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**References**

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**Why Young Children Need Alphabet Books**

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**For early reading development, don't underestimate the power of those ABC's.**

"A-B-C-D-E-F-G," sang Mrs. Mikaelian's prekindergarten class during the end-of-the-year songfest sponsored by her childcare center. Preparing the program was an opportunity for children to share their knowledge with parents. To ensure child-centered participation, Mrs. Mikaelian gave her youngsters a choice about the three songs they would sing. Secretly, she rejoiced when one of the songs they selected was "The Alphabet Song."

She knew that her children's parents would beam with pride, and she recognized that the program would facilitate an opportunity to show off the alphabet books the children had made.

Among the earliest books published for children in the United States--as early as the 1600s--are alphabet books. Other commercial items, such as sneakers, cereals, soups, fabric for clothing and curtains, placemats, puzzles, magnetic letters, and alphabet blocks and toys are products designed to introduce preschoolers to alphabetic sequence as early as they start talking. Schools and child-care centers reinforce alphabet knowledge by placing alphabet books in the book center, displaying alphabet charts around the room, emphasizing children's names by posting them on cubbies, and encouraging children to write. Teachers sing and recite the alphabet and ask children to recognize and name alphabet letters in games and classroom rituals.

Is all of this emphasis on learning the alphabet important for children's literacy development? Yes, say researchers. Parents who use alphabet books are the best teachers of alphabetic knowledge.

Smolkin and Yaden (1992) proposed that children learn important concepts about print through the use of alphabet books. Their longitudinal study suggested that the literacy knowledge children acquire includes: understanding the differences between a letter and a word; awareness of specific features of various letters; recognizing differences between numbers and letters; and grasping initial information about the sound/symbol relationship.

### **Unlocking the Symbols of Language**

Alphabet books encourage literacy development for five simple reasons. First, alphabet books unlock the symbols of the language for young children. At about age two, children enter the Preoperational Stage (as defined by Piaget); during this period, they notice the print around them (often referred to as "environmental print"). Letters and words appear everywhere--in books and newspapers, on street signs and commercial establishments, on television and the computer, on clothing and manufacturing labels, on food products and in writing. Children show evidence that symbols are meaningful to them when they pick up a crayon, marker, or pencil and begin to scribble. They attempt to make sense of the

print they observe. Many recognize familiar signs in their trips around town or to a nearby mall. By the completion of the Preoperational Stage, at age seven, children are proficient with ABC knowledge and usually are reading (Neuman, Copple, and Bredekamp 2000; Owocki 2001; Schickedanz 1999).

### **Connecting Knowledge**

A second way that alphabet books encourage literacy development is that they assist children's knowledge of print by connecting knowledge to other sources. Parents and educators alike expect young children to learn the alphabet. Once children are familiar with the alphabet, their parents and teachers offer them connections by acknowledging their attempts to name letters and words. A parent might say, "Yes, Marianne, your name does start like McDonald's." Or a caregiver may mention that the word puppy starts like Pierre's name or Penny's.

Teachers can challenge individual children to find words in the room that begin as their own names do. Baptiste could name book, bunny, baby, box, or ball by looking at a set of flashcards, while Zelda might use posted words in the classroom to find her initial alphabet letter. A game of this nature works well with

older preschoolers who have had numerous experiences with alphabet books. Language symbols are meaningful when children have had direct connection with them.

### **Book Usage**

Like all books, alphabet books provide book usage knowledge to young children. This is a third way that alphabet books encourage literacy development. Discovering that books have a cover, a back, a title page and title, and individual pages with pictures (and alphabet letters) on them is the precursor to reading and writing. In the beginning, children pore over the pages, naming every picture they see. Adults share information about authors, names of unfamiliar pictures and, of course, the name of the alphabet letter portrayed. Occasionally, children misname pictured objects, and adults correct misconceptions when they occur. When parents and caregivers share books with children, they also demonstrate a model of caring for books. Table 1 lists alphabet books that are prepared for preschool children.

### **Enjoyment**

The fourth reason alphabet books are beneficial

for children is that they complement children's enjoyment of books. The majority of children love books from the time their parents hold them on their laps and read to them. Parents and caregivers observe children, from infancy throughout the preschool years, spending hours scrutinizing pages in books. Alphabet books, like picture books, are unique because children do not need to know the story or plot. Pleasure in alphabet book reading is in naming the pictures and letters. Alphabet books also allow readers to ask children what letters are on the pages and what pictures go with each letter. Sharing an alphabet book with an individual child is an exceptional assessment strategy for adults to evaluate the child's print knowledge. Children's understanding of sound/symbol relationships is best when presented through parent/child interactions with alphabet books (Otto 2002).

### **Independent Reading and Writing**

Finally, alphabet books aid early readers in becoming independent readers and writers. See Table 2 for alphabet books appropriate for emergent and beginning readers. As children begin reading, reviewing alphabet letters solidifies the knowledge

they have about print symbols. If concepts are unclear to children, using alphabet books clarifies information children need to become proficient with the reading process. As children enter the primary years, usually during second grade, dictionary skills become essential to educational endeavors. Alphabet books reinforce skills children acquire about book content and assist them in finding resources they need for other curriculum areas (Moberg 2002)

Alphabet books are an important and historical genre in children's literature. If current offerings are any indication, their availability will continue for years to come.

### **Ideas in Practice**

Here are suggestions for supporting alphabet book use with children:

- \* Add alphabet books to the book center or other center, as appropriate. An animal ABC book, for example, is suitable for the science center.
- \* Share alphabet books with individuals or small groups of children.
- \* Prepare lists of alphabet books for parents to purchase for home use.

- \* Check out alphabet books from the school or local library for parents to borrow for short periods of time.

- \* Search the Internet for alphabet resources.

- \* Ask children to contribute pictures or photographs to classdeveloped posters. Label a group collage with an individual alphabet letter

- \* After a class study, suggest to children that they organize their own alphabet book. If a study has emerged about living things, an ABC book demonstrating children's understanding of the topic would assist in consolidating what they are learning, as well as provide art opportunities for the class to illustrate their collective knowledge base.

Working with young children means that educators must consciously plan to use alphabet books with their groups. Mrs. Mikaelian intentionally planned to introduce knowledge of the alphabet to her four-year-olds. Her efforts demonstrated a successful plan of action in her prekindergarten classroom.

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ADDED MATERIAL

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Sara Weiss is the inclusion teacher for third-and fourth-grade students at Brenham Elementary School in Brenham, Texas. Formerly, she was an early learning center teacher and worked with students on observation and hands-on training in preschool classrooms.

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## **Table 2. Alphabet Books for Emergent and Beginning Readers**

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