



Alphabetic Knowledge
and
Alphabetic Principle

Shared Reading of the Alphabet

Download a list of alternatives for reading the ABC chart. This develops stronger perception and encourages children to take a more critical look at the letters of the alphabet. Mount your chart on vellum, laminate and keep it handy near your shared reading area.

Purpose: To provide children with a special set of cues that can be used during reading and writing activities.

Materials: Use a large ABC chart for shared reading in the group. Reduce the chart and place a copy in each child's writing folder to be used as a personal resource during journal writing.

Collect a large variety of quality ABC books to use for read-alouds and shared reading. Read one a day, particularly at the beginning of the year. Cover some of the letters with Post-its and ask children for predictions before removing the stickers. Share a variety of ABC books with your child or group to promote flexible knowledge about letters and sounds.

A student-generated big book of the Alphabet with letters and picture cues may also be used for shared reading activities.

Procedures: Gather the children around or in front of the large ABC Chart. Point to each letter (upper and lower case) and each picture and you lead the children in a shared reading of the chart. Read the letters fluently and pause at appropriate points to allow the children to lead the reading of the letters or to say the pictured cues. Read the chart daily until your child or group is able to read the chart independently. The chart soon becomes a familiar resource for associating letter and sound cues during reading and writing events.

Let's Deal!

(Alphabetizing Flash Cards)

My first grade team had a flexible way of having their students practice alphabetical order. We purchased multiple sets of colorful sight word flash cards that are produced by several publishers. The picture is on one side and the word on the other. (We laminated them for durability.) Each child was given 5-10 cards each day to alphabetize as part of their daily seatwork during reading groups. It was a good way to practice alphabetizing while reinforcing sight word vocabulary at the same time. You can differentiate the activity by raising the bar for some students with alphabetizing to the second and third letter. Struggling students or children with poor fine motor skills only had 5 cards each day and none began with the same letter. We encouraged the children to look at the alphabet line on their desks or the one on the wall. Before they copied the words onto a paper, they had a predetermined buddy/parent helper, etc. check them. It was painless that way since they could just rearrange the cards if needed. It can be used as a portable center since they can do it on the floor or on the top of their desks.

Some teachers sort the cards into 3 groups and put them into color coded, numbered envelopes. It's easy to keep track of who completes each envelope. Just copy a class or group list and put it on the front of the envelope. Kids can circle or check their name upon completion. It's good to have the whole alphabet in front of them or available for reference. You'll hear some at risk students singing the alphabet song as they work on this activity! I love it!

This is a good lead in to using the dictionary. If your kids have personal writing dictionaries, have them add new words during your guided reading or skill lessons. Ask them where they will find the first letter of the word: at the beginning, middle, or end of the alphabet and refer to your alphabet chart. This will quickly eliminate turning countless pages while looking for the right letter!



Promote Flexible Learning of Letters

To promote flexible learning of letters, children must acquire knowledge of letters in many different ways. A simple rule is to begin with the easiest letters—those letters with maximum contrast (for example, m, b, f, s, r) - and promote overlearning with these letters. The idea is to provide children with a systematic way of learning how to learn letters. As children acquire knowledge of letters, they are prompted to search for known letters that are embedded within words. To encourage this type of processing, teachers should emphasize letter learning in multiple ways:

- The name of the letter
- The way the letter looks
- The sound the letter makes
- The feel of the letter in the mouth
- The movement of the letter as it is written
- A word associated with the letter
- The way the letter looks embedded with a word.

What Does Research Say?

Research indicates that good readers read in chunks as they attach sounds to a group of letters, rather than individual letters. In order to promote analytical processing for the visual organization of word parts into related categories, the child's attention is directed to the largest chunks within words. Through many reading and writing experiences, children learn how to integrate visual knowledge with meaning and structure cues. Letter and word building activities enable children to develop flexible management systems for promoting fast responding to printed language.

Children use "strategies of comparison" when learning how to read (Clay, 1991). When children learn how to look a print, they construct a personal classification system that is organized around the differences and similarities that they perceive in the printed word. This system of organized information has generative value for children. They learn "strategies of comparison" for linking known information to new items. In reading, *a letter can only exist through its relationship to another letter, sound or word.* Thus an important feature of visual perception is the role of interrelationships and the use of "strategies of comparison" for analyzing these connections.

Letter knowledge has been identified as a strong predictor of reading success (Ehri & Sweet, 1991).

While teaching children letter names does not in itself result in success in learning to read (Jenkins, Bausell, & Jenkins, 1972), it can facilitate memory for the forms or shapes of letters and can serve as a mnemonic for letter-sound associations or phonics (Adams, 1990).

Knowledge of the alphabet is essential in early reading instruction. It provides teachers and students with common language for discussing graphophonic relationships. Assessment of alphabet knowledge should occur in two contexts: letter recognition within words and sentences, and letters in isolation. (Reutzel and Cooter, 1996)

What Does Research Say?

Knowing the alphabet is almost like having an anchor for each sound (Hall & Moats, 1999).

A child who can recognize most letters with thorough confidence will have an easier time learning about letter sounds and word spellings than a child who also has to work at distinguishing the individual letters . . . In general, because the names of most letters are closely associated with their sounds, children who learn the name letters also begin to learn their sounds. (Adams, 1990)

Learning to identify letters helps young children focus more precisely on the features of words, so they have more clues with which to remember those individual words. (Templeton, 1995)

Teachers should use a multi-sensory approach to teaching alphabet recognition. This means that teaching strategies should include visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic activities.

After phonemic awareness, recognition of the letters of the alphabet is the most important indicator of early reading success.

Starting at preschool and kindergarten, schools should help students learn the names and shapes of letters. Incorporating writing/printing into letter instruction is a powerful means of developing letter recognition. Using letter/keyword/picture displays when introducing letters is an effective strategy. (Adams, 1990)

Letter Recognition Materials

- Alphabet books (commercial or teacher created)
- Alphabet lotto
- Alphabet placemats
- Alphabet rugs
- A variety of charts
- Blocks
- Board games
- Letter cards
- Letter walls
- Matching games
- Magnetic letters
- Magnetic boards or surfaces for sorting
- Letter tiles
- Puzzles
- Letter books (commercial or teacher made)
- Alphabet sticker books for each child
- Paintbrushes and water
- Child sized chalkboards
- Child sized whiteboards and markers
- Daily writing record for each child
- Names corner with student names and pictures
- Names Chart
- Alphabet attributes corner
- Pocket charts and/or shoe bags
- Desktop alphabet charts
- "Stuff" for sorting
- Butcher paper
- Magna Doodles and sand/salt trays for letter formation
- Word Wall Pointers of assorted sizes and types
- Sandpaper letters
- Salt trays
- Stamps
- Wikki Stix
- Stencils

Sorting Letters

Letter sorting activities provide the opportunity for children to explore and to make discoveries.

Letter sorting activities foster the development of automaticity and independent letter recognition.

Sorting suggestions:

- by color
- by upper-case and lower-case forms
- by letter name
- by attributes (circles, sticks, colors, lower case and capitals, etc.)
- shuffle a set of alphabet cards and put them back into order as quickly as possible
- letters with mixed and unusual fonts (as students become skilled at identifying letters in mixed cases and fonts, they become better able to recognize letters in new contexts.)

Alphabet Books

According to Reutzel and Cooter (1999), "the purpose of using alphabet books is to assist young and special needs readers in discovering the order and elements of the alphabet, both names and sounds. To do this, teachers may wish to acquire collections of quality alphabet trade books."

Using alphabet books in a read aloud format gives children the opportunity to hear, say, and see the alphabet. Ask them to predict what letter comes next and what picture might appear within the "theme" of the book.

Intervention Strategies

- Place an alphabet strip at each student's desk so that he/she has a reference.
- Display the alphabet at eye level in the classroom (too often they are above the white board!).
- Make sure that the child's vision and hearing have been checked to rule out perceptual problems.
- Use flexible practice in small daily increments.
- Give each child a phonics sticker book. Some teachers prefer that children draw their own pictures, but emergent readers rarely remember what it was they drew. This method produces a colorful book to read again and again.
- Show the child a letter card and ask him/her to tell you the name of the letter.
- Talk about the shape of the letter. What is the composition of the letter . . . circles, sticks, tails, etc.?
- Show the child a letter card and ask him/her to make the sound that the letter produces. Remember that each vowel makes two sounds.
- Focus on the pronunciation of the letter and the production of the sound. Where is your tongue, and what is it doing when you say the letter/sound? Where are your teeth? (It helps to look in a mirror for this exercise.)
- Talk through the method of producing the letter in printed form.
- Provide a word or an anchor picture that children associate with a letter. (example: *A, a, apple* gives children an anchor to use as a memory tool.)
- Teach the names of the letters in the child's first name.

More Intervention Strategies

- alphabet matching games
- alphabet sequencing games
- alphabet naming games
- alphabet flashcards
- alphabet drawings
- alphabet songs, rhymes and chants
- alphabet stickers and sticker books
- alphabet cookies and soup
- alphabet templates
- alphabet screen writing

Recommended Reading

I would strongly recommend that teachers read two excellent sources for a better understanding of letter identification in young children. Please note that I didn't say letter "recognition." There's a big difference! Recognition implies automaticity or "knowing" without having to think about it. We recognize our names, but we would have to "identify" unfamiliar and unknown words. The same holds true for children who are just beginning to explore the world of print. They often recognize many of the letters in their own names, but have to work hard to learn to identify unfamiliar letters. Lecture over. Here are the two book titles:

Clay, Marie (1993). *Reading Recovery: A Guidebook for Teachers in Training*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. (Pages 23-28, and 55-56 discuss learning to look at print with concrete suggestions for the teacher, particularly for children who seem to have difficulty with remembering letter names.)

Dorn, Linda, French, Cathy, and Jones, Tammy (1998). *Apprenticeship in Literacy: Transitions Across Reading and Writing*. York, Maine: Stenhouse. (Pages 92-95 discuss multiple ways of learning about print and pages 111-114 describe a literacy corner for exploring letters.)

Tactile Materials

- colored chalk sand trays
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- instant pudding
- macaroni, rice and dried beans
- sand paper letters
- finger paint
- shaving cream
- hair gel
- pipe cleaners
- clay
- play dough or modeling clay
- magnetic letters
- Oobleck