



What is Holistic Alphabet Learning?

Families and teachers have long been concerned with preschool children learning their ABCs. Recent research suggests “a playful approach grounded in children’s background knowledge and interest, one that enables children to build and apply alphabet knowledge in meaningful contexts” (Wasik, 2001). Research tells us that children contribute to their own literacy development, and that they enter school with previous literacy experiences from cultural, socioeconomic and language communities that exist in their world (NAEYC, 2009). These interests and experiences should be taken into account when planning alphabet learning activities for young children.

In light of this, the practice of teaching a “letter of the week” in preschool settings has come under much scrutiny. While letter knowledge is important, presenting letters in isolation and without regard to children’s individual interests and experiences is not considered best practice. In the third edition of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (NAEYC, 2009), holistic alphabet learning is addressed through examples of “developmentally appropriate practice” and practices “in contrast” to developmentally appropriate practice (p.170).

DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE

Teachers draw children’s attention to letters and their sounds and use various strategies to help children grasp the alphabetic principle and relate print to spoken language.

IN CONTRAST

Teachers spend too much time teaching the alphabet and neglect other important goals; for example, they do relatively little talking with children, or they interrupt children’s play and other engaged activities to identify letters or ask children about them.

Here are some suggestions for holistic alphabet learning:

- Provide a print-rich environment where children are exposed to letters in meaningful contexts.
Examples: Labeled classroom areas and storage shelves, Children’s names on cubbies and artwork
- Make 3-D letters available for children to manipulate.
Examples: Wooden alphabet puzzles, magnetic letters, textured letters
- Provide cards with meaningful letters and words on them in the writing, art, and other classroom areas.
Examples: Children’s name cards, cards with commonly used words on them
- Encourage children’s early attempts at writing.
Examples: Provide writing materials in all classroom areas, include a variety of writing tools for different skill levels
- Point out letter names and sounds during daily activities (do not interrupt children’s play to do this).
Examples: Say, “Good morning mmmm Mary! Hey, your name starts with an M sound just like mine!”
- Play with letters and sounds throughout the day (sing, chant, etc.)
Examples: Sing alphabet songs