

Discovering letters and sounds

Christine Topfer



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Contents

ii

About the author

1

Introduction

3

Phonemic awareness

10

Making connections between letters and sounds

15

Learning about writing

18

Developing understanding about writing

21

Conclusion

22

References and further reading



About the author

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Introduction

This book is written for adults working with young children, aged 3–6 years, in a learning environment such as child care, preschool and the first years of school. It aims to provide information about how young children learn the language of their culture and how adults can help them. It focuses on developing children's understanding about letters and sounds, because this knowledge is particularly important for them to become effective readers and writers.



Children learn language from birth. They listen to the sounds around them and learn to identify familiar sounds in their lives, such as the voices of special people. As they hear family members and carers singing and talking to them, they begin to associate each voice with an owner, and the tone of each communication with significant events such as bath time or feeding. Babies respond to these interactions with gurgles and babbling which imitate the sounds and intonation of the language of their culture.

This early learning is the beginning of a child's awareness of sound and one of the foundation blocks for communication through speaking, listening, reading and writing.

'Children learn language from birth. They listen to the sounds around them and learn to identify familiar sounds in their lives, such as the voices of special people.'



Learning about communication

Communication varies according to its purpose and context. It is influenced by social and cultural experiences, and changes as children develop. For example, a newborn baby will cry to get attention, whereas an older child, who has learned to use language, will use words appropriate to their culture to have their needs fulfilled.

Communication comes in many forms:

- speech and gestures
- sound and visual images in films
- words and pictures in printed materials
- electronic communication.

'Communication varies according to its purpose and context. It is influenced by social and cultural experiences, and changes as children develop.'

To make sense of communication around them, children need to draw on three sources of information:

- Meaning – knowledge of words, images and symbols and what they mean in the world
- Grammar – knowledge of how our language is structured
- Letter–sound relationships – knowledge of letters and sounds.

To be able to communicate effectively through writing, images and symbols, children need to learn how the sounds they hear relate to letters they see on the page.

There are two important skills related to letters and sounds:

- phonemic awareness – tuning the ear to sounds
 - rhyme
 - syllables and rhythm
 - alliteration and phonemes (see p. 8)
- alphabetic code – making connections between letters and sounds.

This book explains how adults working with young children can facilitate this learning in fun ways. It describes a range of activities and contexts in which these skills can be developed as young children become readers and, more specifically, writers.

Phonemic awareness



Phonemic awareness has been recognised recently as an important skill for learning to read and write. It is basically about tuning a child's ear to their culture's language. There is evidence that providing activities which raise children's sensitivity to sounds used in spoken language may prevent the difficulty some children experience in writing and spelling (Snowball & Bolton, 1999).

Phonemic awareness involves hearing sounds in spoken language.

There are many aspects of phonemic awareness:

- ➔ listening for patterns in words that sound the same
- ➔ listening for 'chunks' of sounds in words (syllables)
- ➔ listening for alliterations (words that start with the same sound), for example: 'slimy, slippery, slithery snake'
- ➔ hearing and playing with individual sounds in words.

The last is the most difficult aspect. Very young children should not be expected to be able to identify individual sounds in words until they have had extensive practice in listening for rhyme, syllables and alliteration.

'There is evidence that providing activities which raise children's sensitivity to sounds used in spoken language may prevent the difficulty some children experience in writing and spelling (Snowball & Bolton, 1999).'



‘Playing with rhymes helps children learn about sounds. It is an important part of tuning a child’s ear to the rhythm and sound patterns of language.’



Rhymes build phonemic awareness

Adults interacting with young children instinctively sing songs, jingles and rhymes with them: *‘Round and round the garden, like a teddy bear ...’* Rhymes are naturally appealing to young children.

Playing with rhymes helps children learn about sounds. It is an important part of tuning a child’s ear to the rhythm and sound patterns of language. Singing and saying rhymes in a family’s first language also values that child’s culture and builds on the knowledge of language they gain at home and in their community.

Rhyme also draws children’s attention to the sounds of oral language and this encourages children to experiment and make up their own rhymes.

Parents and carers can help very young children (two- and three-year-olds) to develop phonemic awareness by singing rhymes at every opportunity—for example, while changing a baby’s nappy or dressing a child—and making ones up. Look for rhymes containing people’s names and substitute the names of children in your care. For example:

*‘Jenny, Jenny in the tub
Mother forgets to put in the plug
Goodness, gracious bless my soul
There goes Jenny down the hole!’*
(Factor, 2001).

Sing the rhyme lots of times, using a different name each time, and clap the rhythm as it is sung. Repeat the rhyme, clapping each of the rhyming words.

Activities for older children

Adults in childcare centres, at home or teaching the first years of school can assist the development of older children (four- and five-year-olds) through activities such as:

- writing jingles or rhymes on a large chart, so that children can see the connection between sounds and letters as they enjoy the rhyme
- inviting children to act out rhymes
- encouraging parents to share rhymes from their first language with their children
- asking parents to stay and share a rhyme or jingle from their culture with all children at the service, and displaying it on a chart so that a variety of cultures and languages can be celebrated.

Enjoy rhyming stories together such as Dr Seuss stories (like *The cat in the hat*) or books by Lynley Dodd which use alliteration, rhythm and rhyme. For example:

*'Pittery pattery,
skittery scattery,
ZIP
round the corner
came Zachary Quack.'*
(Dodd, 2001).

Talk about the context of a book, re-reading it and asking the children why they enjoy the sound so much. Point out that the author made it 'fun to say' by including lots of rhyme—that is by using lots of words which end with the same sound.



After several readings children will be very familiar with the book: encourage them to chime in with the rhyming words such as 'pittery', 'pattery'. Older children may be able to make up other rhyming words, such as 'bittery' and 'battery'. Some of these will be nonsense words, adding to the fun of the activity. These rhyming words could be used to make a new book, combining the original story with the new rhymes.

**'Talk about the context of a book,
re-reading it and asking the children
why they enjoy the sound so much.'**

Learning to create rhymes

When children first become aware of rhyme they are excited to hear and notice rhyming words. The next stage is to help them create their own rhymes, using the same principles.

Activities to help children to generate rhyming words

Body parts

Young children like to move around and are very interested in their bodies—make up a game involving children pointing to different body parts and finding rhyming words.

For example, start with words that rhyme with either 'head' or 'feet' and ask children to point to the body part that rhymes with 'shed'. Children have to think whether a word rhymes with 'head' or 'feet', and to be correct, they would point to their head.

Other words include:

- ➔ Head – bread, red, said, shed, bed.
- ➔ Feet – meet, greet, heat, seat, sheet.

Vary the activity by focusing on two other body parts, such as nose and knee.

- ➔ Nose – hose, rose, goes, mows, close.
- ➔ Knee – bee, key, flee, see, we, tree.



Finish the rhyme

Make up a sentence and ask children to provide the rhyming word that completes it.

A mouse that lives in a ____.

A frog that sits on a ____.

A fish that lives in a ____.

The cat is sitting on the ____.

Bo Peep has lost her ____.

Children may need to be told the initial letter of the word as a prompt. This also helps children to understand that two words rhyme when their ends sound the same.

Identifying syllables

Syllables are the large 'chunks' of sound that form the rhythm of a word. These chunks are easier to identify than single sounds. It is important to help children to hear the chunks of sound in familiar words, such as 'su-per-mar-ket'.



'Syllables are the large "chunks" of sound that form the rhythm of a word.'

Syllable games

Name game

Encourage children to clap the chunks or rhythm of their names. For example:

x xx	x x	x
Em-i-ly	Pe-ter	John

Echo game

Say and clap a child's name, then ask them to repeat it and clap the rhythm. Remember, at first, it is easier for children to clap words with one or two syllables.

Pattern recognition

Once children are able to clap their name, try clapping the pattern of a name and see if they can recognise their name by the rhythm.

Use this activity as a way to move children from a group activity to other parts of the room: *'When you hear the claps that belong to your name, you can go and get your lunch.'*

Make sure children also have the opportunity to put words back together from their syllable parts. For example, as children move off to other activities, say their name in syllables ('Al-i-son'), then ask them to say their names in the usual way before they leave for the activity.

Mystery bag

Collect different objects, such as small toys, and place them in a bag. Ask each child to put their hand into the bag and select an object. As they remove the object ask them to say its name and then see if they can repeat the word, saying it slowly as they break it into syllables. Other children can help by clapping the word.

Learning about alliteration

It is important for children to begin to identify the individual sounds (phonemes) in words, so they can use this skill when sounding out words in writing and reading.

The first sound in a word is usually the easiest for a child to identify. You can help tune young children's ears to the first sounds by playing games which ask them to identify words that start with the same sound.

Alphabet party

Ask children to bring foods that match the first sound in their name.

Jayden brings jelly.

Andrew brings apples.

Brianna brings bananas.



'The first sound in a word is usually the easiest for a child to identify. You can help tune young children's ears to the first sounds by playing games which ask them to identify words that start with the same sound.'

Alliteration book

Using the mystery bag described previously, ask children to think of words that describe the object they select and start with the same sound:

Brown bear.

Shiny shoes.

Slimy snail.

Using a digital camera, children can take photos of the objects and use PowerPoint to create a book with the words as captions.

This activity can be extended by getting children to think of actions the object can do, which start with the same letter:

Brown bears bouncing.

Shiny shoes shuffling.

Slimy snail sliding.

These activities produce wonderful books to read and share, particularly if PowerPoint is on a computer accessible to everyone at a service.



Games with songs and rhymes

Sometimes the tune of well-known songs can be used with lyrics about the first and last sounds in words.

For example, sing the following words to the tune of 'Old MacDonald had a farm':

*What's the sound that starts these words:
Sam and sun and sock?*

(Wait for a response from children.)

*/s/ is the sound that starts these words:
Sam and sun and sock.*

*With an /s/ /s/ here and an /s/ /s/ there,
here an /s/, there an /s/, everywhere an /s/ /s/.*

*/s/ is the sound that starts these words:
Sam and sun and sock.*

Developing phonemic awareness is all about tuning the ear to the sounds of language: it's about hearing sounds in *spoken* language. It is not focused on the letters that represent sounds in the written form. It is important to ask children 'What sound can you hear?'

As a child's ear becomes attuned to language and adults read lots of stories with them, pointing to the words on a page, children begin to notice which letters represent sounds communicated orally.

'Developing phonemic awareness is all about tuning the ear to the sounds of language: it's about hearing sounds in spoken language.'



Making connections between letters and sounds

The relationship between sounds and letters is often referred to as 'the alphabetic code' or 'alphabetic principle'. Learning which spoken sounds are represented by which letters in writing is particularly complicated in English. This is because there is no simple one-to-one relationship between a sound and the letter/s used to represent it. We have the /ow/ sound, for example, in 'owl', but the same sound is represented by the letters 'ou' in the word 'out'.

As children become more familiar with print and the sounds of language, we can draw their attention to the small words and letters that make up a word. Through seeing print in the environment, and having books shared with them, children begin to learn what particular letters and words look like.

Often young children notice words with the same letters as their name when they see them in the environment, or on printed materials at home. Children need lots of opportunities to explore print in a variety of forms, such as in books, magazines, written rhymes, invitations, signs, posters, catalogues, cards, etc.

Reading aloud connects sounds and letters

Reading to young children is an important and enjoyable way for children to learn language.

Reading aloud as part of your daily routine helps children to:

- ➔ hear language
- ➔ discover the way language works
- ➔ learn about the world
- ➔ develop their imagination
- ➔ become familiar with letters and sounds.

**'Reading to young
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children to learn language.'**



Fun reading activities

Involve children as partners in reading, encouraging them to join in, and read the bits they enjoy and remember, over and over again.

Ask children to pay attention to the first sound and the letter that represents it. For example, in *Little Pink Pig*:

*'OINK, OINK! cried Little Pink Pig's mother.
"Where are you, Little Pink Pig?"
but Little Pink Pig couldn't hear her.'*
(Hutchins, 1994).

Ask children to listen for the /p/ sound each time you read *Little Pink Pig* together.

Choose another familiar book, such as *Clippety-clop*, and listen for other words which start with the /p/ sound:

*'So the little old woman pulled and pulled:
"eeeeeee.....AHH!"
And the little old man pushed and shoved
"oooooooo.....AHH!"'*
(Allen, 1994).

As you read, move your finger along the print so children can connect sounds with the words on the page. Listen for words that start with the /p/ sound—such as 'pulled' or 'pushed'—and talk about how 'pink' and 'pig' start with the same letter and sound as 'pulled' and 'pushed'. These conversations help children understand the relationship between the letter 'p' and the sound /p/.

Provide toys or puppets that are like characters in books, and encourage children to use them to play out stories and enjoy the language and sounds.



'Provide toys or puppets that are like characters in books, and encourage children to use them to play out stories and enjoy the language and sounds.'

Books provide a useful context for children to explore the idea that most letters represent more than one sound. For example, after reading a story about the gingerbread man, ask children:

- What sound do you hear at the beginning of the word 'gingerbread'?
- Which letter is at the beginning of the word?
- Can you find another word that starts with the letter 'g'? (They might reply that Gary's name starts with 'g').
- What sound can you hear at the beginning of Gary?
- What have we discovered?

Ask children to find other words that start with the letter 'g' to see if they confirm their discovery.

Learning how print works

There is print everywhere—signs and words are all around us.

- Draw children's attention to signs in the environment and help them to consider why the sign, word or symbol is there.
- Fill the room with useful print such as signs, instructions, labels or captions for pictures of children's activities.
- Read food labels and recipes used to make snacks or meals, talking about letters, words and the messages they communicate.



Learning more about letters

As children grow older and are approaching school age, some will have had a lot of experience of sounds, letters, words, books and language games; others may not. You will need to determine a child's current knowledge, in order to support them appropriately as they begin to concentrate on the English language alphabet and learn to write their own messages.



'A child's name is very special and intriguing to them as it is one of the first words they learn to recognise, so is a great tool for learning about letters and sounds.'

Ways to build children's alphabet knowledge

Alphabet books

Share alphabet books with children; discuss the pictures and words, so children become familiar with the letters and the order they occur in the alphabet.

Ask children to bring in alphabet books to share, including books in their home language that their family own or could make. A great alphabet book to read is *My first ABC* by Pamela Allen (2006). Pamela uses bold, energetic illustrations of the characters from her stories for each letter of the alphabet.

Make a photo story or movie of children doing things, such as:

- ➔ David is jumping for the letter 'Jj'
- ➔ Anna is smiling for the letter 'Ss'.

Help children to make a big alphabet book from everyday print they are familiar with, such as:

- ➔ photos of familiar signs, places and people— 'b' for bus stop or 's' for stop sign
- ➔ packaging from favourite foods— 'c' for cornflakes
- ➔ words from catalogues and other print items—'t' for Target.

Families can join in by providing pictures and photos.

Write the upper and lower case version of each letter at the top of each page of the alphabet book. Read these books at group time and keep it in a place where children can revisit it regularly.



Playing with names

A child's name is very special and intriguing to them as it is one of the first words they learn to recognise, so is a great tool for learning about letters and sounds.

Make a card for everyone, with a name and a photo. Place all the cards on a table. As children arrive at the centre they can find their name and put their card onto a board. When children are familiar with this routine they can be encouraged to put their name next to another name that starts with the same letter, or has the same number of letters.

Take this activity further during group time by choosing one name each day. Write it in large letters on to card using uppercase for the first letter and lowercase for the remaining ones, then cut the card into individual letters:

R o w a n



Ask for a volunteer to help assemble the letters back together as the name is clapped and chanted. Count the letters and talk about them.

My name

Children can be helped to remember the letters of their name by linking them with things that are familiar.

Make connections with familiar items found at home, in the garden or at the shops—or with names of family, friends, pets, streets and characters.

Cam might make the following connections:

- ➔ Cc – Cam and Cornwall Street
- ➔ Aa – Adam and Adelaide
- ➔ Mm – mum and McDonald's.

Include photos and everyday texts that are associated with each letter. Ask parents to ensure that everyone contributes to the collection, and stress the importance of talking about letters and sounds at home.

Supporting knowledge of letters

Young children love to play with things that give them a tactile experience. This interest can be used to learn about letter shapes through:

- ➔ writing letters in the sand, using a stick
- ➔ using a finger to write in shaving cream or paint
- ➔ painting letters and words, using brushes and small buckets of water
- ➔ playing with magnetic letters kept on a fridge or metal surface
- ➔ exploring letter shapes with clay, plasticine or playdough
- ➔ writing with a glue stick and then sprinkling on glitter to reveal the writing
- ➔ making shapes with bodies
- ➔ writing letters on a path with chalk
- ➔ writing with markers on a white board.

Drawing, scribbling and experimenting with letters helps lead children to writing.

Learning about writing

Messages can be sent from one person to another in many different ways. As young children experiment with creating messages they learn about the sounds, letters and symbols that make up their language. When attempting to write, children have to break a stream of spoken words into groups of sounds in order to record them as letters.

Children learn about writing by:

- watching other people using writing for everyday purposes, such as making lists, writing on cards, or sending a text message
- joining in written communication—writing a note to send to another room in the centre or making a sign to go with a child’s construction
- having a go at writing, either on paper or screen.

‘When attempting to write, children have to break a stream of spoken words into groups of sounds in order to record them as letters.’



Write messages in front of children so they can learn that:

- spoken words can be recorded using letters
- written words can be read by others
- the sounds we hear can be represented by a letter, or letters
- letters are written by starting at the top of each letter and moving the pen or pencil across and then down the page
- words are written in a left to right direction on the page
- there are lots of things we can use to help us when writing, such as names on a child’s locker or on a wall.

Creating a message with young writers gives them the confidence to have a go themselves. When writing with a child, talk as you write, showing how spoken words can be represented by letters. Talk about the letters you use, the beginning of the word, the end of the word and the middle of the word. For example:

'I am going to write a thank-you note to Jack's mum for helping at the working bee. How should I start the note?'

Accept children's responses and make a decision about the first sentence. Say the words slowly as you write them.

Ask: *'What sound can you hear at the beginning of the word? Does anyone know which letters I use to write that sound?'*

Continue saying the words as you write, re-reading to check that the message makes sense. Point to the words as you read the message.

Giving children daily opportunities to have a go at writing, and to talk about their drawing and writing with an adult, lets them know their learning is important and builds children's knowledge about how letters work together to make a message.



A print-rich learning environment

When setting up spaces for play and imagination, encourage children to help you find things to include that encourage writing.

You could include reading and writing materials in play contexts such as:

- ➔ post office – a mail box, paper, envelopes, stamps, cards, pens and forms
- ➔ doctor's surgery – computer, appointment book, prescriptions, telephone message pad, pens, pencils and magazines
- ➔ café – menu, order pad, pen and phone book
- ➔ shop – labels, prices, signs, food packages and catalogues.

Give children easy access to lots of things to use to experiment with drawing and writing:

- ➔ paper (lined, blank, old envelopes, cards and wrapping paper)
- ➔ order forms, catalogues, old diaries and calendars
- ➔ pencils, pens, crayons, chalk, markers and paint
- ➔ whiteboards
- ➔ computers
- ➔ erasers, rulers, sticky tape and stapler.

Encourage children to make useful and informative signs to go with their constructions they build; for example: 'Please do not touch', 'Entrance', 'Get your ticket here' or 'No parking'.

When children have an audience for their writing, they learn that their efforts are valued. Displaying children's writing, from their earliest attempts, invites others to celebrate their own efforts and makes it clear that there are important links between writing and reading.

Try displaying children's writing:

- ➔ on boards, cupboards, fridges
- ➔ next to their artwork or constructions
- ➔ in newsletters or letters to friends
- ➔ in PowerPoint presentations
- ➔ as signs
- ➔ in other places where the writing will have meaning and purpose.



'When children have an audience for their writing, they learn that their efforts are valued.'

Developing understanding about writing

Watching and listening to children experiment with writing informs adults about what children know, what they are beginning to understand, and what they are ready to learn next.

One of the reasons we do not expect young children to write accurately from the beginning is that children move through phases of development in their ability to write words. These phases are the same for all children learning alphabetic script. Several phases have been identified (Gentry & Gillet, 1993; Routman, 1994) ranging from a child's early attempts at making marks on a page, through to children being able to independently and accurately spell words in their writing.

'Watching and listening to children experiment with writing informs adults about what children know, what they are beginning to understand, and what they are ready to learn next.'



The developmental phases are described in different ways, but the key changes in understanding include:

- ➔ scribbling
- ➔ letter-like symbols
- ➔ use of some letters to represent certain sounds in words
- ➔ use of common visual patterns
- ➔ use of common meaning patterns
- ➔ conventional spelling.

The phases of spelling development have been described as follows:

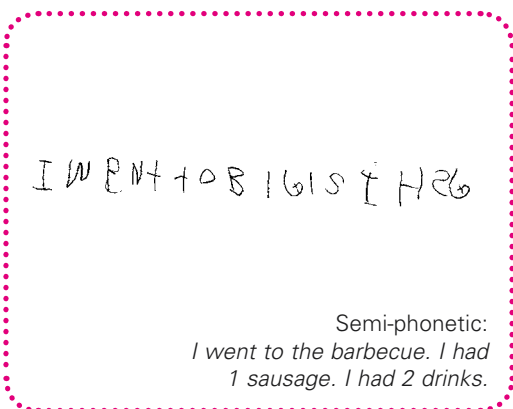
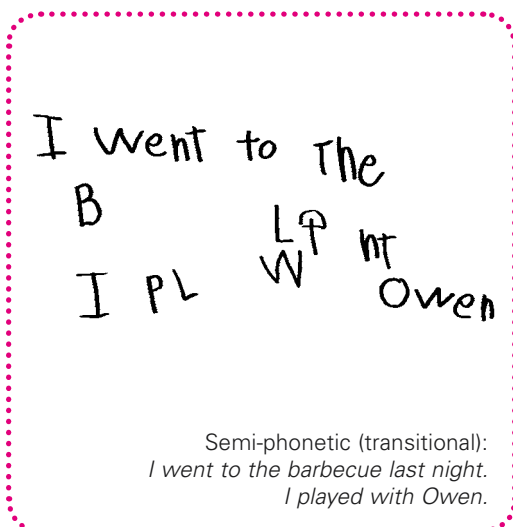
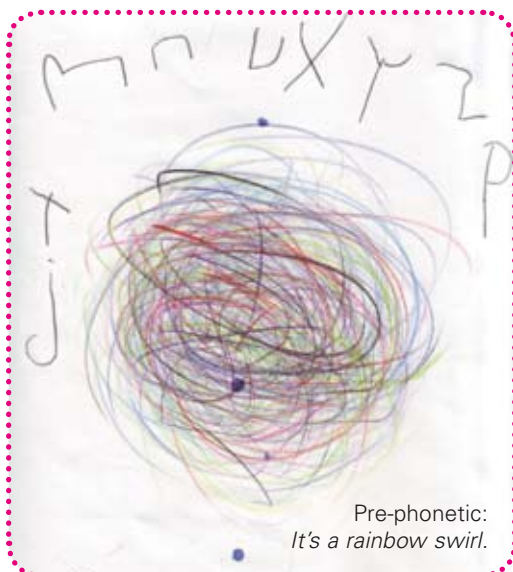
Pre-phonetic phase

In this phase, children's writing ranges from looking like scribbles or symbols resembling letters to putting letters in an apparently random way on the page. This random lettering is often referred to as 'writing using letter strings'.

'As children begin to understand that sounds can be represented by letters, they rely heavily on the sounds they hear to write words.'

Semi-phonetic phase

In this phase, children demonstrate a beginning awareness of the alphabetic principle; that is they understand that there is a predictable relationship between letters and sounds in our language. As children begin to understand that sounds can be represented by letters, they rely heavily on the sounds they hear to write words. Children represent only some of the more prominent sounds in words. For example, they may write 'c' for 'car' or 'hs' for 'house'.



Phonetic phase

As children learn more about letters and sounds, they pay attention to every sound in the words they want to write, and represent each with a letter or letter cluster. For example, 'grdn' for 'garden', 'windo' for 'window'. They know that it may take more than one letter to represent a particular sound. At this stage, children need to be helped to focus on visual patterns in words, so they come to realise that correct spelling must account not only for how words *sound* but also for how words *look*. If children continue to rely solely on the way words sound, their spelling attempts will remain in an early phase.

I went to The
BaBq. I at
Sosg in Bred.

Phonetic:
*I went to the barbecue.
I ate a sausage in bread.*



**'Children
move through
these phases
at different
rates, and not
all children
will follow the
same path of
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Transitional phase

By this phase, children have begun to realise that spelling can be tied to meaning as well as to sound and visual patterns. They begin to understand that several words can be built from a base word. For example, 'locked', 'locking', 'locks' and 'unlock' can be built from 'lock'. They understand that a particular meaning unit is likely to be spelled consistently from word to word—for example: 'sign' 'signal' and 'signature'. Children at this phase of spelling have begun to internalise spelling patterns, and most words they write begin to look like English words.

These phases are a general description of the way learning to write words develops. Children move through these phases at different rates, and not all children will follow the same path of development. Focusing on what an individual child is able to do when attempting to write helps adults plan in order to consolidate and extend their growing understanding.

Conclusion

Learning about letters and sounds should be fun. It should involve children in energetic, enthusiastic activity and interactions with adults and more experienced learners. Learning about sounds begins at birth; learning about letters needs more time and the help of adults to draw children's attention to how letters work, what they do, and how we use them in our everyday lives.

Learning about letters and sounds might once have been called 'spelling', but with young children it's more about being 'clued into' the language structures of their culture and being given the tools gradually to become effective writers and readers. Literacy is the pathway to school and life success, and we have a responsibility to support young learners in becoming proficient and confident users of language.

'Learning about letters and sounds should be fun.'



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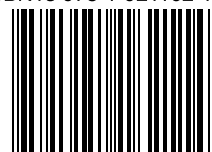
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