

Especially for practitioners working with young children! 

Learning Letters

Alphabet Awareness

Before children can begin to read or write, they need to become familiar with the shape and look of letters. Opportunities to play with letters that appeal to many senses—letters that can be touched and looked at with different textures, colors, and sizes—help build interest and encourage children to experiment with letters and words. Providing your children with a wide variety of alphabet toys helps them learn how letters look and work—an important step toward future reading and writing.

What is the practice?

This practice guide includes some ideas about how to create 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 builds their familiarity, interest, and comfort with the alphabet.



What does the practice look like?

Playing with magnetic alphabet letters, stacking alphabet blocks, squeezing foam letters, or handling oversized letters in smooth, bumpy, rough, and soft textures while singing the alphabet song are all activities that help familiarize children with letters. Sponge painting or stamping with letter cutouts also increases children's awareness of letters. During all of these activities, talk to the children about what they are doing. Respond enthusiastically to their curiosity about the letters and combinations they are making.

How do you do the practice?

Teachers and caregivers can enhance the alphabet awareness of the toddlers in their care in a world of different ways. Supply attractive, developmentally appropriate alphabet toys and encourage the children to explore and experiment with them. Center-based professionals can place alphabet blocks in the blocks center; letter magnets, stamps, and sponges in the art center; alphabet puzzles and beads in the manipulatives center; and letter-shaped cookie cutters or sand molds at the sensory table, for example.

- If you already have some alphabet toys and children play with them regularly, add several new toys or point out new ways for the children to play with them on their own or at circle time.
- Encourage toddlers to actively explore alphabet toys. Let them line up magnetic letters or paint with sponge letters however they choose. It doesn't matter whether they seem to pay attention to the names or sounds of letters yet.
- Comment appreciatively about what the toddlers are doing. For example, if a child uses an alphabet cookie cutter in the sand table, point out that he made an A, and follow his interest about the letter, just as you would with other toys.
- Connect toddlers' interest in the toys to letters in other contexts. If a child shows you an alphabet block with an M, you can point out that it looks the same as a letter on her cubby or on a nearby poster.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Are the children in your care regularly choosing alphabet toys to play with?
- Do children show interest in talking about or experimenting with these toys with adults?
- Do children recognize that the letters on the toys are the same as letters in other contexts, like books or print on the wall?

Take a look at more toddlers learning letters

The Trick Is Texture

Ms. Kim, who teaches toddlers, frequently co-teaches with her center's early intervention specialist, Ms. Isabelle. They are focusing on activities that can promote literacy skills for young children. Ms. Kim notices that many of her toddlers tend to prefer toys that are interesting to touch and that they don't show much interest in the flat alphabet cards she has in the classroom. Ms. Isabelle helps her and the children make a set of textured alphabet letters. The adults cut large letter shapes out of sturdy cardboard. The children glue bits of sandpaper and a variety of textured fabric and wallpaper scraps onto each letter. While they work, Ms. Kim talks to them about the letters they are working on. The children enjoy participating in this project, and the textured letters become favorite classroom materials.

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Find Your Letter!

Thirty-one-month-old Hayden loves playing with Victor, his home visitor. One day Victor brings a collection of rubber stamps and different colored ink pads. Victor sets a big piece of poster board on Hayden's kitchen table, and sets out the box of stamps. "Look, Mom," Hayden says. "He got some letters." "Should we try to stamp something with the letters?" his mom asks, but Hayden is already busy stamping away. He gives Victor and his mom each a letter, and directs them to stamp on the poster board too. "Look, you have H," Victor says to Hayden. "You found your letter!" "What's your letter?" Hayden asks him, and together they search for a V for Victor to use. "What about your mom?" Victor asks. "M for Mom," Hayden's mom laughs, and they each stamp their letters and add designs with their favorite stamps.

Letter Towers

Mr. Mike plays with alphabet blocks alongside a few children in his inclusive class of toddlers. One of the children, Brandon, has low muscle tone and poor trunk control. Mr. Mike positions Brandon with bolsters so he can stay upright successfully and reach for the blocks around him. "Brandon, what are you building?" Mr. Mike asks. "Tower," Brandon answers, as the other children stack the big blocks on top of each other, hoping to knock them down. "Okay, let's try it," Mr. Mike says. He steadies Brandon's hand by holding his wrist as Brandon guides a block onto the stack. "Great!" Mr. Mike says. "And look at the letter on this block. This is a B, like in your name. B for Brandon." Brandon looks at the block and reaches for another one. "This my name?" he asks. "Nope, that one is R, like in Ricky's name," Mr. Mike says, pointing to another child playing nearby. Brandon places the R block atop the tower, and knocks the tower down with a satisfying crash.

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