

PHONEMIC AWARENESS

Barry was a young man in his mid twenties at the time his name came up during a conference with his boss. In the conference, which concerned his boss's daughter and her learning needs, the question was raised, "Do you only help kids with reading problems, or can you also help adults?" A positive answer drew the following explanation.

"I have an employee who is one of the most competent workers that I have ever had. I leave the company in his hands when I leave town, knowing that when I return everything will have been done right. I trust him completely. The problem is, he is still an apprentice at his trade. He ought to be a journeyman, but he can't read well enough to pass the test for advancement to journeyman status, even though he knows everything that is on the test. Is there anything you can do to help?"

A subsequent interview with Barry revealed that he had been frustrated by reading all of his life. He had been in remedial reading and learning disabilities classes since the first grade. He had been provided with special tutors all through school. When he graduated from high school he was aware that he still could not read. So, he hired tutors to work with him as an adult, using the Laubach adult literacy techniques and other methods. Testing showed that, despite all the time and labor that had been devoted to his reading problems by very dedicated and very competent people, Barry's reading level was still at the second grade level.

Testing also showed that Barry had a very severe deficit in phonemic awareness. Therefore, therapy was begun to correct the problem, using the Lindamood Phonemic Sequencing (LIPS) program. Progress was immediately evident, and Barry continued in the program from June to the end of the summer, working for one hour daily. He began reading books at home, and confided that he was getting considerable enjoyment from reading signs as he drove around town.

By mid-September, his reading had improved to the point that he wanted to take the journeyman's test. He failed the test, but was not discouraged. As he confidently stated, "I was just nervous. I could read it, and I knew everything on it. I'll get it next time." In mid-October he retook the journeyman exam and passed it, and immediately began talking about studying to take specialized exams in his trade.

What is "Phonemic awareness"?

Phonemic awareness, the area where Barry had difficulty, involves the awareness of sounds. Specifically, it involves the ability to judge exactly what those sounds are doing within words. This ability to make judgments about sounds is the basis of phonetic reading and spelling. Although it is possible to learn the basics of phonics--that is, associating certain sounds with certain letters--it is difficult to apply phonics to reading and spelling if phonemic awareness is lacking. Thus, phonemic awareness is sometimes referred to as a "pre-phonetic" skill; that is, it must be present in order for phonics to be successfully used for reading and spelling tasks.

These judgments are generally considered to fall into one of three categories: judgments about sameness and difference, judgments about number, and judgments about order. For example, an individual who has difficulty distinguishing sameness and difference of sounds may have difficulty spelling or reading words such as "pin," "pen," or "pan" because he does not perceive that the words have differing vowel sounds. A person having difficulty with judgments about number might have difficulty with the word "sass" because he doesn't perceive that the "s" sound happens twice within the word. Or, he might leave letters out of a word when spelling it simply because he doesn't perceive that

there is a difference between the number of sounds he is hearing and what he is writing on his paper. A person having difficulty with order might read the word "clasp" as being "claps" because he doesn't perceive that he has switched the order of the final two sounds. In reality, these three judgments work together and build upon one another to make auditory discrimination, and thus phonetic reading and spelling, possible.

How do I know if a child has difficulty with phonemic awareness?

There are many symptoms that one can look for. Children having difficulty with phonemic awareness with might do well in spelling if they have a chance to memorize the words, such as for a spelling test, but do poorly when spelling spontaneously, such as when writing a paper or answering questions on a history test. They might have difficulty with syllable number. They might confuse similar words, or switch sounds around, or add extra sounds to words, or leave sounds out of words.

The most reliable way of determining that an auditory conceptual deficit exists is through testing. The Lindamood Test of Auditory Conceptualization (LAC) was developed specifically to check for the presence and severity of this difficulty.

What can be done to correct this difficulty?

Because children or adults with auditory conceptual deficits do not have the ability to make adequate judgments about sounds within words, it does little good to work with them using traditional approaches to reading and spelling. Instead, a way must be found to instill this ability in the individual. The LIPS program (Lindamood Phonemic Sequencing) was developed to remediate this difficulty. In the program, the child is trained to feel the mouth actions used to produce speech sounds. This ability is then used by the child to check whether the sounds that he is assigning to a word are indeed the correct sounds. There is no guesswork, because the child can actually feel whether sounds are the same or different, how many sounds there are, and in what order they occur. The child learns to verify for himself whether his choices are correct. Over time, as the brain develops the neural pathways necessary for accurate processing of phonetic information, the difficulties with auditory discrimination and phonemic awareness actually disappear.

Children (and adults) do not have to go through their lives frustrated by their inability to read or spell. As Barry and thousands of others with phonemic awareness difficulties have discovered, there is ***Hope***.

For additional information, please refer also to the website, www.LBLP.com.