

Especially for parents of toddlers!

Letters and Symbols Are Everywhere

Symbols and Letters

Learning that symbols and printed letters have meaning is an important early learning skill for toddlers. Symbols and letters are everywhere in a toddler's world. It is important to help her begin to understand what they mean.

What is the practice?

As you move around your community together, you will find opportunities to help your child understand signs. For example, she can learn that a red sign with the word *STOP* means that a car or bus must stop.

What does the practice look like?

Signs (stop signs) and symbols (fast-food logos) can help your toddler learn that symbols and words have meaning. She will benefit by seeing the connections between symbols and letters and the things they represent.

How do you do the practice?

Discover ways to help your toddler see these connections as you go out in your community together.

- Begin by noticing the words or signs that catch your toddler's attention. Perhaps she will notice the blinking *Open* sign in a shop window or the red stoplight hanging over the street.
- Follow your child's lead and comment on what she notices. "I see you looking at that blinking sign in the window."
- Explain what the sign means. "That sign says *Open* and it means we can go in the store and buy something."
- Go to the door and show her that it is open and you can go inside.
- The next time you see an *Open* sign on a store, point it out to your toddler and remind her what it means.
- When you see a sign or symbol that you think your toddler will like, point it out. Explain what it means (an ice cream cone, a steaming coffee cup, a lighted *EXIT* sign, etc.).



How do you know the practice worked?

- Does your toddler more frequently notice signs or symbols?
- Does your toddler enjoy looking at the signs you show her?
- Does your toddler ask you about the signs or symbols she sees?

Take a look at more letters and symbols

The Sign Game

Maria, who is 3 years old, and her dad like to play the sign game when doing errands. When they get in the car and start driving, Maria's dad says, "I see a red sign. What should I do?" Maria squeals back, "Stop! Stop sign!" As her dad stops the car, he says "I'm so glad you know that the red sign means stop." When they get to the store, Dad points to an arrow on the door, He says, "What should I do now, Maria?" Again she laughs and says, "Go in." Dad points out a new sign, explaining to Maria what it means, and becomes part of their game.



Ride and Read

Two-year-old Jonathan loves to ride his little push car down the sidewalk and play the sign game. His mom has four different signs. She has a stop sign, an arrow pointing right, an arrow pointing left, and a green light. While Jonathan moves his car up and down the sidewalk, Mom stands in the middle and is the traffic director. If Mom is holding the stop sign up when Jonathan reaches her, he stops. If she holds up an arrow, then Jonathan turns. At the green sign he keeps on going. Jonathan loves the game and wants to play it frequently.

Picture Signs

Nicky is a toddler who sometimes has trouble remembering things. He has learned, along with his mom, that signs can be a fun way to help his memory. Together, Nicky and his mom made signs with pictures and words on their home computer. They have taped them up all over the house. They put a picture of Nicky with his name on his bedroom door. A sign with a red symbol for fire helps him remember not to touch the stove. His picture and name are posted on the kitchen shelf with his own snacks. In Nicky's bedroom, photos of his favorite toys mark the shelves where they belong. Mom and Nicky make new signs whenever Nicky wants to remind himself or his family of something. They take down the old ones as he no longer needs them.



More fun with magazines and catalogs

Grocery-Store Fun

When waiting in a check-out line at the market, 23-month-old Carrie and her mom look at magazines on display. Carrie is seated in the shopping cart. Her mom points to a picture on a magazine cover and asks about it. "What do you think this girl is doing?" she asks. Finding a C in big type, Mom points to the letter and says, "Look, here's a C like in *Carrie*." Mom knows her daughter enjoys the activity since Carrie often points to something printed and asks, "What's that?"



Shopping Flier

Every week, Courtney's grandmother saves the grocery ad inserts from her newspaper. Sometimes Grandma asks 30-month-old Courtney if she wants to help make a shopping list. If Courtney says yes, she gets the ad pages, scissors, paper, and tape. Grandma asks, "What do we need to buy at the store?" Courtney cuts out food pictures, and Grandma helps her tape them on the paper. She knows Courtney enjoys this activity because the toddler asks to take her picture "list" when they go shopping.

Favorite Sections

Davy, who has a hearing loss, sometimes has a hard time letting his mom know what he wants. Each week Davy brings his mom the comics and advertising sections from the Sunday paper. Together, using the pictures, they sign and talk about Davy's favorite comic strips. Then they look at the ads. Davy shows Mom what he would like from the grocery store. They often use this as a way to learn new words and ideas. When they go shopping for food, Davy likes to bring the ads. He helps his mom look for the items they marked.



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What's Your Letter?

Symbols and Letters

Before children can read or write, they need to become familiar with the look and shape of letters. Interacting with letters they can see and touch helps children become interested in the alphabet. Provide alphabet toys for your child with letters of different textures, colors, and sizes to encourage his interest. Conversation as he plays with letters can help him understand the way our alphabet is used and organized. Play with alphabet toys can help toddlers feel confident about learning.

What is the practice?

Interacting with your child around a variety of alphabet toys makes letter learning fun. These toys can be alphabet blocks, magnetic or foam letters, or alphabet puzzles. Any toy with letters prominently displayed so your toddler has many chances to look at them is good.

What does the practice look like?

Let your toddler play with letter-shaped cookie cutters in damp sand, cornmeal, play dough, or real dough. Cut kitchen sponges into letter shapes. Show her how to use them as bathtub toys or as stamps with finger paint. Enjoying these activities together while talking to your toddler about what she's doing is making good use of alphabet toys. Let your child arrange magnetic alphabet letters on the refrigerator door, stack alphabet blocks, or string large alphabet beads. Each play time with alphabet toys helps her become more familiar and comfortable with letters.



How do you do the practice?

Make play with alphabet toys fun by providing a variety of materials, praising your child's efforts, and following his lead.

- Help your child start to learn the letters in his name. Point out these letters on blocks, stamps, or other materials. Praise him when he finds or recognizes them.
- Point out that each letter toy your child is playing with stands for a sound. For example, when your child has the block with the letter *B* on it, name the letter and its sound. Encourage him to do the same.
- Try to avoid making alphabet toys seem too "hard" or too much like work. Even if he doesn't seem to be paying attention to the letters themselves, they are still becoming more familiar. It will make them easier to learn 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 imitate you by naming sounds and letters when you are playing with alphabet toys together?

Take a look at more fun with alphabet toys

Sponge-Letter Printing

Twenty-six-month-old Tally and her mom are playing with finger paints at the kitchen table. Besides using her hands and big brushes, Tally uses sponges her mom has cut into the letters of her name. She picks up the *T* and runs it through the red paint. “Look what you did using the *T*,” her mom exclaims. “You made some red.” Tally looks down at the streak on her paper. “That’s the one that goes *ttt, ttt* like in your name,” Mom continues. Tally picks up the *L* and looks up while her mom makes the sound for it. “What are you going to make with that?” Tally puts some blue paint on the *L* and streaks that across her page. “Very pretty,” her mom says. “Can you try pressing it down, like this?” She presses the *L* sponge directly onto the paper, making a print. “I can do that,” Tally says after watching, and carefully presses the sponge. “That’s great!” her mom says. “Your *L* is just like mine!” Tally examines the two papers. “I made *L*,” she says proudly.



Making My Name!

Dallas, who is almost 3 years old, loves helping his dad fix and paint things around the house. One morning his dad tells him they’re going to make a wooden sign for Dallas’ room. “That way everyone will know it’s your room!” Together they trace the letters in Dallas’ name in pencil on blocks of sanded wood. They say the names of each letter as they go. Then Dallas watches from a safe distance as his dad uses a table saw to cut out the letters. “What color do you want for your *D*?” his dad asks. “That’s the most important letter, because it’s first.” Dallas picks a color for each of his letters, and together they apply base coats and the final gloss. As they work, they talk about each letter and its sound. When the project is completed, Dallas has a great new name plate for his room. And he knows all the letters of his name!

Alphabet Blocks Are Tops!

Evan, who is 30 months old and has Down syndrome, is playing with big alphabet blocks with his dad. He enjoys helping his dad pile blocks on top of each other. Then he gleefully knocks them over. “Wow, we’re making a really big tower,” Dad says. “Are you going to put even more blocks on top?” Evan nods and reaches for another block. “That block has an *E* on it,” Dad says. “It’s just like in your name. *E* for *Evan*!” Evan looks at the *E* block for a moment, then back at his dad, and asks “Evan?” “That’s right, that’s you!” his dad says. “And this is your letter—*E*.” “Evan,” the little boy repeats, and then carefully places his block on top of the others.



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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."



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Looking at Letters

Symbols and Letters

Before your toddler can begin to read or write, she needs to become familiar with the look and sound of the letters in the alphabet. Alphabet books help children ages 18-36 months become interested in the alphabet. They help teach letter recognition, letter sounds, and words that begin with the same letter.

What is the practice?

Reading alphabet books with your toddler is an important pre-reading activity that introduces her to letters and their sounds. Alphabet books come in a variety of styles. Choose one that is easy for your toddler's small hands to handle, such as a board book or an oversized book, and look for one that has bright and colorful pictures. Children who can identify letters and recognize letter sounds have an advantage in learning to read. Reading alphabet books to your toddler helps prepare her for reading.

What does the practice look like?

Let your toddler choose the ABC book she wants to read. It helps to point to the letters as you say them, such as "A is for *apple*." Engage your child. Ask her to help you sound out the letters. "A makes the sound *Aaa, Aaa, Aaa*. Can you make this sound with me?" This will help her become familiar with the letters in the alphabet and help her make connections to letters and their sounds. Children who can identify the alphabet have an easier time learning letter/sound pairs.



How do you do the practice?

Make it fun! Follow your toddler's interest in the activity. Be patient with your toddler and offer encouragement for her efforts.

- Keep an alphabet book in the car and ask your toddler to "read it to you," helping her with the different letters and sounds.
- Read an alphabet book to your toddler at bedtime and point to each letter while making the letter sound.
- Provide your toddler with alphabet toys such as magnetic letters for the fridge, ABC blocks, and alphabet puzzles.
- Reread the book. The more your toddler hears the alphabet the more likely she will become familiar with it.

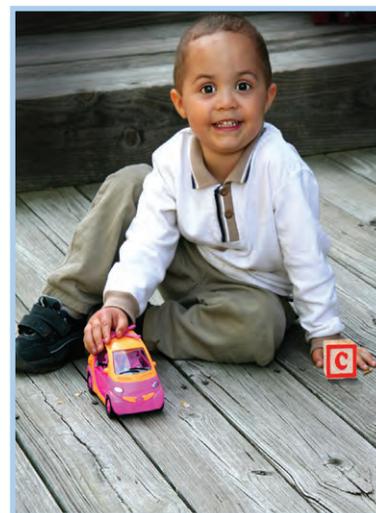
How do you know the practice worked?

- Is your toddler pointing to or showing interest in letters?
- Does your toddler show more interest in books?
- Does your child appear to enjoy looking at letter books?

Take a look at more fun with alphabet books

Making Connections

Two-year-old DeAndre loves to play with cars and blocks. DeAndre has a set of alphabet blocks that he likes to stack up and knock over with his cars. Every night before bed, DeAndre's mother reads him an ABC book. She points to each letter as she names it and makes the letter sound. She asks DeAndre to help her name the picture beside each letter. Next to the letter C in the book is a picture of a car that always catches DeAndre's interest. She tells DeAndre, "These letters are just like the letters on your blocks." DeAndre's eyes light up when he makes this connection. The next day, DeAndre brings his mom the C block and says, "Look, Mom! Car!" DeAndre's mom smiles and says, "Yes, sweet boy, good job! The word *car* does start with the letter C."



The Alphabet Song

Twenty-two-month-old Lars likes to look at books. Lars's dad brings home an ABC book and asks if his son would like to look at it with him. Lars nods eagerly. As they sit down on the couch to read, Dad asks Lars if he knows how to sing *The Alphabet Song*. Lars nods "yes." "Let's sing the song after we've looked at the book," Dad suggests. Lars's face shows excitement. "Okay," he says. Lars's dad goes through the book pointing to each letter and naming the picture. "A is for *Apple*." He does this quickly enough to hold Lars's attention. After they have finished the book, Lars's dad asks Lars, "So, are you ready to sing *The Alphabet Song*?" Lars's eyes light up and he nods. "Sing it with me," Dad starts. "A, B, C, D..."

Got a Feeling...

Thirty-four-month-old Kevin has a vision impairment. Kevin loves to listen to the books his mom reads to him, and he also enjoys listening to music and singing songs. Right now his favorite book is a textured ABC book. Kevin repeatedly asks his mom to read this book to him because he likes that she guides his finger to the raised letters and he enjoys feeling the different textures. "A is for apple," his mother reads. "Do you feel the bumpy A?" When they finish reading the book, Kevin says, "Now let's sing," and enthusiastically begins singing *The Alphabet Song*.

