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The Creative Curriculum® *for* Preschool



Volume 3

Literacy



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Letters and Words

Knowledge of letters and words is an important component of literacy, and it involves more than reciting the ABC song or recognizing individual letters. Readers must understand that a letter represents one or more sounds. A more complex level of understanding requires knowing that these symbols can be grouped together to form words and that words have meanings. The idea that written spellings correspond to spoken words is called the **alphabetic principle**. Children's understanding of the alphabetic principle is a predictor of future reading success.

Children demonstrate their understanding of the concept of a word when they match each spoken word to a printed word. You might notice children pretending to read and touching each word on the page as they recite a narrative. These children understand the concept of a word, and they realize that readers attend particularly to printed words rather than pictures.

Teachers help children learn specific skills related to letters and words. Children learn to

- recognize and name letters
- recognize beginning letters in familiar words, especially in their own names
- relate some letters to the sounds they represent
- match spoken words with written words, one-to-one

Most children learn to recite the alphabet at a young age by singing the ABC song. Then they learn the shapes of the letters made familiar by the song. In other words, they recognize the letters of the alphabet. Learning letter names helps children learn some of the sounds that letters represent. For example, if a child knows the name of the letter *e*, he also knows the long sound of *e*. Once children gain confidence in their ability to recognize letters, they begin to attend to their sounds. Then they group the letters together to write words, ordering the letters in the way they think the sounds are ordered.

Children often recognize the letters in their own names first, because these are the letters of the words that are most important to them. Including activities with children's own names is an excellent way to make letters and words meaningful. After children learn the letters in their own names, they often learn the letters of other words that are significant to them, such as the names of family members and pets.

As children write, teachers can observe their understanding of letters and words. In their early writing attempts, children often use a single letter to represent a word, such as *S* for *soup*. This demonstrates their understanding of beginning sounds. Other children may write letters that represent beginning and ending sounds, such as *LV* for *love*. As their phonological awareness becomes more refined, they hear more sounds in words, and their invented spellings become more accurate and conventional. You will also notice their use of spaces between letters, groups of letters, and words, signifying an understanding of the concept of a word.

If you are teaching English-language learners, be aware that some letters in their home languages may represent the same sounds in English and other letters may not. For example, while vowels look the same in Spanish (*a, e, i, o, u*), they are named differently and correspond to different sounds. Knowing this, teachers help children learn to say and understand words in English before expecting them to be able to distinguish the sounds accurately or use invented spelling (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000).

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