

Initial Sounds for Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is an important skill – it is what we use to hear sounds in speech. Without phonemic awareness, we cannot break words down and decode them to read unfamiliar words. We also find it extremely hard to re-code words to spell them. Therefore, phonemic awareness is a critical skill in learning to read and write.

Phonemic awareness starts developing when students are emergent, and continues once they are conventional. Word families have been shown to be one of the most effective ways of improving phonemic awareness, especially the ability to hear initial sounds in words. Doing some short word family activities regularly with emergent literacy learners can help them to start to hear sounds in speech – which, in turn, helps them to learn to work with words later in their literacy development.

This handout provides an outline for working on phonemic awareness using initial sounds in word families across a week. This is intended as an example only. You should continue with similar and different activities with other word families to help each literacy learner develop this skill.

It is important to be aware that using word families in this context is not being done with the aim of a student getting each word family “correct” or the with aim of them learning to spell the word family. The aim here is for literacy learners to increase their ability to hear initial sounds in words – and this might happen over several weeks or months of repeating word family and other activities designed to develop phonemic awareness.

Generally, we don’t start these activities until a student knows at least 50% of the alphabet. This is based on research showing that there is a strong association between a student’s letter knowledge and their phonemic awareness. (e.g., Castles & Coltheart, 2004; Castles, Coltheart, Wilson, Valpied, & Wedgwood, 2009; Hulme, Bowyer-Crane, Carroll, Duff, & Snowling, 2012). Where possible, use letters the student already knows in these tasks to assist with this building this association.

I do and We do (passive tasks)

In the plan you’ll notice that for the first three days of the week, the tasks are “I do” or “we do” tasks. We introduce the word family and interact with it. The tasks in the first three days are ones that don’t have any “right or wrong”. These are the days in which we teach the student the skill we are looking for, as we start to implement gradual release of responsibility.

You do (active tasks)

On the last two days of the plan, we hand the responsibility over to the student and introduce tasks that require the student to listen and discriminate. These are tasks that also check how the student’s phonemic awareness for initial sounds is developing.

Making Up Resources

It is very helpful to have word family resources made up using both letters and pictures. These have the ending as one chunk – so that we emphasise for students that it is just the initial sound that is changing.

bat cat fat hat mat pat rat sat

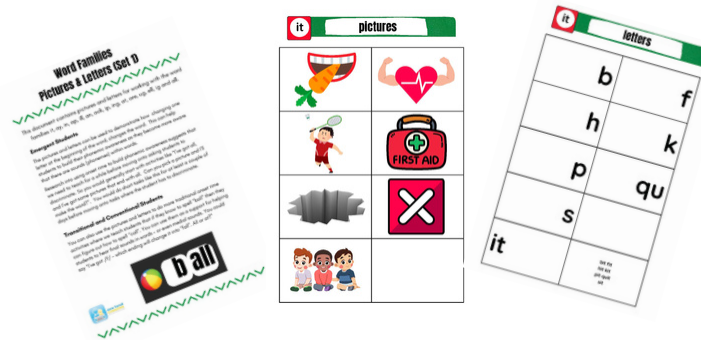
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You can download three sets of word family resources for different word families below. For some students we only need to use Set 1, as this provides them with enough practice. But if you need more repetition with variety then Sets 2 and 3 are available.

[Word Family Pictures and Letters Set 1](#)

[Word Family Pictures and Letters Set 2](#)

[Word Family Pictures and Letters Set 3](#)



Phonemic Awareness with Initial Sounds Across a Week

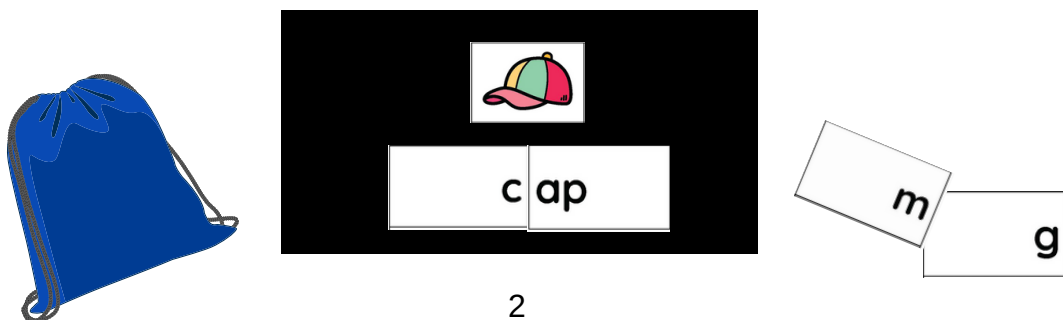
The example below uses the -ap word family. But you can use a similar process with any word family. Just remember to do "I do" and "We do" tasks on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday to teach the student about the changing initial sound - and you can start "You do" tasks on Thursday and Friday.

Monday - I do and We do

Start the week by reading an -ap word family book. [Monarch Reader](#) has lots of great word family books you can use that are specific to a word family.

Introduce the -ap word family by reading the book "[Words Ending in -ap](#)". As you read the book, make each word in the word family, reinforcing what they are seeing in the book. You can see a video of a teacher doing this [at this link](#).

Put the initial letters into a bag and ask students to draw out a letter. Use the letter to make the word family word and add the picture. Say the word in a sentence.



dip hip lip nip pip rip sip tip zip

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Tuesday - I do and We do

Watch a word family song, once again making each word from the word family as it occurs in the song.

Use the -ap word family song "AP, word family jazz, Phonics Garden."

Note: if you use a resource that uses words that start with two consonants e.g. clap, then don't make those words up, and move onto the next word. Don't use these words at this emergent level.

Offer students the word family pictures. When they choose a picture, add the initial sound to -ap to make the word for the picture. Say the word in a sentence.



Wednesday - I do and We do

Review the -ap word family by reading the book "ap Word Family" on Monarch Reader. Again, as you read the book, make each word in the word family, reinforcing what they are seeing in the book. (Please don't make the words that start with two consonants at this emergent level).

As a second activity, ask the students to grab a letter and make a word. Then, you add the picture that goes with the word or the student can do that if it's appropriate.

Thursday - You do

Watch the song, "AP, word family jazz, Phonics Garden" again, making the words during the song. Once you have done this, you can move onto the first "You do" task.

Using the book from Monday, "Words Ending in -ap", talk about the words in the book and ask students to choose which letter they would put in front of "ap" to make one of the words. For some students you might offer them a choice of two letters and for others you might offer a choice of more.

As you offer the letters say "you're making tap. Do you want to use t that says /t/ or c that says /k/?"

Friday - You do

Use the "ap" word family letters and pictures to interact with the word family in different ways. For example, you could put a picture at the top and ask the student to select the letter to add to "ap" to make the picture.

If appropriate, you could select a letter and put it next to "ap" to make a word. You could then ask the student to select the picture for that word. (You will need to read the word out to most students.)



And that ends our week on -ap. Next week, pick a new word family and go through this process again.

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Other Activity Ideas

- Starfall has some word family activities e.g. at word family.
- Check Monarch Reader for additional books.
- Word family sliders example from Pinterest
- Use a large dice to randomly select letters to put in front of a word family (make sure they all make real words)
- Use a spinner to randomly select letters to put in front of "at".
- Anything else you find on Google or your imagination can develop 😊

And make sure your classroom has a good selection of rhyming books. There is a diverse selection of rhyming books from traditional nursery rhymes to Dr Seuss – and Aaron Blabey books are popular for their humour. There are also some early readers that your school might own which have a focus on word families.

Working Further on Word Families

There are 37 word families in English, so you can bring in a new word family each week to ensure you get repetition with variety. Do similar tasks to improve student phonemic awareness across all the word families. Just remember this isn't about a student achieving any level of skill with one word family – it's about them developing their phonemic awareness overall. So – change word families weekly, until the student is reliably hearing and finding the initial sounds in words.

Word families: ack, ap, est, ing, ot, ail, ash, ice, ink, uck, ain, at, ick, ip, ug, ake, ate, ide, it, ump, ale, aw, ight, ock, unk, ame, ay, ill, oke, ank, an, eat, in, op, ell, ine, ore.

And a big thanks to Lidia from Adelaide North Special School for allowing me to share the video.



ball call fall hall mail tall wall