

Classroom Activities: Introductory phonics activities

Phonics teaching can take place by exploring the letters and sounds in children's names, with everyday print, or after reading a book or singing a song or jingle.

Children's names: a way to begin

Many teachers use children's names as an engaging starting point for exploring the relationship between sounds and letters. Children's names are important to their identity. Parents give their children names that reflect gender, culture, religion, history, family names and the parents' hopes for their children's future. Discuss the spelling of names such as Xi, Xue, Aisling, Caoimhe, Pádraig, Seamus, Jaycob and Khloe.

The names given for people and objects, in general, are also important for learning. Giving names to other people and objects is a way for young children to classify and order sensory experiences. Names and symbols allow people to talk about absent objects and communicate with others.

Learning that things have arbitrary labels or names given to them by people is an important social and cognitive milestone. Naming allows children to find relationships between things and to talk about similarities and differences. Below are some suggestions for ways to work with names.

- Make two sets of cards with children's names. These can be classified into names that begin in the same way, names that have the same sound, names that end alike and so on. Children can also play Snap and Concentration games with the cards.
- Write names on paintings and personal belongings.
- Write children's names on card covered with plastic so they can trace and use the card as a writing model.
- Paint names with water outside in the playground.
- Use last names as well as first names for card games like Snap and Concentration.
- Make a 'Who am I?' book where children write clues to their identity and other children guess their name.
- Use children's names in the classroom, such as '*Stephen, will you ...*', and encourage children to use each other's names whenever possible.
- Make a class album with photographs and children's names.
- Make a class book with photographs and a short description of each child in the class.
- Make a school-wide teachers' book with photographs and a story about each teacher.
- Make a mural of the class and add names.
- Ask parents if they had a nickname and make a list of these.
- Explore the meaning of children's first names.
- Ask grandparents to the school to discuss the history of their name.
- Explore names in the community that are similar.

- Explore the meaning of last names; for example, Smith, Taylor and Nguyen.
- Trace the history and geographical location of the children's last names.
- Place last names on a map of the world to show where they may have come from.
- Use lists of names on birthday calendars.
- Write the names of group members and lists of who goes to the library or has special roles to play in the classroom.
- Explore patterns in children's names by clapping the beat in the name: Is-a-bell-a, Har-vey, Ste-pha-nie. Children can use musical instruments to create the beat. They can dance, hop or jump to the beat.
- Make name alliterations into a class book. Use names and a verb such as *Stella sews*, *Jasprit jumps* and *Ari amazes*. Names can also be combined with positive adjectives—*excellent Emma*, *brilliant Brigitte*, *sensible Steve*, *lively Lakshmi*, *kind Kate*, *elegant Eleanor* and *jolly Jacob*.
- Read poems about names, such as 'Disobedience' (AA Milne) with the lines 'James James Morrison Morrison Weatherby George Dupree', and 'Spring Fever' (Eve Merriam) which has alliteration of names such as 'Frank frets, John jumps'.
- Have a name change day when a sound such as /b/ is used at the beginning of each name; for example, Declan becomes Beclan, Susan becomes Busan and so on.
- Change the characters in stories read aloud to the names of children in the class.
- Make a class address book or a class birthday book using children's names.
- Make lists of names and classify them into friends' names, pets' names, football team names, sports star names and teddy bear names.

Using everyday print

How can everyday print on street signs and advertising boards be used to teach phonics? In the following example, the teacher engages in teaching sound–letter relationships in everyday, functional literacy activities with a group of 5-year-olds (Richgels, Poremba & McGee 1996).

To begin the lesson, the teacher wrote out on a chart the poem 'Chicken Soup with Rice' (Maurice Sendak). This poem is about outdoor winter play on ice and eating chicken soup with rice. On a chair next to the chart, the teacher placed a large can of chicken and rice soup.

After discussing then reading the poem, the teacher asked the children if they could tell what she had brought in from the supermarket. The children worked out that it was chicken soup. The chicken soup was to be part of a cooking activity later in the week but now it was the context for making connections between poem print and label print. The teacher's questions prompted children to notice letters, words and sounds and these were interwoven with discussions of the meanings and functions of written language.

Using books

Dr Seuss books are based on rhyme and word play and are greatly enjoyed by most children. To learn letters and to recognise and name the letters of the alphabet, cut out print from catalogues, magazines and leaflets to make collages.

Another way sounds and letters can be introduced is known as 'rounding up the rhymes' (Cunningham et al. 1998). This occurs after reading a big book or a small book aloud many times. For example, after several readings of the book *Ten Little Dinosaurs* (Pattie Schnetzler) the teacher drew the children's attention to the rhyming words. *Ten Little Dinosaurs* describes the actions of ten different dinosaurs.

Five little dinosaurs playing in the street.
Ankylosaurus yelled, 'A car to beat!'
He charged into the street: squeal, screech, bleet, spleet.
No more dinotanks playing in the street.

As children notice the rhyming words, some of which are nonsense words, they are written on index cards and put in a pocket chart. The following words were 'rounded up' from several pages.

bed	bike	mooth	river	peak	street
head	spike	tooth	aquiver	beak	beat
said	trike	booth	shiver	shriek	spleet

Next, because the focus was on words with the same spelling pattern and same sound, some words were deleted. The five sets of words that rhymed and had the same spelling pattern were left in the pocket chart.

bike	mooth	river	peak	street
spike	tooth	aquiver	beak	spleet
trike	booth	shiver		

The next stage is critical as it is the transfer stage where children use analogy based on spelling patterns to create new words. Some new words created to fit the spelling pattern and rhyme were:

hike	liver	leak	sweet
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Using jingles, raps and rhymes

Poems, songs, jingles, raps and rhymes can be used to draw children's attention to the sounds of language. If the jingles and rhymes are written on large charts, children can explore the connection between sounds and the visual letters. When focusing on spoken language, the children's attention is drawn to the phonemes or sounds.

In alphabet raps, the children use class names combined with rhyming words to make a rap to chant read and perform. Names can have one, two or three or more syllables and the rhyming words may have to be changed to fit the rhythm.

A is for Assan, apple and Ann
B is for Barry, berry and ban
C is for Cassie, cabbage and cog
D is for Daisy, dinner and dog
E is for Erin, egg and excite
F is for Fay, fish and fight
G is for Gus, goat and girl

Anna likes apples

Quinton likes queens

Katie likes kittens

Jacob likes jelly

Ally likes ants

Khalil likes koalas

Songs

Many well-known songs can be adapted for word play. For example, 'Old MacDonald Had a Farm' can be sung with a focus on initial sounds, medial sounds or end sounds (Yopp 1992).

What's the sound that starts these words:

yellow, yes and yet?

[wait for a response from the children]

/y/ is the sound that starts these words:

yellow, yes and yet.

With a /y/, /y/ here and a /y/, /y/ there,

Here a /y/, there a /y/, everywhere a /y/, /y/.

/y/ is the sound that starts these words:

yellow, yes and yet.

Learning letters

When children are first learning about sounds and letters, you can hold mini-sessions focusing on one letter. To begin, display books, cards and catalogues that have a particular letter as a focus. Then have children select a book for you to read aloud that focuses on that letter. For example, some books with the letter 'a' include *Pat the Cat* (Colin and Jaqui Hawkins), *The Cat in the Hat* (Dr Seuss) and *Angus and the Cat* (Marjorie Flack).

Collect rhymes and jingles based on particular letters and read them aloud, noting the short and long /a/ sounds.

Apple tree, apple tree	Ants in your pants	Apples on the tree
Have apples for me	Ants in your pants	Apples on the tree
Hats full, laps full	Smack them, whack them	Adam ate them
Sacks full, laps full	Smack them, whack them	Adam ate them
Apple tree, apple tree	Smack them, whack them	Apples on the tree
Have apples for me	Ants in your pants	

Making and using sounds

Many teachers use examples of how sounds are articulated or made in the mouth. The short and long vowel sounds are made in different places of articulation. A teacher can show how the short /a/ sound is made in the mouth. Show how the long /a/ sound is made in the mouth. Find children's names that begin with a short /a/ sound. Find objects in the room that begin with a short /a/ sound. Find children's names that begin with a long /a/ sound. Find objects in the room that begin with a long /a/ sound.

Read an alphabet book aloud, either a big book or a smaller book, and point to the capital 'A' and lower-case 'a'. Have children trace the letter shapes in the air. Sing the alphabet song and point to the letters on an alphabet chart as the children sing. Tell children the name of the letter 'a' is 'ay', and the sound can be long /a/ or short /a/.

Making the sound-letter link

Write words that begin with the letter 'a' on the board underneath each other so the letter is clear, and ask children to identify the beginning letter. Write the word *apple* and identify the letter 'a'. Write the word *ate* and talk about how the letter 'a' can represent several sounds.

Many teachers make it explicit that the *letter* is written down and can be seen and named and the *sound* is made in the mouth and can be heard. Spoken words are made up of sounds. Written words are made up of letters. When we say the letter names for 'a', 'e', 'i', 'o' and 'u', the letter name, for example, 'aye', sounds like the long vowel. Many children think that the letter 'a' has only one sound. Point out that 'a' can represent several sounds in *Ann*, *ape*, *again* and *arm*.

There are many ways of exploring sound-letter links.

- Cut up an alphabet chart and place the letters on cards. In small groups, the children can arrange the cards in alphabetical order.
- Write words with the letter 'a' in arrow shapes:



- Make a chart of words that begin with the letter 'a' from words in magazines and newspapers.
- Have children make the upper- and lower-case letter 'a' with plasticine or playdough.
- Make a large apple tree filled with apples with 'a' words.
- Make apple-shaped books for children to draw in, then write words with the short /a/ sound.
- Make a list of words that have the short /a/ in the middle position.