

# The Look of Letters

## *Alphabet Awareness*

Before children can begin to read or write, they need to become familiar with concepts of print. These include that print goes from left to right, top to bottom, with spaces between words and sentences, and other fundamental rules. Opportunities to interact with print—including alphabet letters with different textures, colors, and sizes—help children begin to experiment with letters and words.

### What is the practice?

This practice guide includes ideas about providing a literacy-rich environment for children in your care using alphabet toys and materials. Responding positively and encouraging children to play actively with these toys increase their familiarity, interest, and comfort with the alphabet.

### What does the practice look like?

A toddler playing with alphabet letters, while singing the ABC song, helps familiarize her with the appearance of the letters. This play includes using magnetic alphabet letters, stacking alphabet blocks, squeezing foam letters, or handling oversized letters of varied textures. You can talk with toddlers about the way the letters go and what happens when they are put together. Having a responsive, interested adult guiding their play encourages toddlers to experiment further.

### How do you do the practice?

Practitioners can enhance the print awareness of toddlers if they supply them with attractive, developmentally appropriate alphabet toys. Encourage the children to explore and experiment with these toys. Help children begin to become familiar with the look of letters. You can do this simply by putting alphabet blocks in the blocks center. Include letter magnets, stamps, and sponges in the art center. Provide alphabet puzzles and ABC beads in the manipulatives center and cookie cutters or sand molds at the sensory table.

- Encourage toddlers to actively explore the alphabet toys, lining up magnetic letters or sponging paint any way they choose. Do this even if they do not yet seem to pay attention to the names or sounds of the letters. Ask questions, like “What words are you making?” or “What does that word say?” This helps reinforce the idea that print carries meaning.
- Comment appreciatively about what the toddlers are doing. If a child uses alphabet cookie cutters in the sand table, for example, point out that he made an A. Follow his interest about the letter, just as you would with other toys.
- Any time toddlers play with alphabet toys, show through your participation and comments how these letters are correctly oriented. Place them right side up and facing the right direction. Show how, when put together, they can make words. Have fun trying to sound out “words” your toddlers will inadvertently create with the letters.



### How do you know the practice worked?

- Are the children in your care often choosing alphabet toys with which to play?
- Do children point out letters on a toy?
- Do children play by putting letters side by side to make ‘words’?

## Take a look at more letter fun with toddlers

### Letter-Shaped Stamps

Ms. Amy, the center's early interventionist, gathers four two-year-olds together at a table. She puts out stamp pads and stamps of various shapes, including letters. She shows the children how to move with care from the stamp pad to the paper. Next, she shows the toddlers what happens when the stamp is pressed onto paper. While they are playing with the stamps, Ms. Amy keeps up a running conversation with the children. She talks about what they are doing, what color ink they are using, and what shapes their stamps are. As children reach for the letter stamps, Ms. Amy points out which letters start each child's name. She shows them how to stamp their names with the individual letters.



### Alphabet Pop Beads

Maurice, who is 30 months old, loves his home visitor Ella's interlocking alphabet beads. He has gotten better and better at snapping them together and pulling them apart. "Look at that, Maurice," his mom says. "That string of beads is almost as tall as you are!" Maurice laughs. "What's it say?" he asks. Maurice knows that letters make words, but he does not know what words his beads have made. "Well, it doesn't really say words," Ella explains, "because letters have to be in a special order to say something. Let's hear what this sounds like. Maybe your mom should help me with this one." They both laugh as Ella and Maurice's mom try to translate the long line of letters into a nonsense word. Maurice says, "Let's say, 'Maurice and Mommy and Ella like beads.' Would that take a lot of beads?" "Let's try it," Ella says.



### ABC Cookie Cutters

Randi, a toddler with visual impairment, likes playing with play dough with her home visitor Deon. Today Deon comes in with a set of alphabet cookie cutters. "Those are neat," Randi's mom says. "Here, Randi, let's roll out your play dough so we can try them." Deon gives Randi an R. "Feel the lines and curves on that letter, Randi? That's R, like in your name. R for Rrrrandi." He stresses the sounds to make them distinct. "I can make one," Randi says. She allows her mom to guide her hands placing the cookie cutter onto a circle of play dough. "Okay, press down," her mom says.

"You made an R!" Deon exclaims. "Feel how your letter has the same shape as the plastic one?" Her mom helps guide her hands to compare the letters. "I made R," Randi says proudly.

