



Phonics Fun! Some Suggested Activities and Games for Phonics Based Learning

Note: if the original activity was developed by someone else, the name or website will be included in parentheses at the end of the section. Suggested variations are based on the original idea. The References/Resources section at the end will list complete details of each source.

Primary Activities

1. Sound Substitution BINGO

Build phonemic awareness and have fun with letter sounds with a simple bingo card full of rhyming words. You can use pictures or the actual written word, or both. For younger players, develop a 3x3 play card, using eight simple words that focus on particular letter sounds (see below for an example). To play, tell your learner the phoneme you are looking for, as well as the starting sound, by focusing on a rhyming word: “I am looking for a word that sounds like with “wig,” but starts with the “/p/” sound.” Then have the learner cover or mark off that square. (Thefirstgradeacademy)

**words in italics are suggested rhyming words for the chosen word. Note that each column uses the identical starting phoneme on this card, to reinforce that sound. You could design a card with pictures instead of words if you choose, or one with both.*

box <i>fox</i>	tap <i>map</i>	pet <i>wet</i>
bat <i>cat</i>	tip <i>dip</i>	pot <i>dot</i>
boy <i>toy</i>	ton <i>son</i>	pad <i>bad</i>

Variation: Sound Substitution Hide and Seek—follow the same idea as above, but look for objects in the room that you can use instead of developing a game card. If playing with older players who have done sound substitution before, you can even use nonsense words or words that the learner may not know in your riddles:

“I see an object here that sounds like gable, but with the starting sound “/t/.”

“Over there is the door, and below us is the....” What is that starting sound?

“The students don’t have lockers here, but they hang their outdoor clothes on this, that ends with the “/k/” sound.”

2. Silly Nilly Sound Substitution

Use familiar stories, rhymes or words but encourage your learner to substitute another sound in part of the word. You can try this with days of the week, months of the year, common names, geographic names, or other commonly known words. (Thefirstgradeprade)

Monday=funday or mobday or monway, as a way to emphasize the sounds of the different phonemes that make up the word. “How would you say Friday if you took away the /d/?”

March = manch, or barch, or mirch “Is there a sound in the word March that reminds you of a pirate?”

Try retelling a nursery rhyme and deleting a particular sound:

“Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep,” becomes “Little Bo ee has lost her shee” when the /p/ is deleted.

3. Spin and Cover Vowel Sounds

This is a great way to have learners learn to identify and distinguish between long and short vowel sounds, though you can use a similar concept with any kind of letter blend or digraph. You can design a spinner using box board (such as a cereal box) with 10 (or how many ever you wish) wedges incorporating the short and long vowels. (Keep in mind that short vowel sounds are indicated with a curved upward symbol on top--for example, ă--while long vowel sounds are indicated with a straight line atop the vowel--for example, ā). If you poke a small hole in the centre of your boxboard spinner, a sharp pencil holding a paperclip will work as a simple spinner.

Design a game card with 10 or more pictures or words that use the short and long vowel sounds on the spinner. (ie., cat + cake, bet + feet, tip + tire, cot + hole, hut + tube). With each spin, a player tries to select the appropriate picture or word associated with that vowel. (Thefirstgradeprade)

4. Roll, Complete and Cover

Susan Jones suggests using a single die to represent all five vowels, and then use the number six as a “lose a turn” or “roll again” feature. Prepare a list of CVC words that use all five vowels—you can use pictures beside each word, if you choose—and then have a player roll the die and try to find a spot where the vowel will fit into a CVC word. This is a great way to practice reading and writing words after a new phoneme has been explicitly introduced. (SusanJonesTeaching)

Variation: Roll, Spy and Spell

Select your five or six sounds (they can be vowel sounds, but be sure to identify whether they are to be long or short vowel sounds) for play. When the learner rolls the die, have them identify an object that includes that sound. Then, encourage the learner to sound and spell the word, or, look up the word in a dictionary.

For example, if the learner rolls a 2 and the vowel sound for that number is /ī/, first have them identify a word with the “long i” sound, (iPad, bike, microphone, sign, light) and then work at sounding out the spelling. It doesn’t matter at first if the learner is able to spell the word or not: just encourage them to focus on the sounds they believe are present in the word. Then, find the word in a dictionary (or write it out on your own) and show them the actual spelling.

5. Letter Sounds Alphabet Board Game

This alphabet board game can double as a letter recognition or a sound practice game. The board template can be filled with letters, letter blends, or even three letter words in advance of play. Use a single die to allow your learner to “roll and say” their way to the end of the game!

When filling out the template, take care not to overload the learner by adding too many letters or letter blends, particularly if you are in the introduction stage of a new sound. Instead, allow the game to add some explicit repetition for the sounds that your learner is focusing on. (Funlearningforkids).

Keep in mind, however, while playing that the focus is on the sounds of the letters, and not letter identification. You can also encourage your learner to try to identify a word with the same sound as a way to roll again.

6. Word Family Fish/Word Family Memory Match

Although flash cards are both loved and hated by many, there are some great uses for them, provided they are not only used for drills, but also for play! You can make your own flash cards by printing a series of related words in pairs, as this enables you to turn your sound and word repetition into games such as Concentration (memory match) or Go Fish! You can even play a similar game with words that share digraph or trigraph consonants, simply by having your learner look for the repeated letter blends.

If trying a memory match, begin first with only four pairs, then move to eight pairs. Review the cards first, practice the sounds and/or words, so that there are no stumped moments during play. As well, choose pairs that are distinct enough from one another that there will be no confusion for the learner.

Junior Activities

1. Battleship Phonics

While this game is presented as an ESL activity, it can be a fun way to practice familiar words as well as consonant digraphs and trigraphs.

Note that this game uses a ten by ten grid, which means you are using ten digraphs/trigraphs plus ten phoneme word endings (which is why they work for so many of the starting sounds). If this is too complex for your learner, simplify the game by using different starter sounds across the top of the grid (even single letters) and repeat word endings along the side (it means that the location of the word that you choose will be doubled, but that in itself can be a new way to play the game). (Matthew Wilson)

When beginning this game, it might be useful (depending on your learner’s comfort level with the phonemes and letter blends being used) to review how to play and how the word is made. It will be important to let beginning players know that the top of the grid always starts the word, and the side of the grid completes it. You can practice a few times by showing the learner how the words are put together, or even by making up some nonsense words by simply picking a grid coordinate, such as F8 or B10.

There are a few different ways to play Battleship Phonics. The first would be simply to identify three or four words (perhaps record them separately on a sheet of paper) and then give your learner five or

ten attempts to discover your word. Second, you can challenge your learner to find all the known words associated with a specific word ending, and see if they can identify them all. You can also challenge the learner to find all the words that begin with the same letter/digraph/trigraph, but have different word endings.

You can add a writing component to Battleship Phonics by having the learner write the word that they believe is your Battleship.

2. Rhyming Snap

This is a simple card game made up of 13 sets of four rhyming words. You can play this game as you would any version of snap or slapjack, except that players do not snap their hands over cards that are the same, but snap their hands over their cards if the two turned up cards rhyme. The person who snaps their pile first wins the cards that have been flipped thus far.

You can make up your own rhymes or use the ones featured in the full Rhyming Snap instructions. This is a great game to not only build comfort level around specific phonemes, but also to increase a learner's sight reading capability. It is also an easy way to introduce learners to rhyming words that may phonemically sound the same, but phonetically are spelled differently (mail and whale; feel and real; might and bite, etc.). (Natalie Wilson)

3. Sight Word Slapjack

Like Rhyming Snap, this is a great way to practice repetition of new words, or to build comfort level with a number of sight words. You play slapjack (also known as snap) by watching for both players to turn up the same card at the same time. Whoever snaps their hand atop their own pile of played cards wins the other player's pile. You can choose to do four of each sight word x 13 words, or you can do 26 pairs of sight words to make up a standard 52 card deck. However, if your learner is just beginning the process of getting comfortable with these words, it would likely be best to start off with a smaller number of cards (26 cards total versus 52 cards) to play.

Take care to review the words with your learner in advance of play, being sure to stress how to sound out the words that seem to be a little trickier. Remember to point out common digraphs or letter blends that the learner likely already knows. The complete Sight Word Slapjack instructions include a list of 78 common sight words that you can use for play. (Natalie Wilson)

4. Speed Reading

Matthew Wilson suggests this activity as a classroom based game, where a series of words are written on a blackboard, and then the teacher reads almost all of them aloud fairly quickly. The winner of the game is the learner who can identify which word(s) weren't read aloud. (Matthew Wilson)

A simpler way for a tutor to introduce this game is to use a familiar story or book that the learner has been reading, or to use a list of words that the tutor and learner have developed as practice words. The tutor can read a passage or a list of words aloud, but omit some key words from the paragraph or list. It is up to the learner to read along and try to identify which words were missed.

When playing this, be sure that the learner is able to follow along with a written text or script (encourage the learner to follow with a finger, or use a ruler for each line, or whatever else is

necessary). Part of the effect of this activity is that it will allow the learner to hear (as opposed to say) sounds that can be connected with words on the page.

Similarly, you can substitute a same-sounding word while reading aloud, and see if the learner can identify the word you replaced. Or, encourage your learner to be the reader, and have you try to identify the word(s) that were not read aloud.

5. Finger Twister

TeachStarter has come up with this finger based phonics version of Twister, and there are plenty of ways to play! Add a colour spinner or a die (equate one number with each of the four colours, then one as a “lose your finger” and one as a “roll again”) and see how many words your learner can spell with their hands before running out of options—or fingers! (TeachStarter)

The sample from TeachStarter is available for view, and you can use the Finger Twister Template to develop a game based on the digraphs, trigraphs or phonemes that you’d like to practice. You can also play the game without the template, simply by writing your columns of word starters and endings in four columns of four different colours. Just make sure you are placing them close enough together that littler fingers can reach them!

6. Consonant Digraph Bingo

This TeachStarter game is a great way for learners to practice isolating the sounds of specific phonemes in common words—with the added bonus of explicit reading at the same time.

Though this is suggested as a two player game, you can adapt the rules to play with a single learner as well. Simply outline the total number of turns a learner will have (kind of like hangman) in order to get their BINGO (four corners, single line, letter “T”, letter “X” etc.

Use the TeachStarter cube as a sort of die, rolling it to identify what digraph/letter blends the learner must identify on their card. You can even make your own cards to continue play with the cube, mixing up the words that are on the original game card, or adding other words that include the same letter blends. See a list of additional words below. (TeachStarter)

sh	ch	th	ph	bb	ll
shift	arch	throw	graph	bubble	will
ashes	cheat	bath	aphid	lobby	allow
squash	change	mother	alphabet	ebb	pellet
shadow	recharge	thing	dolphin	gobble	fell
bashful	much	with	phonics	nibble	tallest
rush	chick	feather	microphone	bobbed	bell

Use the same game card more than once, as regular practice with the words will improve the learner’s fluency and ability to recognize the sounds of those letter blends in new words.

References and Resources

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