Why is my child having difficulty learning to read?

Reading is a complex skill. However, reading researchers have identified specific factors that help explain why learning to read may be difficult for some children. One of these key factors is called phonological awareness. If your child is having difficulty learning to read, assessing his or her phonological awareness skills should be considered.

What is phonological awareness?
Phonological awareness is the sensitivity to the sound structure of one’s language, the ability to detect and manipulate the sounds of words. Phonological awareness skills range from easy to complex. Beginning phonological awareness skills include the ability to produce rhyming words and to clap syllables in words. A level of phonological awareness that is more complex and significantly related to reading is called phonemic awareness. A child demonstrates phonemic awareness when he or she is able to detect and work with individual sounds of a word.

Why would a child need phonological awareness?
Our system for reading and writing is alphabetic. An alphabetic system is based on the idea that words can be viewed as a series of sounds and these individual sounds are represented by letters and letter patterns. Thinking about words as a series of individual sounds and detecting the individual sounds is necessary to learn to read efficiently. Phonological awareness skills are included in the Common Core State Standards for Kindergarten and 1st Grade Reading.

Phonics is not phonological awareness. Phonics is a method for teaching reading and involves memorization of letter/sound pairs. Phonological awareness does not involve memorization or knowledge of letters. Children may memorize that the letter “t” makes the sound /t/ but still may not be able to detect the /t/ sound in spoken words due to weak phonemic awareness.

When children acquire phonemic awareness they can detect the individual sounds in spoken words, helping them understand that the letters they see map onto the sounds they use in speech and hear in spoken words. This insight helps them learn to read by allowing them to efficiently use their phonics and vocabulary knowledge for word identification. For children with weak phonological awareness, using letters that represent sounds does not quite make sense since they are unable to readily detect the individual sounds in words.

Not all children easily develop this sensitivity to the sounds of a language and so may require explicit teaching in this area. If your child is having difficulty with reading, phonological awareness skills may be a factor. Check out our module on phonological awareness at HelpforReading.com for more information on how you can help your child. Or ask your school about checking to see if an underlying factor for your child's reading difficulty is phonological awareness.

Keep in mind that phonological awareness is just one component in learning to read. It is a necessary skill but not the only factor.