**Why Phonemic Awareness and Phonics are Important for Success in School**

The United States is facing a crisis. According to the NAEP results over 40% of all 4th graders and 8th graders are reading below grade level. When one looks at the students attending urban public schools, that number approaches 80%. It is well known that students who are not reading in 8th grade have a great chance of dropping out of school because school work is too hard, presumably because those students cannot read the textbooks for their courses. In addition, prisons look at 3rd grade retentions to predict how many prison beds will be needed in 15 to 20 years. These statistics are frightening, but true. In the wealthiest country in the world, students are not learning how to read.

Dr. Joseph Torguson at Florida State University published work in 2000 showing that students who enter 1st grade reading below their grade level never catch up with their peers. In fact, that group seems to plateau at 3rd grade level even in their middle school years. He feels that this is because those are the students who are not adequately prepared in phonemic awareness and phonics.

Kindergarten readiness is an important contributor to the data reported by Torguson. Fewer than 40% of students entering Kindergarten are prepared nationally. Admittedly there are many items included in this readiness that are mainly social skills, such as communicating needs and thoughts, taking turns and sharing, being curious in approaching new activities, and paying attention, the academic areas are just as critical. These school-related items included being able to use a pencil, counting to 20 or more, and knowing the letters of the alphabet and their sounds. It is the latter point that repeatedly keeps the students back. All this is occurs despite the fact that so many of the students attend a pre-school program of some type.

So what is “phonemic awareness” and why is it so important? The English language uses an alphabetic writing system in which the letters, by themselves and in combination, represent single speech sounds. These sounds are called “phonemes.” People who can take apart words into sounds, recognize their identity, and put them together again, have the foundation skill for using the alphabetic principle. Students who lack phonemic awareness may be frustrated by the system and how it represents the spoken word. These students may not even know what is meant by the term sound. They can usually hear well and may even be able to name the letters of the alphabet, but they have no idea what the letters represent. If asked to give the first sound in the word *cat*, they are likely to say “meow.” Students must be able to identify /p/ in the words *panda*, *park*, or *mop*, and separate the phoneme from others before they can understand what the letter “p” represents in those words. Phoneme awareness predicts later outcomes in reading.

Phonemic awareness interacts with and facilitates the development of vocabulary and word consciousness. It is well known that middle class students enter Kindergarten knowing approximately 5,000 vocabulary words, while students from the lower socio-economic neighborhoods know only 1,000 such words. It is felt that those students never mastered their phonemes.

Because of the importance of this phonemic awareness, the MaxScholar team created the MaxPre-K Phonics Program. Through a specifically designed series of steps the young students are presented sets of consonants and short vowels which they have to learn. The program is explicit, systematic, and multi-sensory. It starts with the recognition of a letter, shows how it sounds In a word that begins with that letter, the sound the letter makes is pronounced, and the student is taught how to write the letter. There is extensive practice required and an assessment quiz to see if that letter is mastered. This sequence is repeated for each letter in a group of five letters. Once those letters are mastered, the students proceed to recognizing the letter that makes a specific sound and then to learning how to blend sounds into words or nonsense words. There is much drill and practice, since it is expected that a typical student must review each letter at least five times until mastery. This method is a typical Orton-Gillingham (OG) approach.

The program is available in electronic format which the students seem to prefer. It can be taught by a teacher or a paraprofessional by just following what appears on the screen. For those schools with interactive white boards, the program seems to come alive as it is totally interactive with the students. It also can be used by a teacher on a notebook or desktop computer or iPad with students grouped around. There are even workbooks which provide the exact same program in print format. There are instructional materials available which are OG flash cards, containing the letter on one side and the picture on the reverse side. There are OG alpha chips which allow the teacher to work with a student or small group of students to practice making words, and there is an OG kit with magnetic tiles to provide even more drill and practice. There is also an on-line video which uses music to teach the young students all their letters.

Results from several pre-K programs and Kindergarten programs in urban schools have shown that students who are exposed to the MaxScholar program quickly master their sounds. Test results of these students indicate that by the end of the academic year, over 90% are reading at grade level. In addition, the MaxScholar Pre-K Phonics program transitions into the Phonics Program for use by students in grades K to 2, or for those students who are in higher grades, but never learned their phonics.

Phonemic awareness and Phonics are the stronghold of the MaxScholar program and the best time to start is in preK.