

# Clapping the Word

## Targeted skill

Young children are expected to learn how to divide words into parts, or syllables. Dividing words into syllables is part of a set of skills that educators refer to as phonological awareness. It is one of the steps in learning to read.



## What to do

This is a game that you can play with your child almost anywhere. It is simple: Just say a word slowly and clap your hands once for each syllable. If the word is *cat*, you clap once. If the word is *bedroom*, you clap once when you say “bed” and once when you say “room.” If the word is *caterpillar*, you’ll clap four times—once for “cat,” once for “er,” once for “pil,” and once for “lar.”

Children usually like to clap their own name, the names of family members, and the names of friends. Beyond that, clap the syllables for familiar words such as things you eat, favorite toys, and places you go together.

If your child seems to have difficulty hearing the syllables within a word, try this: Have your child place a hand under his or her jaw. The jaw usually drops for each syllable. This physical motion makes identifying syllables a bit more concrete.

## Extending the activity

Once your child can hear the syllables in most words without assistance, you can move on to the more advanced skill of phonemic awareness. Rather than listening for syllables, encourage your child to listen for phonemes (letter sounds). Start with simple three-letter words in which each sound is clear, for example, *mom*, *dad*, *cat*, *dog*, *bed*, and so on. Rather than clapping letter sounds, use a different motion, such as tapping your fingers on your knee.

## What your child is practicing

Phonological awareness is a group of skills that includes rhyming, alliteration, sentence segmentation, word segmentation, and phonemic awareness. Phonological awareness is important as children learn to read.

Hearing the number of syllables in a word is second nature to adults, but not for young children. Children need lots and lots of practice saying words aloud and recognizing the syllables. Clapping out the syllables helps make them more concrete for children.