

Especially for practitioners working with preschoolers! 

Fun With Letters

Alphabet Knowledge

Preschoolers are eager to recognize some letters, especially those in their names. Often they can even point out the letters in an array of contexts. Reinforce these skills by giving children chances to interact with letters that appeal to the senses. Stock your classroom with many different alphabet toys. Make or purchase letter sets with lots of textures, colors, and sizes. Include alphabet toys that make sounds. Try toys that “speak” the name of a letter when a letter-shaped button is pushed. Alphabet toys promote future reading and writing by making the ways letters look and sound part of children’s everyday experiences.

What is the practice?

This practice guide includes ways to use alphabet toys and materials to provide a literacy-rich environment for preschoolers. Relate to students positively and let children be active as they engage with these toys. It will increase their familiarity, interest, and comfort with how letters look and function.



What does the practice look like?

Children can move plastic letters on a magnet board and build with letter blocks. They can solve alphabet puzzles or use stamps and sponge-paint with letters. These activities will help the children in your care become familiar with letters. Talking with adults about what the letters look and sound like strengthens these concepts for preschool students. Point out things that are the same between letters on toys and printed materials such as signs, books, and posters. This helps promote preschool children’s interest and understanding. During free play time, encourage the children in your classroom to play with alphabet toys. Respond enthusiastically to the children’s curiosity about the letters and the things they do with them.

How do you do the practice?

There are many ways teachers can enhance the alphabet awareness of preschool children. Provide them with attractive, developmentally appropriate alphabet toys and encourage 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 choices of alphabet puzzles and beads in the manipulatives center. Add letter-shaped cookie cutters or sand molds to the play 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, support them in finding the letters in their names. Ask them to match letters and point out the differences. For instance, explain, “This block has a red R, but the R is blue on this one.”
- Help older preschoolers begin to use magnetic and other tactile letters to “write” a message and play with words. It is okay if the words are not spelled perfectly. The idea is to show how letters make words you can read. Joining letters can be a less complex task and therefore more immediately rewarding for some children than trying to write.
- Support preschool children’s play with alphabet toys. Make it fun rather than making it too “academic.” The children will continue to want to explore with these letter-learning activities if they are having fun.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Are the children in your class starting to point out 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, walks over to a small group of children. She carries a box of brightly colored magnetic letters and a small magnetic easel. "What are these?" one child asks. "Letters!" a second 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 her preschool students' play. She helps them think about the sounds of the letters and supports their attempts to make words.



Greeting Cards

Mr. Lee provides a small group of children in his preschool class with colored paper and alphabet stamps and stickers. "We're going to make cards with these," he explains. "You can use the stamps and stickers to write a message. You can write to your mom or dad, your friend, or anyone else to whom you want to send a card. 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," a second child says. "Where's the *E*?" The children help each other find letters and create their cards.

Comparing Letter Shapes

In an inclusive class of 4-year-olds, Ms. Sawyer brings a set of alphabet cookie cutters to the table. 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. 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 not the same," Lily answers, pressing her letter into the play dough. "This is how my letter feels."



Sounds of Letters

Alphabet Knowledge

Before preschoolers begin to read or spell, they must learn the letters of the alphabet and the sounds they represent. Learning to pair letters and sounds helps prepare preschool children for later reading.

What is the practice?

You can help preschool students in your class become familiar with letters and their sounds during everyday play and activities. Use books, toys, environmental print, and games to show the link between printed letters and their sounds.

What does the practice look like?

A preschool child may recognize the first letter of his name, "his letter," on a poster. A group of children can use magnetic letters to sound out and form words. A teacher reads an alphabet book at group time. All of these are examples of everyday opportunities that focus preschool children's attention on letters and letter sounds.

How do you do the practice?

Introducing letter names and sounds can happen as part of planned and informal activities during your daily routine.

- Start with your children's special interests. Suppose they love trucks. When sharing a truck book, point out the initial letter of a truck's name and talk about the letter sound. If they notice a new sign in the hallway, talk about the letters and words and what they mean.
- Provide a variety of alphabet toys in each classroom center. Include items like letter shaped rubber stamps, magnetic letters, and alphabet blocks. As the children play with these things, stress and repeat letter sounds. Encourage the children to do the same.
- Alphabet books about topics your preschoolers love can be a source of great interest. Children learn by seeing a letter's shape along with a picture of something that begins with that letter's sound. The children will learn to look at the printed letter and picture while saying and hearing the letter sound.
- Use print throughout the classroom and the children's own writing to surround them with letters. As part of your classroom activities, refer to posters, nameplates on cubbies and tables, children's written "stories," and toy labels. Be sure to point out letters and letter sounds.
- Play sound games with small groups of your preschoolers. Let them take turns matching printed letters with their sounds. They will begin to name different objects that begin with the same letter. Have them try to form letter shapes with their bodies while making the letters' sounds.



How do you know the practice worked?

- Do the children point out letters of the alphabet on environmental print or books?
- Are the children showing more interest in the alphabet or alphabet toys?
- Are the children aware of the sounds of some letters?

Take a look at more fun with letter sounds

Letters, Letters, Everywhere

In Frank's preschool classroom, he and his co-teacher make letters and letter sounds part of every child's daily experience. They have letter blocks in the block center and letter puzzles in the manipulatives corner. There are alphabet books in the library center and letter stencils in the art center. The teachers ask their preschoolers to "sign in" when they arrive at school, helping them learn to identify their names. The children's cubbies and seats at their tables are labeled with their names as well. Frank makes a point to talk to the children daily about the letters in whatever they are seeing. He uses listening games to emphasize sounds: "If your name begins with bbb, you may line up for lunch." All the children in his class have improved in their ability to recognize printed letters and their sounds.



Active Letter Game

Anna's four-year-old students are working hard on learning their letters. She has made up a game they all love to play, especially when they need to burn off excess energy. Anna has each letter of the alphabet cut out of brightly colored foam sheets. She takes a handful of letters and strews them on the grass on the playground. The children line up on the sidewalk. When she calls out a letter name, the children find that letter, and then tell Anna what sound it makes.

I'm Getting the Feel of It

Four-year-old Keeley has a visual impairment. In her inclusive preschool class her teachers work with her to help her learn letter sounds. Along with Braille and textured storybooks, they provide Keeley with lots of opportunities to "feel" raised letters. There are letters made out of materials like playdough, clay, and tiles. When the class looks at letters as a group, Keeley touches her letters and identifies them that way. Other children in the class also benefit from learning with Keeley's letters. Using the sense of touch helps reinforce the shape and "feel" of the letters while the children say their sounds.

