Playing with ABCs

Recognizing the letters of the alphabet is one of the first stepping-stones on the exciting path to becoming an independent reader. Try these activities as your child learns her ABCs.

Alphabet train
All aboard! This playtime project encourages your youngster to write and play with letters. Let her collect small cardboard boxes. She can cover each one with construction paper and label it with a different letter of the alphabet (uppercase and lowercase). Then, punch holes in the boxes, and use yarn to string them together like cars in a train.

Alpha-doodles
Calling your child’s attention to loops, lines, and curves helps her tell similar letters apart. Pick two lowercase letters, perhaps p and q or v and w. Have her print a big version of each letter and turn them into doodles. She might draw a smiley face in the loop of the p and make the straight line into a ponytail by drawing a ribbon around it.

Letter search
Choose a word, and see if your youngster can find its letters on signs or labels. She’ll learn to recognize letters with different fonts, which will help her read the print in various books. Before dinner, you could say, “We’re having tacos. Go find t-a-c-o-s.” Maybe she’ll spot t on the package of tortillas, a on a jar of salsa, and so on.

I found a poem!

A pile of books next to your youngster’s bed or at the library could inspire him to write a “found poem.”

A found poem uses words your child finds in print—in this case, on book spines. Have him choose several books with fun titles and stack them so he can see all the spines. For example, his stack might include Chicka Chicka Boom Boom (Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault) and Zin! Zin! Zin! A Violin! (Lloyd Moss).

Now he can use the words to write a poem. It’s fine for him to add words of his own, too. His poem might begin: “Chicka chicka zin zin / I like to play the violin.”
Make words stick

To truly learn new words, your youngster needs to use them over and over again in different situations. Use these strategies to make new words a permanent part of his vocabulary.

See. Attaching words to something concrete helps to cement them in your child's memory. When you're out and about, you might point out construction workers using a crane to lift a load, or say the wind is blustery because it's blowing hard.

Explain. Ask your youngster to teach his little sister or his grandpa a word he learned today. Example: "Prefer means you like something better than something else. I prefer blue to red." Explaining the definition in his own words helps him make sense of it in a way that works for him.

Repeat. Look for opportunities to use new words in various contexts. For instance, if your child learned gravity while reading about space, you could take turns naming something that might happen if we didn't have gravity. ("Without gravity, it would be really easy to do flips in the air!")

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Fun with Words

Compound combos

Thanks + giving = Thanksgiving!
Here's an idea that lets your child learn about compound words, or longer words made up of two smaller words.

Make cards

Together, think of a dozen compound words (mailbox, playground). Have her write and illustrate the two words from each compound word on separate index cards. (For suitcase, she would write suit on one card and case on another.)

Mix and match

Ask your youngster to form other compound words. She might think, "A housefly is a fly in the house. I could make firefly by using fire from campfire and fly from housefly." Or maybe she'll form sunflower by putting together sun from sunrise and flower from flowerpot. How many combinations can she find?

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Parent to Parent

Getting the most out of audiobooks

My daughters love audiobooks. I mentioned this to one of their teachers and asked if listening to them counts as "real" reading. Mr. Jackson said audiobooks are great for readers of any age. Then he gave me an idea for using them to build the girls' comprehension skills.

Mr. Jackson suggested that I listen to audiobooks with my daughters. We could follow along in a print version so they make the connection between the words they hear and the words they see. He also recommended that we stop sometimes to talk about the book—just like we would if I were reading it aloud. We might discuss the characters, predict the ending, or go over a confusing part, he said.

Since then, the girls and I have checked out several audiobooks from the library, and I think they're helping them become stronger readers.

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Q&A

Tell me about your drawing

While volunteering in my son's classroom, I noticed the teacher asking students to tell stories about pictures they drew. What's the purpose of this?

A Drawing a picture is one way your son tells a story. For instance, if he draws a squirrel with its cheeks full of nuts, he's communicating that the squirrel is collecting nuts. Describing the picture out loud encourages him to think it through and perhaps add more information.

Tip: Suggest that he write a story about his drawing—or offer to write down his story as he dictates it to you.