

Especially for practitioners working with young children! 

Fun With Letters

Alphabet Knowledge

Preschoolers are starting to recognize some letters, especially those in their names. Often they can even identify the letters in different contexts. Reinforce these skills by giving your preschoolers opportunities to interact with letters that appeal to several senses. Make or purchase letter sets with interesting textures, colors, and sizes. Include alphabet toys that make sounds, such as a recorded voice saying a letter name when a corresponding letter-shaped button is pushed. Stocking your classroom with many different alphabet toys helps with future reading and writing by making the ways letters look and sound part of the children's everyday experiences.

What is the practice?

This practice guide includes some ideas about how to use alphabet toys and materials to provide a literacy-rich environment for the children in your care. Interacting positively and letting children play actively with these toys increases their familiarity, interest, and comfort with how letters look and function.



What does the practice look like?

Moving plastic letters on a magnet board, building with alphabet blocks, putting together alphabet puzzles, and stamping or sponge-painting with letters all help familiarize children with the alphabet. Talking with adults about what the letters look and sound like reinforces these connections. Pointing out the similarities between letters on toys and other printed material in the environment—such as signs, books, and posters—helps stimulate preschoolers' interest and understanding. Particularly during free play periods, encourage preschoolers to play with alphabet toys. Respond enthusiastically to the children's curiosity about the letters and the different things they do with them.

How do you do the practice?

There are many ways teachers can enhance the alphabet awareness of preschoolers in their care just by providing them with attractive, developmentally appropriate alphabet toys and encouraging the children to explore and experiment with them. Put alphabet blocks in the blocks center. Add letter magnets, stamps, and sponges to the art center. Include a selection of alphabet puzzles and beads in the manipulatives center. Add letter-shaped cookie cutters or sand molds to the sensory table. These are just some of the ways children can begin to become familiar with the look of letters.

- While children play with alphabet blocks or work a letter puzzle, encourage them to find the letters in their names or to match letters and point out the differences ("This block has a red R, but the R is blue on this one").
- Help older preschoolers begin to use magnetic and other kinds of letters to "write" messages and play with words. These don't need to be spelled correctly, but this process reinforces the idea that letters make words others can read. It also can be easier—and therefore more immediately rewarding—for some children than trying to write.
- Encourage preschoolers' play with alphabet toys, and focus on the fun of the process and the children's initiative rather than making it too "academic." The children will be more likely to want to keep experimenting with these letter-learning activities.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Are the children in your class beginning to identify letters of the alphabet?
- Do the children show interest in alphabet toys?
- Do the children seem to enjoy naming letters?

Take a look at more fun with the alphabet

Easel Ease

Ms. Miller, a teacher in a preschool class of 4-year-olds, approaches a small group of children with a box of brightly colored magnetic letters and a small magnetic easel. "What are these?" one child asks. "Letters!" another child answers. "Look, this is my letter." "Where's my letter?" Other children crowd around to look at them. "Look at what they can do," Ms. Miller says, spreading the letters out among the children. "See what happens when you put them on the easel." The children experiment with sticking the letters to the magnetic surface and making their names. Ms. Miller guides the play by helping them think about the sounds of the letters, and encouraging their attempts to make words.



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Greeting Cards

Mr. Lee provides a small group of children in his preschool class with construction paper, alphabet stamps, and letter stickers. "We're going to make cards with these," he explains. "You can use them to write a message for your mom or dad, your friend, or anyone else you want to send a card to. You can also use them to decorate your message." The children gather their supplies and plan their cards. "I need M to write *Mommy*," one child says. "That's right," Mr. Lee answers, passing her the M stamp. "What other letters are you going to use for *Mommy*?" "I use E, because it sounds like eeee," another child says. "Where's the E?" The children work together to find letters and create their messages.

Comparing Letter Shapes

In an inclusive class of 4-year-olds, Ms. Sawyer brings a set of alphabet cookie cutters to the table where some of her children, including Lily, who has visual impairments, are rolling out play dough. She shows the children the cutters, and places Lily's hands in the box so she can pick a letter, too. "Look," a child says, pressing his M into the dough and holding up the letter shape. "Great," Ms. Sawyer responds, "What did you make?" "He made M," another child responds, and presses her letter too. "Can you show Lily your M?" Ms. Sawyer asks, and the child places the M shape on the table and helps Lily find and touch it. She traces it with her hands. "Is that letter on the table the same shape as the cookie cutter you're holding?" Ms. Sawyer asks, encouraging Lily to trace her B cookie cutter. "No, it's different," Lily answers, pressing her letter into the play dough. "This is how my letter feels."

