

Alphabet knowledge

An important part of awareness of print is recognizing and being able to name the letters of the alphabet, so it helps to teach children to recite the alphabet as soon as they're able to do so. The easiest way to do this is through an alphabet song, linked to an alphabet chart. Demonstrate the song, pointing to the letters on the chart and encouraging children to join in until you can hand over the singing to them. Later, you can try stopping as you sing and letting children fill in the missing letter as you point to it. Refer to the letters by their alphabet names (ay, bee, cee) – at this stage, alphabet knowledge has nothing to do with phonics, so this is not a case of /k/ for cat.

Familiarization with the alphabet ensures that children know what *letters* are and that there are a limited number of them (without this knowledge, learning to read could seem an impossibly daunting task). If children are interested – especially in the letters of their own names – they may want to play with the shapes, decorating letters, making prints or Plasticine letter shapes and so on. Most children are also keen to write their name and, if so, should be helped to do so, but that's as far as *writing* letters should go in the early stages. Long-term success in writing requires adequate fine motor control, hand-eye coordination and control of the muscles of the fingers; starting too early can do more harm than good (see Chapter 7).

The more children play with the letters before learning about reading and writing begins in earnest, the more confident and competent they'll be when they begin phonics and, eventually, handwriting.



Making alphabet letters from play dough familiarizes children with their shapes and names.

Dough alphabet

You will need lots of play dough, some alphabet shapes for cutting and a laminated alphabet strip. As you observe the children playing with the shapes you will be able to learn a great deal about their awareness of print. Some of the children may want to make their names. Encourage those who are ready to match the letters they are making to the alphabet strip. Keep a range of alphabet books nearby so that the children can link their experiences, and sing the alphabet song as you work to encourage yet more links.

Alphabet clothesline

You will need an alphabet frieze, some card, a clothesline and some pegs. Cut up the alphabet frieze, stick the letters onto card and laminate them. You could have upper case letters on one side and lower case letters on the other. This way, children can use the frieze to make their names, sequence letters and make up simple slogans. The added bonus of having laminated cards is that they can be used outside.

Make your own alphabet book

The children are the stars of this book, so they will be motivated to look at it closely. Have the children collect things that begin with *A* and *B* and *C*, and so on. The children who have names beginning with *A* then have their photograph taken with the collection they have made, and so on through the alphabet. If you have a class mascot or puppet, include it in the photographs as this adds even more engagement to the process. This book can then be added to the book corner and the children encouraged to take it home. Since it features them and all their friends, there will be plenty of interest.

Alphabet treasure hunt

You will need wooden or plastic letters and plenty of sand or compost in which to bury the letters. The children could be set the challenge of finding the letters of their name. If they are not developmentally ready to do this, they will just enjoy hunting for the letters and will increase their awareness of the alphabet.

The alphabet thief

You will need wooden, plastic or magnetic letters.

Lay the letters out in sequence with gaps for where the missing letters should be. Tell the children that someone or something has removed the letters and that an urgent search is required. Before doing this you will, of course, have hidden the missing letters around the setting. This is a great activity for outside as the letters can be tied to the branches of trees and hidden under stones. Hold a celebration when all the letters have been recovered.

Food labels alphabet

For this activity, you will need to get the children to collect as many food labels as they can. You will also need a scrapbook.

Talk with the children about which food names begin with which letter and begin to compile the scrapbook. Don't worry too much if you can't find a label for every letter.