

Literacy

by Cathy Abraham

Creating a print-rich environment

Children's success in school depends in part on what they bring with them the first day of kindergarten. Children with a foundation in literacy—language and listening skills, familiarity with books, and experience with scribbling and drawing—are more likely to succeed in all school experiences.

By the end of first grade, these children are reading simple books and beginning to write. By the third grade, they shift from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." From then on, reading is a fundamental way they learn about everything, from geography and history to math and science.

As a child care provider or preschool teacher, you play a critical role in children's literacy development. You help them lay the foundation for literacy by what you do every day. Some examples:

- Talk with children and encourage them to express themselves. (See "Smart talk: Improving children's oral language," *Texas Child Care*, Summer 2003.)

- Read stories, sing songs, recite nursery rhymes, and play finger games. (See "Getting preschoolers ready to read and write," *Texas Child Care*, Winter 2002.)
- Encourage dramatic play.
- Provide scribbling and art activities.
- Provide hands-on opportunities for children to explore topics of interest to them, such as cars, dinosaurs, and butterflies.
- Help parents understand that they are their child's first teacher.

Children gain literacy skills not only by interacting with adults and other children but also by interacting with their surroundings. You can enhance literacy development by providing a print-rich environment.

What is a print-rich environment?

A print-rich environment is one in which "children interact with many forms of print, including signs, labeled centers, wall sto-

ries, word displays, labeled murals, bulletin boards, charts, poems, and other printed materials" (Kadlic and Lesiak, 2003).

A print-rich environment allows children to see that reading and writing serve real, everyday purposes. Children observe adults using printed materials and realize that print carries meaning. They explore print and become motivated to try to read and write themselves.

What makes an environment print-rich?

In a print-rich environment, children have specific places to explore reading and writing. They also see and experience a variety of printed materials. Some examples:

Library or book center

Provide a specific place for children to explore books. This might be a table with a bookshelf or a corner with pillows and rugs. You might add a rocking chair





where you hold children in your lap and read stories. On the wall hang pictures of children reading.

Stock the shelves with a variety of books, including picture books and familiar books that children “read” from memory. Add simple reference books such as a children’s dictionary. Include teacher-made books and child-made books, constructed by individual children and by groups, perhaps based on shared experiences.

In addition to books, add children’s magazines as well as story tapes and tape player. Provide flannel-board materials and finger puppets so children can retell stories.

Tip: Don’t send children to the library area for time out or other disciplinary action. You want children to associate reading and books with positive experiences, not negative ones.

Posted dictation

Take dictation from children using large sheets of easel paper and post them on the wall or an easel. This is an effective way to expand on children’s interests, preferably on the curriculum topic for the week. Ask open-ended questions such as: “What do you think will happen to the beans we planted?” “How did you feel when we laid on our backs watching the clouds?” Write their quotes verbatim. This gives children the message that there are symbols for their words. You will also find that when you write down exactly what children say as they say it, over the course of time they will make real strides in language development.

Tip: Everything written in the classroom should start at the top

left-hand corner of the page and be written from left to right. With the exception of a child’s preference on his artwork (see below), all writing should appear the same way in which children will be taught to read. We are training their eyes to naturally look to the top left-hand part of the page.

You can reinforce this orientation when reading by occasionally using your finger to track the words as you read them, illustrating how the story progresses in the text.

Quotes on children’s artwork

After children finish a collage or painting, ask them individually if they would like to tell you about their work. Ask if they would like for you to write it down, and where they want it on the picture. Again, write down what they say word for word. What children say about their own work tells us what they are thinking and feeling and their views on the world.

Tip: Encourage parents to do the same with a child’s artwork. It’s a great way to enhance communication between parent and child.

Labeled items

Make labels for various items in the room, such as “blocks” and “wastebasket.” Use markers and sturdy poster board. Labeling gives children the message that everything can be identified by a set of recognizable, common symbols that are written down.

Tips on labeling

- Don’t label everything in the room. It becomes too visually stimulating and overwhelming. Label five chairs, not all 20.

Equipping the writing center

Writing tools and utensils

- thick pencils
- pens
- washable markers
- chalk and chalkboards

Printing tools and samples

- letter stencils
- alphabet letter stamps and ink pad
- magnetic letters and cookie sheet
- laminated alphabet poster
- wipe-off boards and dry-erase markers
- name cards, one for each child
- sentence strips and word cards

Paper

- recycled computer paper
- lined and unlined paper
- envelopes and stationery
- carbon paper
- small “books” of blank paper stapled together that children can use for writing stories or journaling
- index cards
- old appointment books and calendars
- Post-it® Notes
- tablets
- outdated forms

Other tools

- hole punch
- stapler
- blunt-tip scissors
- paper clips
- tape
- pencil sharpener
- erasers
- office paper filing bins
- old typewriter (make sure it still works)
- keyboard

- Make sure your labeling is neat. If you cannot print neatly, use a computer.
- Use the style of printing consistent with what your school district teaches because that is what the children will be expected to recognize. Big, puffy letters in all capitals may be confusing to children when they are just learning to recognize letters.
- When labeling shelves for toys, try to use pictures as well as words. If a toy is off the shelf, the words alone usually are not helpful to a pre-reader.
- Allow children 4 and older to label their own cubbies. If Carmela is able to write only a "C," she knows that symbol stands for her. That is far better than anything we might do to label her cubbie. Using a child's photo also works well and is meaningful and personal.

Rebus charts

Rebus charts or real photos are an excellent way to teach and remind children about step-by-step activities. Make a rebus chart to illustrate the handwashing procedure and post it by the sink. Write the words alongside the pictures.

Use rebus charts for recipes to show children how to make their own snack or do other cooking activities. Illustrate the daily schedule with pictures. A pictorial schedule is meaningful to children and gives them the feeling of being more in control of their day and the environment.

Charts and graphs

Charting and graphing are excellent ways to teach math and science concepts but they also show children the correlation between language and symbols written on

paper. If your learning theme for the week is transportation, for example, you can make five categories such as bus, plane, train, boat, and car. Then have children identify which modes of transportation they have used by placing their name markers (made in advance) in the appropriate cate-

gories. Responses should stack at even intervals to create a graph. Children can then see which category has the most responses and make comparisons themselves.

Tip: Use charting and graphing in addition to, not instead of, open-ended questions. Each technique teaches a different skill.

Ideas for introducing letters and letter concepts

Hands-on activities are preferable to worksheets and "readiness papers" for introducing children to letters of the alphabet. Consider these ideas.

- "Letter of the Week" table or area
- magnetic letters and cookie sheets used as magnetic boards
- rubber stamps of letters and stamp pads
- having children "sign up" to go to different areas as a classroom management system
- word cards and sentence strips
- magnetic words that children can group into sentences with assistance
- letter lacing cards
- A B C cookie cutters for use in playdough or for prints
- sponge letters
- dry-erase wipe-off board
- sandpaper or other textured letters (fake fur, terrycloth, satin, for example) for children to trace with their fingers and feel
- shaving cream (or sand) on a cookie sheet for "writing" letters in
- letter puzzles
- letter-shaped ice cube trays for use with playdough or in sand
- letter matching games (use pictures as well as letters for younger children)
- letter bingo (use pictures as well as letters for younger children)
- categorizing or sorting small items based on which letter or sound they start with
- "Letter Boxes" with many small items and miniatures beginning with the same letter
- letter stencils
- alphabet concentration or memory game
- chalk and a chalkboard
- individual journals for each child to write about their thoughts and feelings or give dictation to an adult
- small pads of paper and pencils throughout the classroom for spontaneous child-initiated writing
- name cards for each child to look at or refer to if they want to practice writing their name
- letter games during waiting or transition times. *Example:* Ask children to find or think of something that begins with a certain letter or sound
- Magna Doodle® (or clipboard with the red stick "pencil" that allows you to write something and then pull up the film layer to erase everything)
- small beads with letters on them (for children 4 and older)
- letter collages made by the children using pictures cut out of magazines



Interactive alphabet

If you are teaching letters of the alphabet, use real, concrete objects that children can physically handle. Children learn most effectively by interacting with objects, not by looking at them. If you are using an alphabet chart, place a real object next to each letter. For example, place a flashlight by the letter *F* and a spoon by *S*. Or use pictures of real objects that the children have cut out of magazines and glued by each letter.

Skills children gain in a print-rich environment

- the correlation between speech and written words
- new vocabulary
- oral language skills
- the ability to enjoy books and reading
- creativity and imagination
- ways to work through real-life experiences
- fine-motor skills
- the sequencing of events in storytelling
- memory skills
- visual discrimination
- eye-hand coordination
- role-playing skills
- values of diversity
- aspects of the physical and biological world
- mastery of concepts
- appreciation and respect for books and fine literature
- cognitive skills such as prediction and hypothesis
- the ability to recognize letters
- the concept that letters combine to make words that represent people, places, ideas, and things

Other ideas: Buy two of the same chart, cut out the letters, and make them into a matching game. Or collect small items (or pictures of items) for each letter, glue a magnetic strip on the backs of the objects and letters, and let the children match them on a metal cookie sheet. Have a “Letter of the Week” table where children handle and talk about miniature objects that all start with the same letter.

Children are experiential learners. They learn little from an “Alphabet Train” hung near the ceiling. Instead of having children color an apple ditto sheet, have them make applesauce.

Tip: Wait until children are at least 3½ or 4 years old to begin this formal introduction to letters. Follow a younger child’s lead and interest.

Manipulatives

Offer many choices of small-motor manipulatives, such as puzzles, sewing cards, and interlocking plastic blocks. These items will develop the fine-motor muscles a child will need to hold a pencil and begin to write.

Using scissors is one of the best ways to develop small-motor skills and eye-hand coordination. Encourage children to do all their own cutting beginning at age 3. Be sure to give children some instruction initially. Always use round-tip scissors and provide close supervision.

Writing center

Provide a table and chairs and a variety of materials. (See “Equipping the writing center” on page 13.) Set up the writing center entirely apart from the art center to help children begin to

distinguish between writing as communicating with words and art as creative expression.

This is the place in your classroom where it is appropriate to post an alphabet chart so that children can have something to look at when they are trying to re-create letters. Make sure the chart is at the children’s eye level. You can also make a wipe-off version by laminating an alphabet chart so that children can practice tracing letters with dry-erase markers.

To help children learn to write their names, make an individual name card for each child. This gives them a model to look at.

Tip: Allow children to choose their writing activities. Requiring them to trace letters or practice writing their names when they’re not interested turns these activities into a chore instead of a discovery.

Paper and pencils everywhere

Set out small pads of paper and pencils in different areas throughout the classroom. What will you see when you do this? Children in the block area drawing “blueprints.” Children in the home center making “grocery lists” or “taking an order” in a restaurant. This spontaneous child-initiated learning and acknowledgement of the printed word is our goal. This demonstrates that they understand and are making the connection between print and meaning.

Tip: Make sure that your group of children can handle pencils safely. Typically children 4 and older can be taught to handle and respect pencils and use them correctly.

When parents want worksheets

If your classroom is print-rich and you can articulate how children are learning literacy skills, you will be better able to answer well-intentioned parents who want their children to bring home daily worksheets. Many parents do not understand that children learn best through hands-on, meaningful play experiences within a prepared environment.

Ultimately the children benefit the most from developmentally appropriate practices. A print-rich environment enables children to build a foundation in literacy in a way that is both meaningful and fun—instead of by rote or by being forced to sit and write a page full of “R’s.” Learning should be spontaneous and fun when you’re 4.

References

Kadlic, Melanie and Mary Anne Lesiak, “Early Reading and Scientifically-Based Research: Implications for Practice in Early Childhood Education Programs,” National Association of State Title I Directors Conference, February 2003, www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SA/SA/ereadingsbr03/index.html, accessed July 19, 2003.

About the author

Cathy Abraham is a business consultant currently providing child care management services in Nashua, N.H. In her more than 20 years of experience, she has been a center director, college instructor, classroom teacher, CDA advisor, and NAEYC validator.

How print-rich is my classroom?

Yes	No	Sometimes	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Books in the library area are rotated often, with new choices available every two weeks or so.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	The library area has child-made books.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	The library area has teacher-made books.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	A flannel board is available with pieces for creating and re-telling stories.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Objects are labeled throughout the classroom.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Children’s attempts to write are acknowledged and respected.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Artwork includes quotes from the children about their work and experiences.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Dictation obtained by asking children open-ended questions is on display.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	All labeling and other writing are done in upper- and lower-case letters, consistent with the teaching of the local school district.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Rebus charts and pictures illustrate handwashing and the daily schedule as well as other procedures.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Children participate in making charts and graphs to learn concepts from curriculum units.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Children learn letters with real, concrete objects that the children can explore and interact with.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Children do all their own cutting with safety scissors.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	The writing center offers a wide variety of materials.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Children have daily opportunities to choose unstructured writing activities.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Pre-made books with blank pages are available for the children to write stories and journaling experiences.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Adults point out written words to children, when appropriate, within the environment as a natural occurrence.