



Sounds and speech

Introduction

Explore your child's understanding of the sounds in speech.

Young children find it difficult to work out what are the separate sounds in words. As adults, most of us find the task so easy that we can't understand why children have these difficulties. See what happens when you try the following things.

Activity

Ask your child if they would like to play a game with words. Say to them that the game involves you saying three words. Ask them to pick out the word that starts with a sound different from the others. Your child might find it difficult to understand what a sound is – especially if they haven't yet started to read. So you might need to explain that the first sound of 'ball' is the sound 'b'. If your child seems uncertain give more examples. Some young children might still find this idea confusing, in which case it's probably best to try this game when they're older.

Then start the game "I'm going to say three words to you, listen to them carefully, and try to work out which word starts with a different sound from the others. Do you think you can do this? Are you ready?"

Then say the words "SUN, BUN, BAT", repeat the words if your child needs help. Children who have started to read will probably be able to give the correct answer (SUN), but children who are not yet reading may find this task quite difficult.

Make a list of your own words that you can use with your child. See if your child is more likely to make a mistake if the words are longer, or if they are words your child doesn't know. You can also play a game with the endings of words, for example "RAT, CAT, DUCK".

Remember this isn't a test; it should be fun for you and your child. Also remember that younger children will find this difficult as the understanding of sounds develops over a number of years, and can be helped by learning to read.

The explanation

Most adults have no difficulty in working out that the first sound of "ball" is "b"; the task is so easy that it can be hard to understand that young children might have difficulties with this task. The thing to bear in mind is that children learn words as whole units so usually there isn't any need to break words up into their different sounds. Also for the child it can be difficult to know whether the first sound of "ball" is 'b', or 'ba' or even whether 'ball' makes up one sound.

Research findings have shown that being able to break up words into their individual sounds can help children when they start to learn to read. This seems to be because if children can identify the sounds of a word, then they can more easily relate the letters of the word they are reading to the individual sounds of that word. It also seems to be the case that later on, learning to read helps children to pick out the sounds of words, because adults who have not learnt to read can find the task you gave your child quite difficult.

Some researchers suggest that experiences like hearing and learning nursery rhymes, even if they contain nonsense words, can help children notice differences in the sound patterns between words. Also word games like the one you played with your child can help children notice the differences between words.

Remember that children vary a lot in their abilities in the activity we have suggested, but it's something that most children will master as they get older. Also if you want to help your young child by getting them to learn nursery rhymes or playing word games, then make sure the process is fun. It's important that your child sees this learning as a game and not as a chore.