

Especially for practitioners working with young children! 

The Look of Letters

Alphabet Awareness

Before children can begin to read or write, they need to become familiar with concepts of print—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 some ideas about how to provide a literacy-rich environment for the 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 magnetic alphabet letters, stacking alphabet blocks, squeezing foam letters, or handling oversized letters in smooth, bumpy, rough, or soft textures while singing the alphabet song all help familiarize her with the appearance of letters. Having a responsive, interested adult guiding their play by talking about the way the letters go and what happens when they are put together encourages toddlers to experiment further.

How do you do the practice?

Practitioners can enhance the print awareness of toddlers in their care simply by supplying them with attractive, developmentally appropriate alphabet toys and encouraging the children to explore and experiment with them. Putting alphabet blocks in the blocks center, letter magnets, stamps, and sponges in the art center, alphabet puzzles and beads in the manipulatives center, and cookie cutters or sand molds at the sensory table all help children begin to become familiar with the look of letters.

- Encourage toddlers to actively explore the alphabet toys, lining up magnetic letters or sponging paint however they choose, even if they do not yet seem to pay attention to the names or sounds of the letters. Ask encouraging questions, like “What words are you making?” or “What does that word say?” to help reinforce the idea that print carries meaning.
- Comment appreciatively about what the toddlers are doing. If a child uses an alphabet cookie cutter in the sand table, for example, point out that he made an A, and 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 (right side up, facing the right direction), and 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 regularly choosing alphabet toys to play with?
- Do children point out letters on a toy?
- Do children play by putting letters together 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 with stamp pads and stamps of various shapes, including letters. She shows the children how to move carefully from the stamp pad to the paper, and 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 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, and shows them how to stamp their names with the individual letters.

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Alphabet Pop Beads

Thirty-month-old Maurice loves his home visitor Ella's interlocking alphabet beads, and 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 already knows that letters make words, but he doesn't 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 decipher 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

Miranda, 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," Miranda's mom says. "Here, Miranda, let's roll out your play dough so we can try them." Deon gives Miranda an M. "Feel the lines on that letter, Miranda? That's M, like in your name. M for Mmmiranda." He exaggerates the sounds to make them distinct. "I can make one," Miranda says, and allows her mom to guide her hands holding the cookie cutter onto a circle of play dough. "Okay, press down," her mom says. "You made an M!" Deon exclaims. "Feel how your letter has the same lines as the plastic one?" Her mom helps guide her hands to compare the letters. "I made M," Miranda says proudly.

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