

Especially for practitioners working with toddlers!

World of Learning

Literacy-Rich Experiences

Spending time in settings that encourage listening, speaking, and paying attention to written words is a huge plus for toddlers. Such opportunities are at the center of literacy-rich environments for toddlers.

What is the practice?

Provide toddlers with a literacy-rich environment. This means giving them many chances throughout the day to interact with books. Let them try varied writing and drawing materials. Look at and talk about letters, signs, and labels. Provide chances to listen to and talk with interested, responsive adults.

What does the practice look like?

Toddlers enjoy many types of experiences in a literacy-rich classroom. They can be playing with alphabet blocks or stamping with ABC letters. Alone or in groups, they can be looking at books from an easy-to-reach display. At circle time they can be singing nursery rhymes with their teacher and friends. Throughout the day, caregivers talk with the children about what they are doing. They also point out the everyday uses of functional literacy skills like writing lists, reading menus, and asking questions.



How do you do the practice?

Young children build literacy skills over time by having fun, meaningful experiences. These are based on their interests and build their confidence. Here are some ideas to try with the toddlers in your care.

- Book reading is an important part of literacy development for toddlers. Provide an attractive and often-changing display of books and magazines in a comfortable spot. This helps make book reading an everyday activity in which children can engage on their own or with friends and adults.
- Environmental print—in the form of labels, signs, and posters in your classroom—helps toddlers understand that print has practical uses. Calling children’s attention to printed matter in their classroom helps them become familiar with the way letters and words look. They begin to see patterns in print.
- Spoken language is the keystone of a literacy-rich environment for toddlers. Engage the children in continuous, meaningful, thought-provoking conversations about whatever is going on around them and whatever interests them. Building good speaking and listening skills will be the result.
- Even though toddlers are too young to “write” like adults, give them plenty of chances to experiment with making marks. Provide them with all sorts of surfaces. Let toddlers paint, draw, scribble, and play in sand or other tactile materials. Talk with them about what they are doing during these activities. You will be helping them take the first steps toward developing later writing skills.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Are children in your care seeking out literacy-related activities when they play?
- Do the children like to talk and listen?
- Do they enjoy scribbling?

Take a look at more learning opportunities

Words Are Everywhere!

Sela, age 2, looks forward to getting to her home childcare center. When she arrives she puts her coat on a hook labeled with her name and photo. Her teacher greets her warmly and asks how she is doing this morning, allowing Sela time to answer. She goes to the kitchen for breakfast, where the drawers and cups are labeled. After she eats, Sela joins a friend in the book corner under a bright poster that says "Book Nook." They look at a new book their teacher has placed there. Later, she and her classmates use cookie cutters in play dough. When they go outside, Sela and some friends play in the sand and then draw with chalk on the sidewalk. By the time Sela's mom picks her up, the toddler has had a whole day's worth of literacy learning experiences.



Trikes 'n' Words

Charlotte tries every day to give the toddlers in her care a well-rounded literacy experience. Her group enjoys playground time. Charlotte has found lots of opportunities outdoors to engage them in meaningful talk. She draws their attention to print and comments on the symbols and signs they see. When the children are riding tricycles, she places models of common street signs along the sidewalk. Some children in the group love to point out street signs like stop and yield. Charlotte talks with the children about all of the words on the signs. She explains how the signs help people know where they are and where they want to go. She knows the children enjoy these conversations because they often comment on the signs they see. They have started acting out the signs' meanings that Charlotte has explained to them.

Count Me In!

Carlo, a 26-month-old with motor impairments, participates in the same literacy activities as the other children in his inclusive class. His teacher provides easy access to oversized books, larger writing tools, and clips to hold papers steady for easy drawing. There are alphabet and word puzzles with grip-enhanced pieces so Carlo can hold onto them. He joins the other children in songs, fingerplays, and acting out stories with occasional physical assistance from teachers. One of Carlo's favorite things is the voice recorder. It allows him to record his "stories" and then see the result printed out in words. Throughout the day, the teachers talk to Carlo and the other children. They talk about what they are doing, what they are feeling, and what is coming next. This helps them make the connection between words and their meanings.



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Words All Around Us

Literacy-Rich Experiences

To help toddlers develop speaking, listening, and print-related skills, make use of words that are all around them. Environmental print that is interesting to toddlers helps familiarize them with the varied kinds and uses of printed language.

What is the practice?

Create a literacy-rich classroom for your toddlers. This involves posting lots of interesting, meaningful print around the room. Refer to it often during your daily routines. Hang posters, signs, nameplates, lists, displays of children's labeled artwork, and other forms of print around your classroom. This will help toddlers make the connection between written words and what they mean.

What does the practice look like?

There are lots of everyday opportunities to use environmental print in your classroom. These include pointing out the signs for different activity centers or helping a toddler find her cubby by checking nameplates. Both of these make good use of environmental print.

How do you do the practice?

A literacy-rich environment is a place where literacy learning occurs. Signs, letters, and symbols that children see daily mean more and are more familiar than letters or words seen alone. For example, a toddler will often learn to recognize—or “read”—a fast-food chain's sign long before she can decode words. Here are some ways to use environmental print with the toddlers in your classroom.

- Post meaningful signs around the room and refer to them when you talk with toddlers. Use them to introduce the concept that we use printed words to gain and give information. Post signs that label each learning center. Print a daily schedule. Display charts printed with the words of newly learned songs or rhymes. All of these can help children see the connection between what is printed and what people say and do.
- Let children help you create print for your classroom. Post their scribbling and drawings where they are easy to see. Ask them to dictate some words or labels for you to write on their pictures. For special events, help toddlers create banners to hang. Talk about what the words will mean to people who visit your classroom.
- Introduce children to the practical uses of print. Involve them in helping you make a list of needed supplies or take attendance. Make these everyday literacy events part of the environmental print with which children are familiar. Emphasizing the practical aspects of printed language helps show its importance.
- Use toddlers' own names to spark an interest in printed language. Toddlers love having their own space. This could be their own cubby, their own spot at a table, or their own coat hook. They are often motivated to begin recognizing their names by understanding that it means something is “all mine!”



How do you know the practice worked?

- Do your toddlers notice and refer to environmental print in the room?
- Have they begun to pair certain signs or labels with their meanings?
- Do they ask about new or different printed language that they notice?

Take a look at more words all around us

Words, Words, Words

Annie has worked hard to make her classroom a literacy-rich space for her toddlers. Writing and drawing materials are kept out in the open. Annie hangs and often rotates all her toddlers' artistic and writing attempts. When she writes lists or takes attendance, she describes what she is doing to the children nearby. She has labeled the centers and objects in the room in the children's home languages. She knows that even though they cannot read yet, the children understand the meaning of classroom signs. They often point to or refer to them during their daily play and routines.



Environmental Print

Mark wants to engage his toddler class in environmental print. He asked parents to help by bringing in signs of familiar places that interest the children. They brought in pictures of street signs, signs from restaurants, schools, churches, and other familiar sights the children saw regularly. Mark and his co-teacher also took the children on a special neighborhood walk to take photographs of signs. They talked about what the signs meant and then displayed the pictures with the others around the classroom. The children began referring to the signs regularly by pointing them out. They engaged their teachers in conversation about the places and signs.

The Word on Decorating

In Erin's inclusive toddler class, many of the children enjoy decorating the room for special events like birthdays and holidays. Each new season also provides opportunities for decorating. Erin involves all the children in the process by providing adapted brushes, markers, and other art materials. She encourages children to speak messages into a computer program that prints out their words. Some children record greetings to play during parties. Others help select best-liked songs to sing. Erin prints out their dictations and songs and posts them in the room where they are easy to see. The children refer to these signs and posters with pride, noting all the ways they have helped prepare for the party.

