Phonemic Awareness in Montessori:

Building Strong Readers

Phonological Awareness

Word Awareness

Syllable Awareness

Alliteration

Rhyming
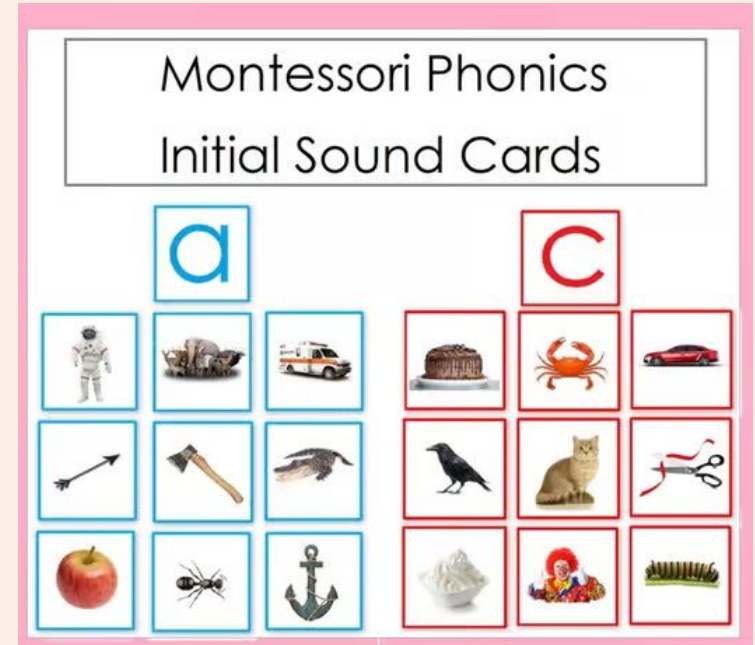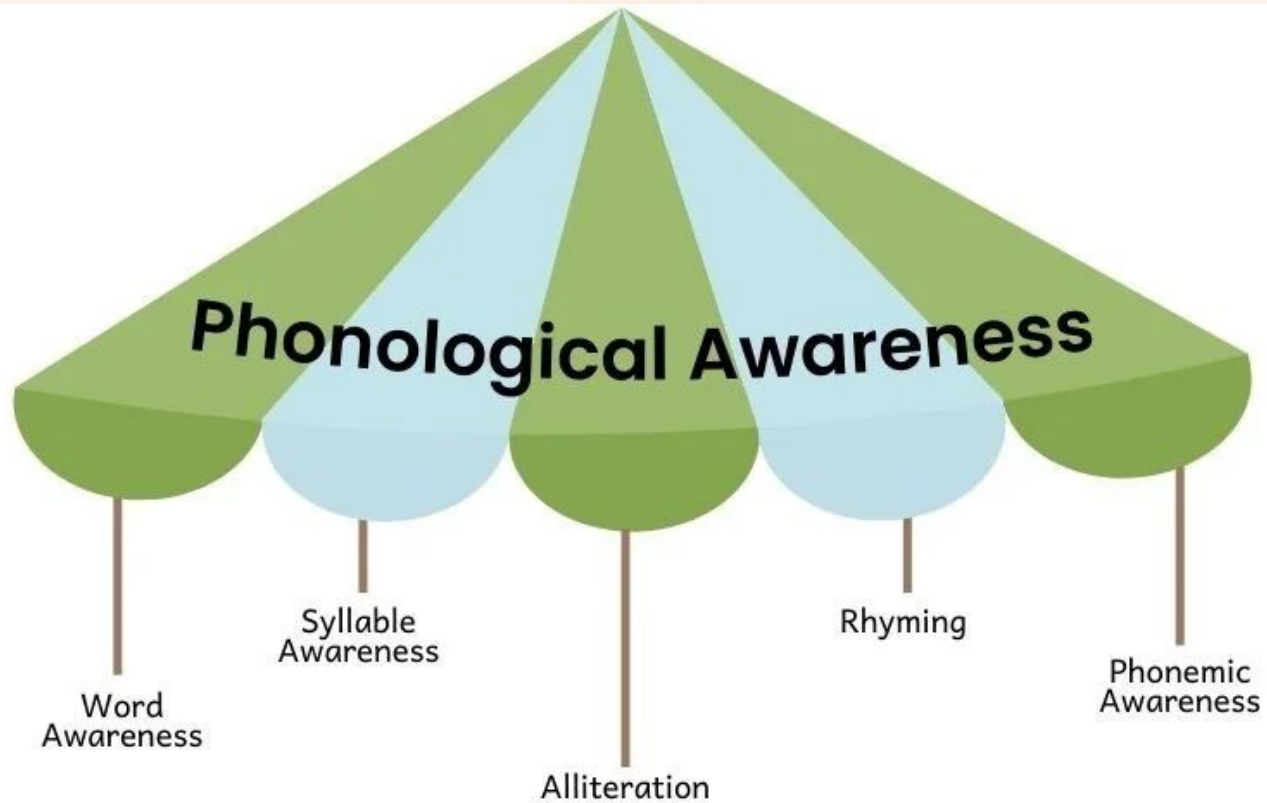
Phonemic Awareness

What Is Phonemic Awareness?

- Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words.

- It's different from phonics—phonemic awareness focuses on sounds alone, while phonics connects sounds to letters.

- Example: In the word "cat," you can hear three separate sounds: /c/ /a/ /t/.

Why Montessori Does It Differently

- Montessori teaches phonemic awareness intentionally, using sensory-based activities in a specific sequence.

- We begin these activities with the first year students in our primary classrooms. (some toddlers show readiness, too)

- The approach is multisensory

Sound Games: Starting with Oral Awareness

- Build pure phonological awareness—completely separate from print.

- No letters needed yet—just listening and speaking!

Sound Game Examples: "I Spy"

- "I spy with my little eye something that starts with /m/…" Children guess what object you're describing.

- Makes phonemic awareness feel like fun rather than work.

Blending and Segmenting

- Blending: "What word is /c/ – /a/ – /t/?" Children blend the sounds together to say "cat."

- Segmenting: "Say the sounds in cat." Children break the word into /c/ /a/ /t/.

Sound Game Examples: Phoneme Manipulation

- Add, delete, or substitute phonemes in words
- Example: Add /s/ to "mile" = smile
- Delete /k/ from "clap" = lap
- Substitute /p/ with /m/ in "pat" = mat

Phonemic Awareness Skills

ISOLATING Sounds:
- What is the 1st sound in *cat?* (/k/)
- What is the last sound in *cat?* (/t/)
- What is the middle sound in *cat?* (/ă/)

DELETING Phonemes:
- Say *cat.* What word do we get when we take away the /k/? (at)
- Say *frog.* Take away the /r/. What is left? (fog)

BLENDING Phonemes:
- Blending onset and rime: s–at = sat
- Blending individual phonemes:
    /s/ /a/ /t/ = sat

SEGMENTING Phonemes:
- Segmenting onset and rime:
    cat = k – at
- Segmenting individual phonemes:
    cat = /k/ /a/ /t/

SUBSTITING Phonemes
- Say *cat.* What word do you get when we change the /k/ to /p/? (pat)
- Say *sled.* What word do you get when you change /l/ to /p/? (sped)

ADDING Phonemes:
- Say *at.* What word do we get when we add /s/ before *at?* (sat)
- Say *sick.* What word do you get when you add /l/ after /s/? (slick)

Sandpaper Letters: Connecting Sound to Symbol

- Once children can identify sounds orally, teachers introduce sandpaper letters.

- Children trace the letter while saying its sound, engaging multiple senses at once.

The Power of Multisensory Learning

- Sandpaper letters combine sight (seeing the letter), touch (feeling the texture), and sound (saying the phoneme).

- This sand tray work is another multisensory material effective for embedding sound-symbol relationships.

The Moveable Alphabet:
Encoding Before Decoding

- Montessori teaches children to build (encode/spell) words before they are formally asked to read.

- With the Moveable Alphabet, children push individual letter tiles together to "build" words.

- Children stretch a word orally and represent the sounds they hear—for example, "pig" becomes p–i–g.

What the Moveable Alphabet Strengthens

- Phoneme segmentation

- Phoneme-grapheme mapping

- Phonemic blending

- Early spelling awareness

All of these skills work together to create confident, capable readers and writers.

Early Reading Materials
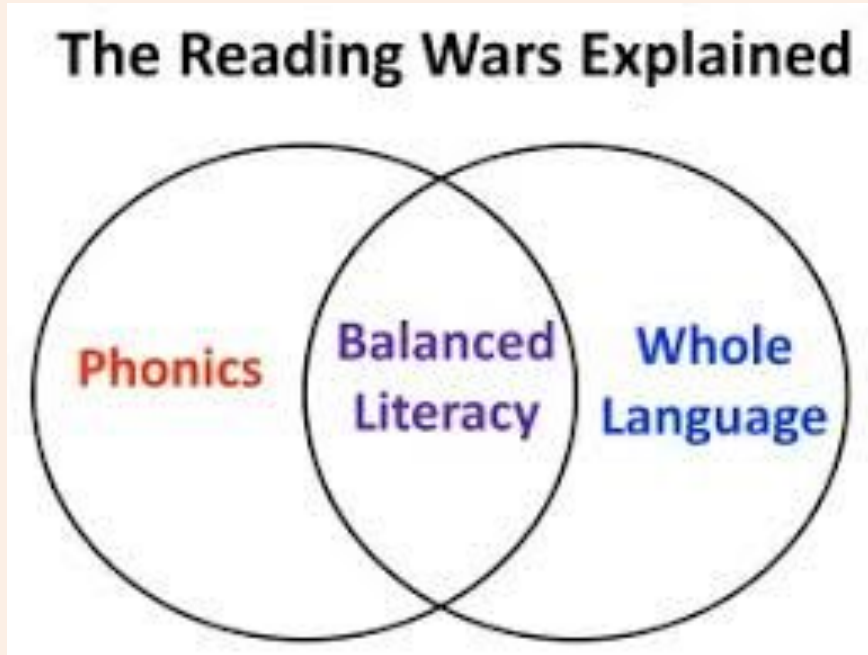# Putting It All Together

The Montessori Path to Phonemic Awareness

- Oral sound games (listening and speaking)
- Sandpaper letters (sound-symbol mastery)
- Moveable Alphabet (encoding to strengthen phonemic segmentation)
- Hands-on sorting and matching activities
- Phonetic reading materials

Reading Wars of the 1990's

Whole Language vs. Phonics

The Reading Wars Explained

Phonics   Balanced Literacy   Whole Language

Balanced Literacy

Scarborough's Reading Rope and Maria Montessori's Approach to Teaching Reading