Home Reading Program

Infant through Preschool

Alphabet Flashcards

Upper and Lower-Case Letters

Why teach the alphabet or sing the ABC Song?

Music helps the infant ear to develop like nothing else does! Sing the Alphabet Song and recite the alphabet soon after the baby is born. Singing the ABC song will key the child's interest in the alphabet and he* will want to see the alphabet flashcards when you show them because the baby is curious to know what is this ABC that he has heard sung to him so often. In addition alphabetical order will be learned, which is important when consulting the dictionary and has many other practical uses.

Singing the ABC Song and Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness *(being able to hear the sounds the letters make)* comes easily when the child knows the names of the letters, because the names of most of the letters contain the sounds *(called phonemes)* the letters make. By learning the alphabet the baby is learning *to hear* at the same time he is being prepared for reading. Singing and reciting the alphabet is a simple way for parents to clearly convey the basic sounds of speech to the newborn whose ear is still developing.

No Alphabet???

Some experts say you should teach phonograms first and the names of the letters should come much later, even as late as when the child starts school! *Phonograms are the written letters of the alphabet and certain letter combinations, not taught by name but taught by the sounds the phonograms make, which we call phonemes.* I disagree since babies can so easily learn the alphabet when parents sing and recite it for their child. So why make the child wait until *he is in school and learning is not so effortless as it is for a baby?

And why begin with the complex rather than the simple? Learning pure phonemes can be difficult for the infant because his ear is undeveloped. He has a hard time hearing many consonant sounds without a vowel *(A, E, I, O or U)* sound attached. *When teaching letter sounds, often a muted short vowel sound is added to the phoneme for the sake of audibility. For example, phonogram b becomes /beh/. With the long vowel sound added, however, phonogram b, becomes /bee/, the same sound as the letter's name! 'Bee' is easier for the infant ear to hear than 'beh' especially when the 'eh' sound is muted.*

Some people think that singing letter-sounds (phonemes) in alphabetical order instead of the names of the letters might be a good idea because music can stimulate the development of hearing, and the letter-sounds are used to decode words. They think beginning with phonograms and circumventing the alphabet will give children a head start in reading. The problem with this is if you try singing the pure letter phonemes without the short vowel sounds being added to consonants b, c, d, f, g, h, j, k, p, s, t and x, you will get no music, whatsoever, as there is no sound coming from the vocal chords with these letters. Therefore, muted short vowel sounds must be attached, a sort of cheating, if you are a purist. If you are not a purest, why not add the long vowel sounds, instead, and say the names of the letters, which is the ABC Song? It's much easier and makes for a better song!

Since singing pure letter sounds doesn't really work, and it's not at all musical, the Alphabet Song is all there is if we want to take advantage of the power of music. Children have always loved the song, and it's rather catchy. It's a shame that many educators try to take it away from them.

Even the adult ear has difficulty being able to distinguish between certain isolated consonant sounds unless a short vowel sound is added to the phoneme. Irrefutably, even a muted short vowel sound, added to a consonant phoneme, does not constitute the pure sound of the consonant. So why would it be a backwards step for the child to learn the alphabet, first, since the infant can gain phonemic awareness with a long vowel sound, just as readily and more readily, as with a short vowel sound?
The pure sound of a consonant can be almost impossible to distinguish in some cases. Try differentiating between D and T without adding a muted short vowel sound, as these consonants have no sound, whatsoever, coming from the vocal cords. Or try B and P or C and G. I contend that whether you add a long vowel sound to a consonant, as in the name of the letter, or a muted short vowel sound, the result is that the pure sound of the phoneme is not isolated or demonstrated for the child, anyway. Most importantly, infants do better hearing phonemes when a long vowel sound (rather than a muted short vowel sound) is blended with the phoneme. Consonant sounds blended with muted short vowel sounds can come later, after the child has learned to hear letter sounds with the Alphabet Song and recitation of the alphabet.

I fail to see why the Alphabet Song is pooh-poohed by educators, including Montessori teachers, when teaching the alphabet is something all parents know how to do. Every parent in the United States can sing or play a recording of the Alphabet Song and can give their children a head start in life! In my day, when I was in grade school, I knew of no 'Johnnies' that couldn't read. Truly, it was unheard of! And I didn't know of a single child who couldn't sing and recite the alphabet before starting school. A coincidence? Children were proud they knew the alphabet and loved singing the song! And I loved singing it. Today we have a very high illiteracy rate in the United States and parents are being told by a majority of educators to not teach their children. And, above all, parents are told, "Don't teach the alphabet!" At the same time they are condescendingly being told, "You are wasting time singing the Alphabet Song to the child!"

The letters of the alphabet are the building blocks of literacy, and phonograms (depicting letter sounds) empower the child to read. In the Home Reading Program, after the baby has repeatedly heard the names of the letters in song and recitation and has been given the opportunity to develop the sense of phonemic awareness, from birth, and has been duly shown the alphabet flashcards, then, the baby is given the letter sounds (called phonemes) using the Alphabet Phonogram Flashcards.
I concede that with a preschool age child who did not learn to read as a baby, you may want to begin with letter sounds, but there is no reason for the child to not learn to sing the Alphabet Song at the same time. The ABC Song belongs in the child's repertoire of favorite songs!

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*Because gender-neutral language can be cumbersome, we have often used he or him to refer to the individual. These terms are used for readability and are not intended to exclude women or girls.

USING THE FLASHCARDS

Description of Alphabet Flashcards

Upper-case letters (capitals) are shown on one side of the flashcards. Lower-case letters (small letters) are shown on the other side making 26 double-sided flashcards.

How to Assemble the Flashcards

Print flashcards and use card stock or poster board for backing. Match the lower-case letters to the upper-case letters, back to back. Insert backing between upper and lower-case letters and slip them into a sheet protector. One side of the flashcard shows the upper-case letters and the other side shows the lower-case letters.

Pointers

- Practice your presentation in front of a mirror until you are comfortable handling the flashcards. Do this before showing them to the child.

- Show flashcards when both you and the baby are feeling well and are in a good mood. Otherwise, wait for a better time.

- Good lighting is essential.

- Eliminate noise and distractions before giving a presentation.

- Gain the child's consent to show flashcards. Pick a time when he's not doing something he enjoys, and do not interrupt him.

- Flashcards should be shown in alphabetical order the first few times they are presented. Then you may mix-up the order and show them randomly.

- Continue singing the Alphabet Song to the child from time to time and reciting the alphabet.

The Order of Presenting the Flashcards

1. Take the first 10 flashcards in alphabetical order, holding them in one hand with the lower-case letters facing you. Capital letters are shown first because they are larger and are easier for the infant to focus his eyes upon.

2. Tell the child that you have the letters of the alphabet and you will be presenting upper-case letters. Present all the upper case letters before showing the lower-case letters.

3. Repeat the same process with the lower-case letters. Each time before presenting the alphabet tell the child whether the letters are upper or lower-case.

4. After showing upper and lower-case letters separately, show them together in the same presentation. Show one side of the flashcard and say, “upper-case “A”. Then quickly turn around the flashcard to the other side and say, “lower-case “a”. With each letter say "upper-case" and “lower-case”, but when you sense that the child knows the difference, drop the upper-case and lower-case descriptions and just name the letter.

5. After showing the alphabet inform the child that the letters of the alphabet go into two categories, vowels and consonants. Then separate the vowels from the consonants and inform the child that you will first show the vowels (A, E, I, O and U). After vowels are shown consonants can be shown. When giving vowel and consonant presentations tell the child which you will be presenting.

6. When you have shown both upper and lower-case letters a few times and have presented vowels and consonants, you may show Beginning Phonograms. Review the letters from time-to-time and keep changing their order, as well as reciting the alphabet so that alphabetical order will be retained and reinforced. Continue to move along quickly in the program, thus providing new content to hold the child’s interest.

How to Present the Flashcards

1. Hold the flashcards steady at the child’s level and at a comfortable distance where he can see clearly without straining (about 18 inches for an infant).

2. Take the flashcards from behind and bring them up to the front, one at a time, saying the name of each letter as the child sees the flashcard. Or you may want to put the flashcards on your lap and hold up the top flashcard for the child to see. Some parents prefer to put flashcards in a ring binder and flip them over like a flip chart.

3. Presentations should be done quickly and smoothly. Ten seconds is ideal for 10 flashcards. (Some children may want to see the entire alphabet. If the child is attentive show as many as he wants to see.)

Maintaining the Child’s Interest

Keep in mind that the rule is to stop before the child looses interest, so the child will be eager to see the flashcards next time you show them. (Don't keep showing cards if he' not looking, and don't try to force his attention.) If it works better for you or the child to show fewer flashcards (or more) show the number that works best.

We hope you and your child enjoy this reading program. The gift of reading is one of the greatest gifts you can ever give your child. Early readers have all of the advantage in life, and it is never too soon (or too late) to begin to learn to read.

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B

b

C

C

D

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E

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