Segmenting and Blending Syllables

Syllable Place Mat

Rabbit

Elephant

Credit: Olhastock/Shutterstock

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Literacy Background
A child's phonological development is an important predictor of success in reading. Phonological awareness refers to the area of oral language associated with a child's ability to hear the sounds in a word. Young children who have developed phonological awareness understand some basic aspects of the structure of a spoken language. They understand that the spoken language is made up of words and that words are made up sounds, syllables, and rhymes. Phonological awareness has often been described as a child's ability to “listen inside a word.” To support the development of phonological awareness, children need experiences in the following areas:

- Recognizing the number of words in a sentence
- Recognizing the number of syllables in a word
- Recognizing and creating rhymes*
- Isolating the sounds at the beginning and ending of a word
- Segmenting and blending the sounds, or syllables, in a word

*Note: For activities that support recognizing and creating rhymes, see the Nelson Week 2 activity titled “Rhyming Words” on this site.

Purpose
These activities will focus on developing children's awareness of syllables. Children will clap and count the number of syllables in words out loud. They will use a segmenting place mat to identify and count the syllables in a word. They will also listen to a word pronounced syllable by syllable, and then blend the syllables together to identify the word.

Materials
- segmenting place mat (as shown above)
- 4 buttons, coins, or other small, flat objects to serve as counters

Awareness of Syllables
Clapping Syllables
1. Read a story to children. Then select some words from the story, choosing some words that are comparatively long and some that are comparatively short. Say each word out loud and have children repeat the word as they clap out the syllables. For example, the word “piano” would be accompanied by three claps, one clap for each sound, or syllable: pi - an - o. The word “baby” would have two claps, one clap for each sound: ba - by. Children might notice that long words usually have more syllables, which are therefore represented by more claps.
2. Engage in this clapping game for a few minutes each day. You might clap the names of foods or snacks that children enjoy, the names of parts of the body when children are taking a bath, or the names of toys.

Tapping Syllables
1. Children can tap out the syllables in various words using parts of their bodies. Have them stretch out one arm with the palm of the hand facing up. Using their other hand, children tap their body parts in the following order, depending on the number of syllables in the word:
   - fingertips
   - wrist
   - inside the elbow
   - shoulder
   - nose
2. For example, children would tap all five parts of their body, from fingertips to nose, when they tap out the syllables in the word “hippopotamus”:
   - hip- (tap fingertips)
   - po- (tap wrist)
   - po- (tap inside of elbow)
   - ta- (tap shoulder)
   - mus (tap nose)

Guess the Object
1. Hide an object in a bag. The object should have characteristics that would help children to recognize the object by touching it (e.g., a pencil or crayon, a marble, a necklace, a LEGO® block).
2. Have children reach into the bag and try to identify the object. Encourage them to describe the object (e.g., It is round. It is smooth).
3. Next, have them remove the object from the bag, say the name of the object, and then clap out the number of syllables in that word as they say it out loud again.
4. Change roles: invite children to hide an object in the bag, and then you guess the object and clap out the name of the object in syllables.

Use a Segmenting Place Mat
1. Provide children with a segmenting place mat like the one shown above. Also provide four coins or buttons that they can use as counters. Place the counters underneath the arrow on the place mat.
2. Point to the image of the rabbit on the segmenting place mat. Say the word “rabbit,” stressing the two syllables in this word. Children move the counters to the boxes on the place mat, one at a time, to represent each syllable in the word “rabbit.” They can use the arrow to help them identify where to place the first counter, and then the second. Have children check their boxes by saying the word “rabbit” out loud again.
3. Repeat step 2 for the word “elephant.”
4. Select other words with one to four syllables (e.g., dinosaur, piano, macaroni) and have children use the place mat to show the number of syllables in each word.
5. You can make this activity more challenging by adding more boxes and by saying words with more than four syllables.

**Name Sort**
1. Have children say their name and then repeat it as they clap out each syllable. For example, if the child's name is Harper, they would clap twice while saying their name: Har - per.
2. Next, have them identify another name that has the same number of syllables as their own name (e.g., Sarah, Ahmad, Jerome, Morgan).
3. Challenge them to think of names with more or fewer syllables compared to their own name.

**Syllable Detective**
1. Tell children that you are going to say some words slowly, syllable by syllable. Ask them to listen carefully to figure out what the word is. The words could be words from a story you are reading or they might be words related to activities in which children are engaged (e.g., cooking: cook - ing, crayon: cray - on, macaroni: mac - a - ro - ni).
2. Change roles: have children say a word slowly, syllable by syllable, and you figure out what the word is.