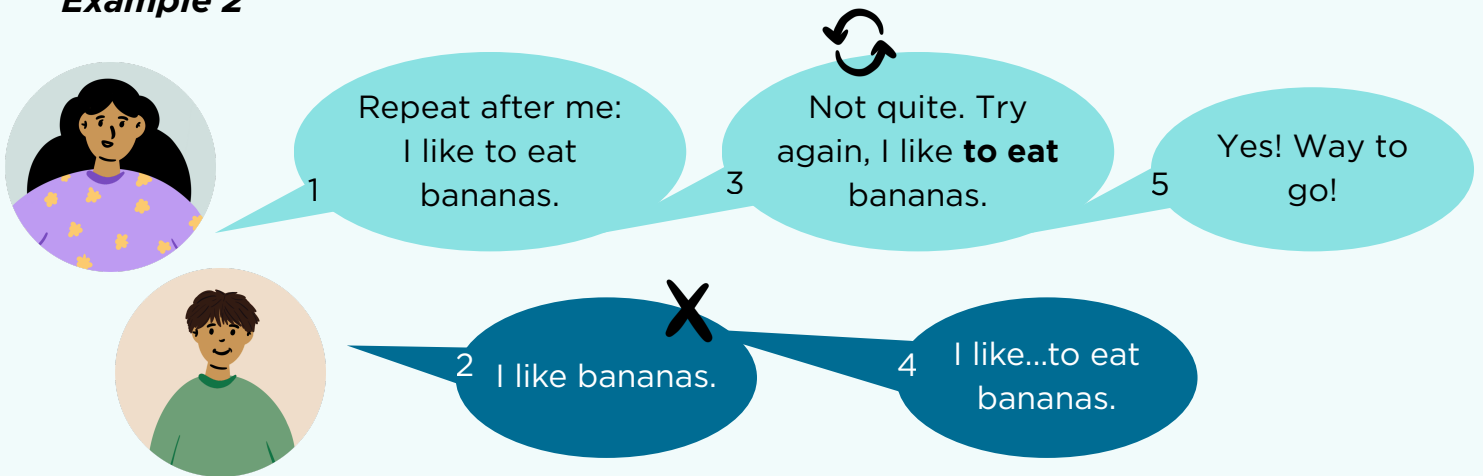
Routine 1: Repeat After Me

This simple echo game helps your child listen closely to sounds and practice saying them. There are three steps for each turn: (1) You say a sound, word, or short sentence, (2) Your child repeats it, and (3) You give feedback on their attempt. Your feedback will depend on how your child responds. If they correctly repeat the sound, word, or sentence, you will give praise (e.g., "Yes, that is right!"). If your child says something that does not match what you said, make sure to model the correct sound, word, or short sentence again. After you do, have your child try again. See the examples below.

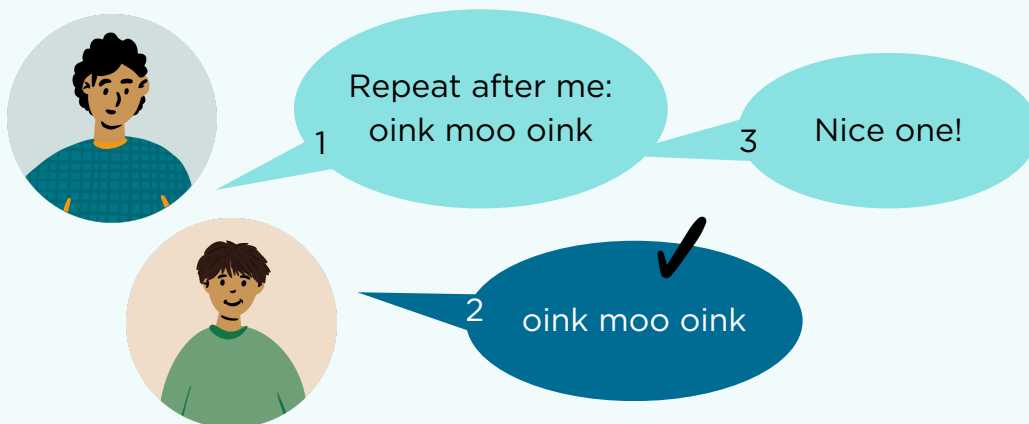
Example 1



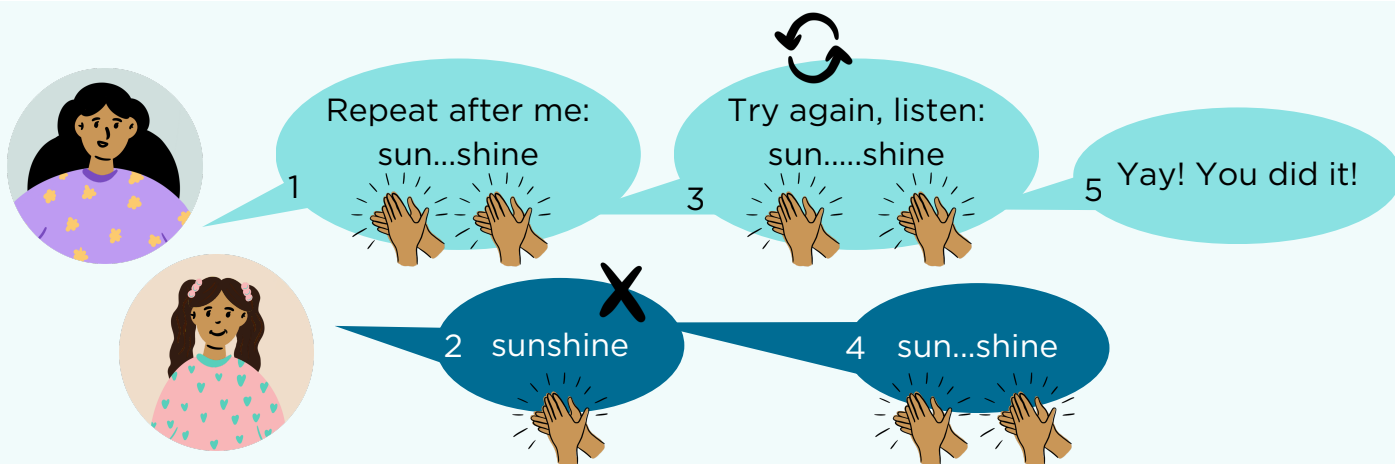
Example 2



You can use what we call “environmental sounds” for your child to try repeating. Environmental sounds are the sounds we hear all around us, like the sounds animals make (e.g., neigh, woof) and the sounds of objects (e.g., a siren or a snap). These silly sequences make practicing sounds fun and playful.

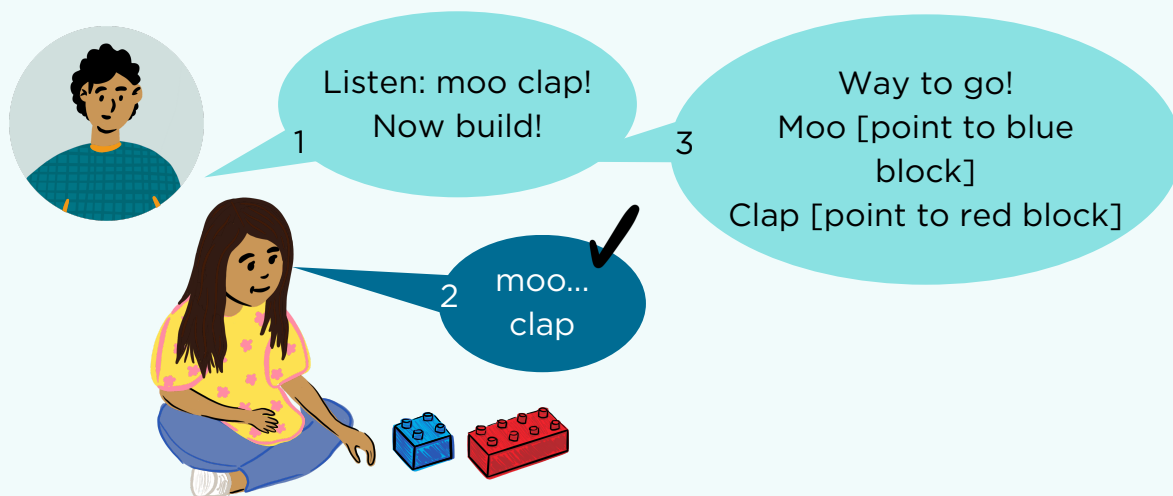


You also can use body movements to model breaking up words into smaller parts. Again, have your child repeat after you, copying your body movements and how you break up the word.

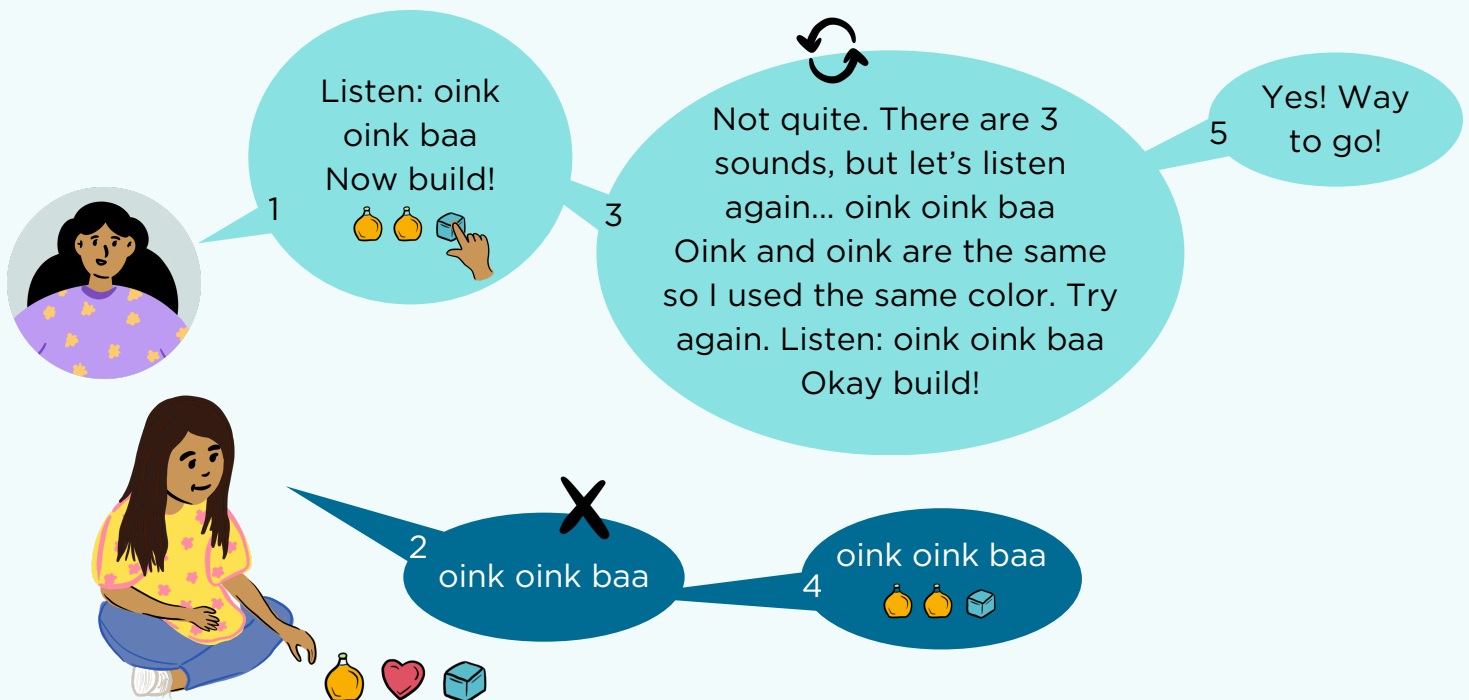


Routine 2: Listen and Build

This hands-on activity helps children see and touch the sounds they hear. There are three steps for each turn: (1) You say a short sequence of sounds or words, (2) Your child uses colored objects—like blocks, Legos, or fruit snacks—to represent each sound, and (3) You give feedback on their attempt in the same way you do for *Repeat After Me*. When first playing, only say two sounds, and your child will use the same color to show that the sounds were the same or different colors to show that the sounds were different. Encourage your child to repeat the sounds while building.

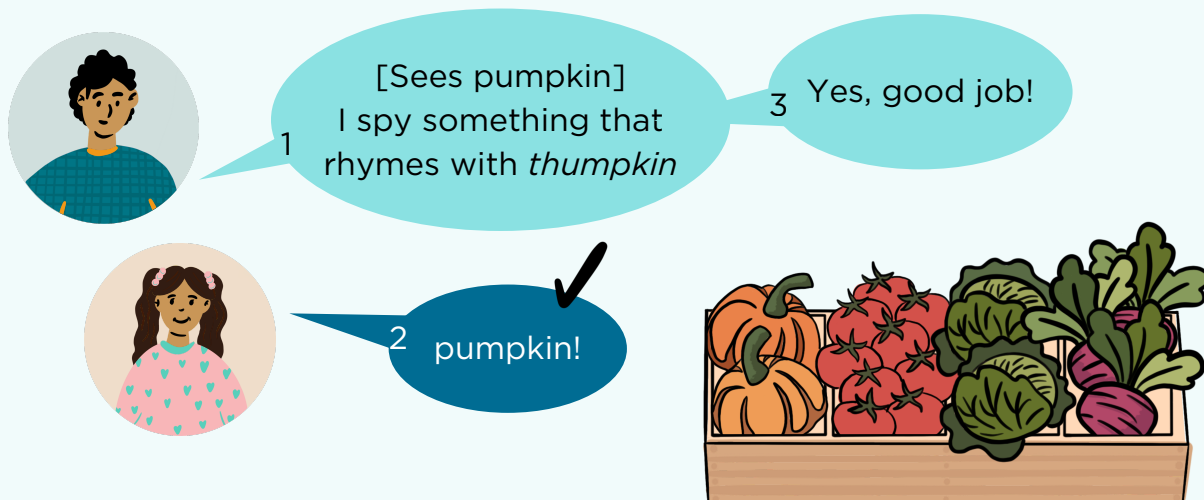


As your child gets better at deciding if sounds are the same or different, you can increase the number of sounds you use. When giving your child feedback on mistakes, it is important to show your child the correct build while saying the sounds again. This modeling helps your child make important connections and can build their confidence when trying again.

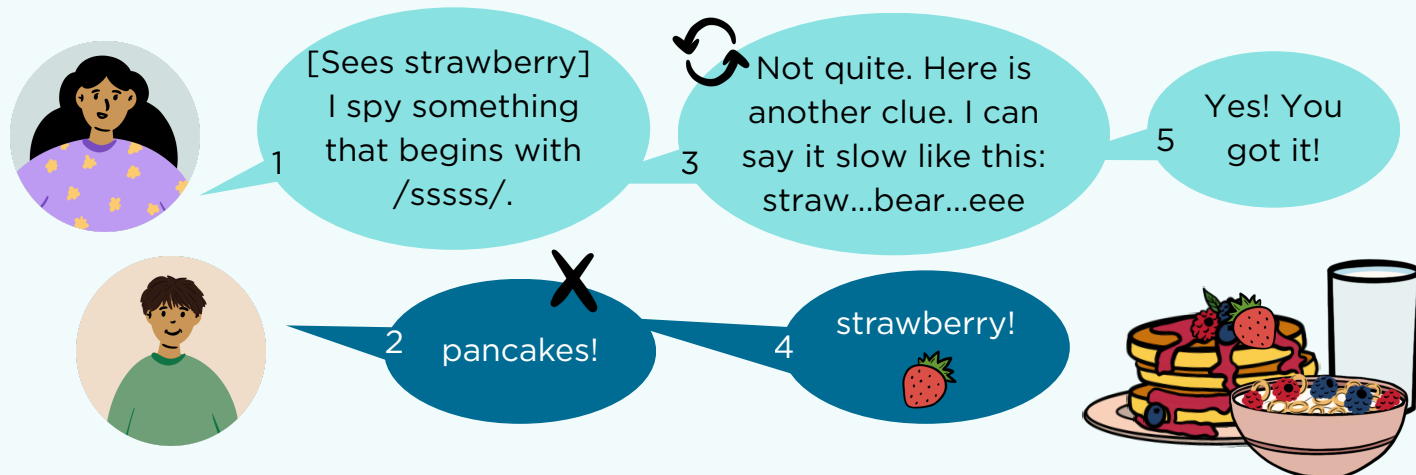


Routine 3: I Spy Sounds

This everyday guessing game builds sound awareness. There are three steps to each turn: (1) You choose an object around you and give your child a sound clue, such as a rhyming word or the first sound, (2) Your child guesses what the item is based on your clue, and (3) You give feedback on their attempt.



In this game, if your child does not guess the item correctly, give a different sound clue.



There are many types of sound clues you can give since there are many ways to break up words. See some examples below.

Syllable sound clues

- Stretch out the word: "I spy a *tay...bull*!" [table]

Word chunk sound clues

- Rhyme: “I spy something that rhymes with *log*” [frog]
- Beginning word chunk: “I spy something that begins with /br/” [**br**ush] or “I spy something that starts with *str-* like at the beginning of the word *straight*” [**str**ing]
- Ending word chunk: “I spy something that ends with *air*” [ch**air**]

Individual sound clues

- Beginning sounds: “I spy something that begins with /m/” [**m**ouse] or “I spy something that begins the same first sound as *sun*” [**s**issors]
- Ending sounds: “I spy something that ends with /t/” [cat**t**] or “I spy something that ends with the /sh/ sound like in the word *fish*” [di**sh**]
- Stretch out the word: “I spy a /d/ /aw/ /g/” [dog]

Where to Play?

These sound games can be played almost anywhere. All of them can be played for just a few minutes each day during mealtimes or playtimes. *Repeat After Me* and *I Spy Sounds* are especially easy to play in the car, at the grocery store, at the park, or before bed. Remember to make the games light and playful. Keep the games short; 2–5 minutes is plenty. A good rule of thumb to follow is that play sessions should be no longer than the age of your child. For example, if you have a 3-year-old, limit sound play to 3 minutes or less. Always remember to give your child feedback for each attempt. We learn through trial and error, so celebrate effort and model correctness.

Learning to read starts long before children pick up a book. When children can hear, notice, and play with the sounds in spoken language, they are building the foundation they need for reading and spelling success. The good news is that these skills grow through simple, playful moments you likely are sharing with your child already. Just a few minutes a day of sound play can make a lasting difference.

References

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