

Fun Parents Put Phonics  
What's a Parent To Do?

**MARYJANE BLASI**

# What's a Parent To Do?: Phonics and Other Stuff

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No Child Left Behind, Reading First, Early Reading First, Good Start, Grow Smart . . . the current whirlwind of education initiatives in the United States commits millions of dollars of federal money to "scientifically based" reading and early literacy development. In 2003, President Bush directed Head Start programs across the country to function as early reading programs, thereby focusing on direct, systematic approaches to early reading development and teaching the alphabetic principle. These approaches, developed primarily for struggling students and learning disabled children, teach isolated phonics rules and the alphabetic principle through drill-and-practice techniques (Foorman, Francis, Fletcher, Winikates, & Mehta, 1997). However, knowledgeable, reflective teachers of young children continue to rely on decades of research that highlights the importance of literacy development in play, emergent literacy practices, and discovery learning.

The federal thrust in education confuses many parents and makes understanding literacy development so much more difficult. How should the typical young child learn to read and write? Of course, children must learn the alphabet in order to read. And of course, knowing some high-frequency phonics rules helps. But this is a very small piece

of the total picture of a child's literacy development. Learning to read and write requires significant, caring adults to answer questions. It requires a lot of talk. It requires hearing the lilt of storybook language from daily lap reading with engaging picture books. It requires free exploration with paper and pencils and crayons and books of all sorts. It requires significant, caring adults to point out how print is used in the real world. It requires meaningful connections that significant, caring adults help the young child to forge. *So, what's a parent to do?*

Learning about print and developing beginning reading skills need not rely on inappropriate isolated drills, worksheets, and flash cards. Learning starts very easily and naturally. Young children are surrounded by print in their everyday world. Cheerios, McDonald's, ON/OFF, STOP—environmental print such as signs, billboards, logos, functional print, labels, and product packaging saturates the world in literate societies. In fact, reading of this kind of print constitutes the initial stage of reading development called "logographic reading" (Dombey & Moustafa, 1998; Frith, 1985). Parents can use the high-profile, attention-getting print that surrounds a child every day in order to subtly begin teaching reading and the alphabet.

Here are some activities that require nothing more than parents and significant adults talking with children:

• **Environmental Print Walks:** Trips to the grocery store and running errands are an opportunity for pointing out and reading signs together. The golden arches of McDonald's means the letter "M" and happy meals for lunch. The trademark red S of the Safeway grocery store and the red K of the Kmart logo give clear opportunities for parents and adults to point out individual letters to children. Having young children "help" locate items in the grocery store encourages focusing on the print on products' packaging. And drive time in the automobile can be a learning time if parents use it as an occasion to play "I Spy With My Little Eye" games with children. Spying "T-t-t Target" reinforces recognition of the sound and graphic shape of the letter "T," and focuses attention on the print of the store name. Take a digital camera on an environmental print walk, and you and your child can search the environment for each letter of the alphabet and capture it to print in your very own alphabet book.

These next activities take the decades-old pastime of reading the cereal box at breakfast and bump it up a notch:

• **Recycle Packaging:** So much literacy potential is thrown away every day—the kitchen and bathroom cupboards hold a host of materials for learning activities in the form of product packaging. Props for make-believe play at home can be readily created from clean, empty containers. Expensive toys are not needed to create a prop box. Children can play house with a prop box that includes food packages, junk mail, old address books, recipe cards, and old magazines. Restaurant menus, take-out boxes and bags, and order pads can facilitate playing restaurant. Do the children want to play store? Use the kitchen cupboards to stock the pretend store, use saved grocery bags, and include newspaper advertisements and old check pads to infuse literacy into the play. Gently encourage the children to notice and read the print in their play frames as you listen and observe.

Puzzles can be created by saving cardboard packaging from cereal boxes, detergent boxes, soda cartons, etc. The puzzles can be as simple as two-piece puzzles for the preschooler or as complex as 15- to 20-piece puzzles. Cut through the package's logo to draw attention to letters, their shapes, and the sounds they represent. While assembling the puzzle, talk with your child about the words on the package. Store the puzzles in resealable plastic bags for travel time or for dropping into a backpack.

Create new games for play anywhere by saving advertisements from the newspaper. A range of matching games can be created in which the player matches the logo in the ad to its actual product. For example, a child can match milk in the grocery ad to the gallon of milk in the refrigerator. Be sure to point out the word "milk" in the ad and on the milk container. In another game, the logo of an ad can be matched to its conventional, black-and-white print spelling. An example of this matching game might be to match a *TIDE* ad to the word "Tide" written on an index

card. Glue the ad onto an index card and create a version of the concentration game. Have the child lay the ad in a grid face down and turn over the cards to make a match. This can be done by simply matching two identical ads or by matching an ad logo to its conventional spelling. An extra dimension of learning is added to these games if the children help to cut and paste the ads onto cards.

Bingo games also can be made just as easily by using plain white paper tri-folded lengthwise and widthwise to create a 9-cell grid. Glue ads or product packaging logos onto the cells, and play bingo by either calling the logo word, a beginning letter, a rhyming word, or an ending letter. A more challenging version of bingo can be created by matching the conventional spelling of the logo to the card. Talk about the letters and words, and make connections to important names and places during play to generate the meaningful mental anchors that children need to acquire early reading skills.

Environmental print holds a powerful role in our consumer-driven society. It bombards and captures the attention of young children at a very early age. Corporations invest huge sums of money in packaging and advertising their products. Young children riding in grocery carts are enticed by the array of goods purposely set at their eye level. It is incumbent on teachers, caregivers, and parents to co-opt the intense, commercial power of environmental print for instructional uses with children by drawing attention to the print in logos, billboards, and signs. Using environmental print is just one way in which parents and significant adults can draw attention to the alphabet and help the young child develop beginning reading skills. In and of itself, such efforts are not all the instruction a child requires to become a successful reader and writer (Prior & Gerard, in press). Nevertheless, so much of success in school and life rests on the experiences that children have in the home in the early years. Reading success can begin by making use of all the meaningful print and text that pervades the home and the community.

## Seeking Articles . . .

The Editor of the "For Parents Particularly" column is seeking manuscripts to consider. Articles should address ideas or suggestions that would be of interest to parents. While the ideas or suggestions should have some research base, the focus should be on the practical presented in everyday language.

**Contact the "For Parents Particularly" column editor MaryJane Blasi at [maryjane@mail.tqci.net](mailto:maryjane@mail.tqci.net) or send material to: ACEI Editorial Department, 17904 Georgia Ave., Ste. 215, Olney, MD 20832.**

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