

Especially for parents of toddlers!

Playing With Words

Symbols and Letters

Before children can learn to read, they need to learn some of the basic rules of print. They need to see that we read print from left to right and from top to bottom on a page. They must find out why there are spaces between words and how print is different from pictures. You can help your toddler learn these things by joining him in playing with alphabet toys.

What is the practice?

Joining your child in playing with alphabet toys makes the process of learning letters fun and enjoyable for your toddler. The toys can be alphabet blocks, magnetic or foam letters, or alphabet puzzles. Other toys with words written on them helps your toddler get used to looking at and interacting with them.

What does the practice look like?

Let your toddler play with letter-shaped cookie cutters in damp sand, cornmeal, play dough, or real dough. Show your child which letter starts his name. Make little groups of the same letter while playing with magnet letters on the refrigerator door. Or take these letters and line them up into simple words—*cat* or *dog*. These are just a few examples of good ways to use alphabet toys. While your child plays, describe what he's doing. Encourage him to turn the letters in the correct way and chat about letters that make words.



How do you do the practice?

When your toddler is playing with alphabet toys, remember to make it fun by providing a variety of materials, praising her efforts, and following her lead.

- Help your child recognize that these toys have letters on them by pointing out the letters in her name. Most toddlers like being able to identify their own names. This introduces the ideas that printed letters form words and that words carry meaning.
- Make connections between the toys your child is playing with and the letters on them. When playing with alphabet blocks, for example, show your child that lining them up in a certain order forms words.
- Try not to make alphabet and word toys seem too “hard.” Even if he doesn’t seem to be paying attention to the words, that is alright. The idea that letters and words follow certain rules is becoming more familiar to him. This will make learning to read easier later on.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Does your child play enthusiastically with alphabet toys?
- Does your child point out familiar letters on his toys or anywhere else he sees them?
- Does your child turn his toys so the letters are right side up and facing in the right direction?

Take a look at more ways to play with words

Magnetic Power

Thirty-two-month-old Eva and her Mom are playing with some magnetic letters in the kitchen. "Look, Eva," her mom says. "You have all the letters in your name there, just like on your cup." Eva looks at the letters in front of her on the refrigerator and on the cup her mom holds up. "It doesn't look like that," she says. "They're not in the right order, and some are upside down," her mom explains. "Can you move them around to make them look like that?" Eva moves the letters around until they look like her name cup. "Great," her mom says. "All your letters are in the right order, and right-side-up. E-V-A. That spells Eva!"



Stamp of Approval

Alex loves the messy fun of finger paints. One day his mom brings him a new package of letter-shaped sponges. She lets him explore dipping them in finger paint and pressing them onto construction paper. "Look, Alex," his mom says. "You can make words with all these letters." Together, they share the sponges. Alex's mom shows him how she can use the A, L, E, and X sponges to print his name. Alex continues stamping letters at random over the paper. "That's my name," Alex tells his mom. "I'm writing lots of words." Playing with the stamps increases Alex's interest in writing and familiarizes him with letters and words.

Letters the Right Way

Keoni, a toddler with motor impairments, and his mom are playing with an alphabet puzzle. This puzzle is made so each letter piece fits into a letter-shaped cutout. Keoni struggles to get the pieces to fit, even though he holds them by the knobs in each piece. "Look, Keoni," his mom says. "See these letters on your alphabet poster, how they are all standing in the right direction? Your puzzle letters need to stand in the right direction too or they won't fit." She helps him run his hands over the pieces to feel their shapes. They compare them to his poster to see if they are right side up and facing the right way. "The poster will help you know which one comes next," she says. "If it's backwards or upside down it won't fit."

