

Teaching and Practicing Alphabet Letters
Research Based Guidance
from
Literacy Development in the Early Years
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How to Introduce Alphabet Letters

Systematic and explicit teaching of the alphabet is necessary. The most recent recommended practice is teaching a letter a day – or two to three letters each week. This way the alphabet is introduced quickly and you can go back and review each letter again. Specific research studies have shown that the children in the lesson-of-the-day group increased significantly in their letter recognition compared to teaching the letter-of-the-week group. The growth was attributed to the constant review of the letters throughout the year after letters were initially introduced.

Ultimately our goal for letter learning is four-fold:

1. Name the letter in upper-case and lower-case form.
2. Say the most common sound the letter makes (other sounds will be learned later – like g for girl now and g for giraffe later).
3. Find the letter in a book or story.
4. *Generate words from their own vocabularies that start with the sound. (This will be difficult for children who have limited vocabulary; I would not consider this to be essential for mastery in the early stages of alphabet introduction.)*

It is recommended that teachers help children identify the letters in their own names first. This is probably the most effective way to begin teaching the alphabet. We know that teaching familiar letters first and those that have a sound that sounds like the letter-name are learned more quickly. Please reference the following chart for examples of which letters are most easily taught and in what order. Letters that are more difficult to learn may need more time spent on teaching them. Different researchers suggest different orders to teaching letters. Some propose beginning with the most frequently used letters first, whereas others propose that children learn the letters of their name first or letters in the thematic approach being used in the classroom.

The most important point is that explicit teaching is needed for letter identification. The teacher explains to the children that they will be learning to name, say, sound, and write both upper and lowercase letters because learning letters helps them to read and write. The teacher writes an uppercase letter on the board and identifies the letter saying what it is; the class responds together naming the letter. Then the teacher writes the lowercase letter following the same process. Following the explicit instruction, the teacher creates experiences that allow children to explore letters explicitly, spontaneously, and in meaningful contexts. There are multiple items and activities for practicing the alphabet through manipulation and hands-on experiences using:

- Alphabet puzzles

- Magnetic upper and lowercase letters
- Sets of wooden upper and lowercase letters
- Tactile letters made of sandpaper or other textures
- Alphabet board games
- Felt letters and felt boards
- Letter stencils
- Alphabet flashcards
- Alphabet charts posted at the children's eye level
- A large supply of alphabets books
- Taped songs or poems about the alphabet
- Uppercase letters of the child's first name in a baggie
- Uppercase letters of the child's last name in a baggie
- Lowercase letters of the child's first and last names in baggies as they have learned those letters
- Chalk and chalk board to write letters
- Markers and a whiteboard to make letters
- Electronic whiteboards for letter games
- Keyboard letters on the computer
- Software for computer alphabet games
- Finger-paint letters
- Painted letters on an easel
- Clay for shaping letters
- Alphabet soup, alphabet cookies, and alphabet pretzels
- Shaped letters with fingers
- Shaped letters with the body
- Create labels throughout the classrooms for ongoing reference

With general practice with such activities and using similar activities in practice centers, the majority of children will readily learn the alphabet. If more explicit instruction is needed to help struggling students, it should be provided one-on-one or in small groups. Students should be exposed to letters of the alphabet on a daily basis and in as many different settings as possible.

Practicing the Alphabet: As Many Doses as They Need!

Remember that children enter school with various stages of readiness; some children will need repetitious experiences before they achieve mastery of the individual letters of the alphabet. We need to be patient and try different practice strategies until we find the strategy that works for each child.

Assessing Mastery of the Alphabet

When assessing mastery of alphabet letters some ways to assess mastery are to:

- Identify the first letter in their own names
- Identify all letters in their own names
- Find letters for their names in a random collection

- Of letters identify letters that are not in their names
- Match letters in their names with letters in the names of classmates
- Identify letters in sequence on ineffable
- Chart or a word wall Group words that start with the same letter
- Indicate letters
- From books or stories that they know Match uppercase letters to lowercase
- Sequence uppercase K car
- Cards and identify them by name
- sequence flow work is letter cards and identify them by name

