

Supporting Children’s Growing Understanding of Print

Children develop print awareness, the understanding that print carries meaning, long before they learn to read. By noticing how adults use print and engaging with it in natural, meaningful ways, children begin to connect spoken language with written symbols. This handout offers simple, authentic strategies for using print throughout the preschool day.

1. Model Everyday Use of Print

Children learn best when they see adults use print for real purposes. Let them see you:

- Write notes and reminders “Let’s write a note to Ms. Maria to tell her we found her book.”
- Check the daily schedule “Let’s see what comes after snack.”
- Label materials or sign in “I’ll write your name on your artwork so we know it’s yours.”

Tip: Say aloud what you’re writing and why: “I’m writing your name so we remember whose cup this is.”

2. Surround Children with Meaningful Print

Environmental print gives children clues that words are all around them:

- Use labels with pictures for shelves, cubbies, and centers.
- Include signs and charts children recognize (“Clean-up,” “Snack Time,” “Bathroom”).
- Display children’s names often: on attendance charts, cubbies, helper lists, and artwork.
- Keep books and magazines accessible in every area, not just the library.

Tip: Change print displays with children’s input: “What should we call our new block area? Let’s make a sign!”

3. Use Print During Play and Routines

Print becomes powerful when it’s part of what children are already doing:

- In the dramatic play area, include menus, order pads, shopping lists, or appointment books.
- During block play, use blueprints, maps, or “construction signs.”
- In science, add clipboards for recording findings or plant growth.
- During circle time, invite children to help “read” the morning message or add their ideas to a chart.

Tip: Follow the child’s interest. If they pretend to open a store, ask, “Should we make a sign for your shop?”

4. Invite Children to Experiment With Writing

Encourage children to use writing as part of play, without focusing on correctness:

- Offer varied writing tools: markers, pencils, crayons, chalk, and clipboards.
- Provide paper choices: sticky notes, envelopes, forms, and notepads.
- Model writing together: “Let’s write a list of animals we saw outside.”
- Celebrate all attempts at writing: scribbles, letter-like forms, and invented spelling.

Tip: Focus on meaning, not mechanics. Ask, “Tell me what you wrote!” instead of correcting letters.

5. Read Aloud—and Point Out Print Naturally

During shared reading:

- Track print occasionally with your finger to show directionality.
- Point out titles, authors, and labels on pages.
- Talk about print features (“These big letters mean the word is loud!”).
- Invite participation: “Where should I start reading on this page?”

Tip: Read for enjoyment and connection. Print awareness grows most when children are engaged and curious.

6. Make Print Personal and Purposeful

- Create class books featuring children’s photos and names (“Our Favorite Things”).
- Write thank-you notes or messages to families with children.
- Encourage dictation: “Tell me what you want to say, and I’ll write it down.”

Tip: When children see their words written, they understand that print preserves their ideas.

Remember

Print awareness grows through real-life experiences. Every time you write, read, or use print in front of children with purpose, you’re helping them take one more step toward literacy.