

# Playing with Language

Pembroke's Friday Freebie

## The Cornerstones to Early Literacy

Childhood experiences that promote learning in reading, writing, and oral language

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**Drama  
&  
Play**

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### Music, Rhythm, and Creative Movement Activities

Children communicate naturally through song. Singing rhymes, verses, street raps, chants, and action songs leads children to develop a joy and appreciation for music and rhythm that allow their language experiences to grow. Apart from singing songs and verses, youngsters can explore language through other word play activities that actively combine music or rhythm and movement.

#### Action Songs

Have children perform traditional action songs such as *Row, Row, Your Boat*; *I'm a Little Teapot*, and other childhood favorites. Youngsters can build up their repertoire of action songs by turning nursery rhymes, poems, verses, and other popular songs into action rhymes. Allow youngsters to work together to create their own action songs based on children's folk literature from around the world. These experiences help them to make meaning of texts and interpret language by creating actions to accompany the words and verses they have grown to love.

#### Puppet Shows, Shadow Plays, and Drama Activities

Children can explore the language of nursery rhymes, songs, poems, and contemporary verse by producing puppet shows, shadow plays, and dramatic presentations based on original texts (e.g., *Little Miss Muffet*). Encourage youngsters to make props and use costumes to act out characters, words, and verses. As children prepare for their performances, they will interact closely with language to draw meaning and share their interpretations of traditional or contemporary literature.

#### Rhythm and Music Activities

Youngsters can tap, clap, stomp or march to the beat in songs and poetry. Patting a drum or shaking a tambourine can add life and energy to children's renditions of favorite rhymes and verses like *Mary Had a Little Lamb* and *Sing a Song of Six Pence*. As children play with musical instruments and sounds, they become aware of the rhythms, patterns, and tunes of language that help them grow in literacy.

#### Playground Games and Jump-Rope Rhymes

Skipping rhymes, ball-bounce chants, clapping games, and counting-out songs heard on the playground are rich with opportunities for vigorous word play. Allow time for children to share action games, playground verses, jump-rope rhymes, and schoolyard cheers from around the globe. Use these rhymes as texts for early reading. Create books and posters featuring verses from the playground. Finding a place for this collection of folk songs can bridge the gap between the language of childhood and the texts of school and move children closer to reading.

#### Songs of the Neighborhood

Children can explore the rhythm of language through the musical sounds of street raps and songs heard in the neighborhood. Invite youngsters to share the beats and rhythms of the music of their cultural and ethnic community. Make up simple raps to accompany daily routines or devise more difficult ones that mirror the rap songs they hear. As children practice rapping to a beat, they use spoken language to produce vocal rhymes.

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### **Sound Games**

As children listen “inside” words, they hear specific sounds and begin to notice language components. As youngsters recognize initial sounds or ending word patterns in rhyming pairs or other words, their focus turns to sounds and language structures. Word play activities allow children to grow in language awareness while having fun breaking up words and bringing sounds together. Sound games give youngsters the opportunity to pull words apart and practice segmenting, blending, and sequencing sounds. Activities that focus on sounds within words (syllables, onsets, rimes, and phonemes) can help children develop phonological and phonemic awareness. Here are some word play events to help young children attend to the sound structure of spoken language:

### **Sound Discussions**

As children experiment with language, talk with them about the sounds and structures of words. Show excitement when playing with sounds and having fun with language. Discuss the units that make up sounds in words. Encourage children to ask questions that will help them develop a better understanding of sounds and language structures.

### **Sound Museum**

Encourage children to create a sound museum filled with a collection of artifacts they find at home, at school, or in the community that begin with same initial sound. As students grow more familiar with other specific positions of sounds within a word (middle, ending), they can create other displays to feature objects with the same middle or ending sounds.

### **Play “I Spy”**

Have children look for objects around them with the same beginning, middle, or ending sound. As youngsters try to guess the item that shares the same sound, they are learning to discriminate the individual sounds within a word.

### **Sound Matching**

As children learn about language, they discover patterns in words that share the same sounds. Youngsters can look for word patterns and sound relationships using objects around them (mug and rug) or practice matching sounds using picture cards that feature related items (apple, ant). Teachers can develop their own set of cards or use commercial memory games that feature word pairs. In addition, students can produce their own sound matching games by creating game cards for word pairs (e.g., sun, puppy) that share the same sound.

### **Name Chants**

To introduce the concept of segmenting sounds, start with the syllables in names. As a class, tap or clap out the syllables beginning with the teacher’s name. Encourage youngsters to work in pairs or small groups to tap or clap out the syllables in each student’s name. Children can use musical instruments to tap out the syllables as well. Students can later chant the names of class members as they tap, clap or pat the syllables on a drum to a steady beat.

### Clapping Words

Have children clap out words from songs, verses, rhymes, literature, or real life. These words can range from one syllable to many syllables (e.g., *coat, mountain, jacket, teacher, pencil, supermarket*). As youngsters clap the beats, they will learn to isolate sounds and segment words apart. Instruments such as tambourines can also be used to break words into syllables by tapping out separate beats.

### Exploring Compound Words

Since many compound words are made up of two or more identifiable words that children may know, youngsters may have more success pulling these types of words apart and blending them together. As children explore compound words in oral language activities, they have fun playing with the syllables, word chunks, and sound units they hear within them. At first, youngsters can practice putting words together to make a new word (e.g., *bed* and *room*, *side* and *walk*, *hot* and *dog*, *rain* and *bow*, *air* and *plane*). Later, children can say words with word chunks left out (e.g., remove “cow” from *cowboy*, “ham” from *hamburger*, “bath” from *bathtub*, “chalk” from *chalkboard*). By deleting or adding word chunks or syllables in this way, youngsters can better understand how words are made up of smaller parts or sound units. Starting with larger words that can be pulled apart or put together to form compound words gives children practice in segmenting and blending sounds. This can help them isolate and identify individual sounds within smaller words and later sequence them together.

### Humpty Dumpty Words

Youngsters can practice saying words by leaving out different sounds (e.g., removing /l/ from *look*). To begin segmenting sound units, play the following game inspired by a nursery rhyme children may know:

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall  
What happens when you take away /b/ from “ball”?*

Next, have children pull apart other words from literature, songs, rhymes, and theme topics or interests.

Once children have had practice segmenting sounds by pulling apart onsets and rimes, they may be ready to bring parts back together by sequencing sounds. Begin by having youngsters put together the words they first broke apart. Have them use some of the words from the popular rhyme:

*Though all the king's horses and all the king's men  
Couldn't put Humpty together again  
Words are quite different as you shall see  
The parts join forces quite easily  
(provide example here: What happens when you add /s/ to /ong/?)  
The sounds come together to make the word: (say the word e.g., song)*

Children can practice sequencing sounds by using words from the rhyme to blend onsets and rimes. For example, they can add an initial sound onto another sound unit (add /l/ to /ight/). Challenge youngsters with other words that can be brought together by sequencing and blending sounds (e.g., add /sh/ to /op/, /bl/ to /ack/). Through sound blending games like this, children have fun playing with language orally before seeing words in print. Playing sounds games helps youngsters begin to develop an effective strategy for reading.

**Instrument Words or Keyboard Sounds**

Many oral activities can work to emphasize the process of “sounding out” words by segmenting and blending individual sounds. Children can practice sequencing sounds together by focusing on simple words that can be easily pulled apart. Youngsters may grow to understand how words are made up of separate sounds when they play games that help them discriminate the beginning, middle and ending parts of a word. Teachers can start by choosing simple words such as *cat*, *dog*, or *big*. Have the children count out the number of separate sound units, or phonemes, they hear (e.g., /c/ /a/ /t/ = 3). Next, use a keyboard to demonstrate the segmentation and blending of sounds within the word. To show this clearly, separate notes can be played to represent the individual sound units (e.g., one note to represent /c/, another to represent /a/, and a different note to represent /t/). As each note is played, the individual sound is repeated. Finally, all the notes are played in unison as the word is said or sung aloud. (This process can also be demonstrated by playing musical chords). After giving several examples of segmenting and blending sounds using phonemes, invite students to repeat the individual sounds with other words as they are pulled apart and later, say the words as the parts are brought together. Finally, have children use the keyboard to practice breaking words apart and bringing them back together by sequencing sounds. (Note: Other instruments such as tambourines, drums, or maracas can also be used to practice segmenting and blending sounds).

**Changing Sounds**

Part of the fun of word play happens when texts get altered in silly ways. Substituting initial sounds in songs, poems, games, and children’s books can turn popular rhymes and phrases into nonsense verse. Children are amused by the ridiculous sounds that nonsensical words can make. Encourage students to repeat songs, phrases, and verses several times by substituting the initial sounds of words in popular texts with other sounds:

*Ring around the Rosie...*

*Ping around the posie...*

*Sing around the sosie...*

*Ting around the tosie*

As children play with initial sounds in nonsense verse, they learn to manipulate language by changing sound structures beyond the limits of meaning and vocabulary to produce words and sounds just for fun.

**Tongue Twisters**

Tongue twisters are a fun way to involve children in sound discrimination and repetition games. Through the reiteration of alliterative phrases, youngsters can focus their attention on initial sounds while discovering an important literary device (e.g., alliteration) used in poetry and word play. Learning to repeat tongue twisters helps children to articulate and discriminate letter and word sounds. Seeing tongue twisters on a page moves youngsters towards making visual distinctions between letters and initial sounds and building letter-sound relationships. Begin by having students repeat simple tongue twisters until they can say them on their own. Encourage youngsters to find other twisters they can learn. Post alliterative phrases so students can see the repetitive sound and letter patterns. Invite children to underline the first letter of each word in the phrase and

circle the sounds that are the same. Ask students to make up their own tongue twisters to share orally or to challenge others. Children can make up simple twisters based on their own names, people they know, or familiar experiences:

*Mommy made milk on Monday morning.*

*Tony likes to eat turkey and tomatoes on Thanksgiving.*

### **Nonsense Couples**

Children's games, songs, literature, and films are filled with rich examples of language play in which words and sounds creatively come together to make nonsense phrases and verses that are easy to remember. As a class, make a list of rhyming pairs from these sources. For example:

*Bippity boppity*

*Itty bitty*

*Teensy weensy*

*Wibbly wobbly*

*Cock-a-doodle-doo*

*Mock-a-moodle-moo*

*Rock-a-roodle-roo*

*Sock-a-soodle-soo*

Have children make up their own rhyming pairs, or nonsense couples, using double words with similar sounds. As children play with sounds in nonsense verse, they discover patterns in language (rhyme, alliteration) that can lead to word study.