Learning the Alphabet

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Learning the Alphabet is fundamental for learning to read.

- Although people understand this, there is little research or discussion about the alphabet.
- Without firm knowledge of letters, children will have difficulty with all other aspects of early literacy.
What is Alphabetic Knowledge?

- Letter shape recognition
- Letter name knowledge
- Letter sound knowledge
- Ability to print letters
- Rapid letter naming
Do children know the alphabet?

• National Household Education Survey
  – Slightly over half of 4-yr olds recognize “some or all” letters, based on parent report
  – Ability to name letters affected by
    • Parent education level
    • Minority language status
    • Poverty
Do children know the alphabet?

• Entering Kindergarten: A Portrait of American Children when They Begin School
  – 50% of all children entering K have one or more risk factors
  – Two-thirds of children with two risk factors have significant reading problems
Why is the alphabet important?

- Letter-name knowledge before formal reading instruction is one of the strongest predictors of children’s reading ability
  - Share, Jorm, McClean, & Matthew, 1987
  - Riley, 1996
But is it necessary?

- Early studies which approached this question experimentally did not find that it was necessary to learn letters in order to learn words
  - Jenkins, Bausell, & Jenkins, 1972
  - Johnson, 1969
  - Ohnmacht, 1969
  - Samuels, 1972
  - Silberberg, Silberberg, & Iverson, 1972
• Ehri (1983) found that the studies were flawed:
  – Children did not adequately learn letter names
  – Children were not taught how letter names could be used to decode words
  – Target words did not always include the letter-sound found in the letter name.

• Letter name knowledge may be functionally inseparable from other factors.
How might letter-name knowledge contribute to reading?

- Letter-name knowledge mediates letter-sound knowledge (Treiman, 1998)
- Letter-name knowledge may be proxy for rich “school-like” literacy experiences (McGee & Richgels, 1989; Smolkin & Yaden, 1992)
- Letter-names may be a precursor or facilitate phonological awareness (Johnston, Anderson & Holligan, 1993; Stahl & Murray, 1994)
How do we teach children the alphabet?

• Letters-of-the-week
• Use of mnemonic devices
• Alphabet books
• Children’s first name
Letter-of-the-Week

• Introducing letters in isolation may confuse some children about the purpose of letters in relation to words and reading.

• Not all letters are created equal but each letter receives equal instructional time.
• Some letters take longer to visually discriminate
  – t, a, e, o, s, i
  – Massaro, et al. 1980

• Letters have different relationships to sounds
  – Easiest ones are consonant-vowel letter names (e.g., b, d, j, p)
  – Followed by vowel-consonant letter names (e.g., f, m, l, n)
  – Most difficult are c, g, h, w, y (Treiman, 1998)
Should we teach the most frequent first?

• In a “Letter of the Week” approach, six of the most frequent letters (n, o, r, s, t, and u) would not be taught until after January.
Use of Mnemonic Devices

Ehri, Deffner & Wilce (1984)

• Pictures do help children learn letter-sound correspondences.

• Incorporating the letter-shape into the picture is also beneficial.
Alphabet books

• Yaden, Smolkin, & MacGillivray (1993)
  – Children learn metalinguistic terms, directionality, orientation of letters, letter names and sounds

• Murray, Stahl, & Ivey (1996)
  – Alphabet books that used alliteration increased phoneme awareness
Alphabet Books

- Van Kleeck (in press) found that parents of young children (3 years old) tended to use alphabet books for vocabulary.
- Parents of older children increasingly stressed the letters and letter sound connections.
Children’s Names

- Villiaume & Wilson (1989), Share & Gur (1999), and Bloodgood (1999)
  - Found that names are highly motivating for learning letter names
  - The ability to write letters in one’s name and name those letters are originally separate.
What do we know?

• Very little research on how to teach letter names
• There needs to be more emphasis on exposing children to the alphabet in preschool
Questions

• Is there one sequence of letters that is preferable?
  – Alphabetic?
  – By frequency?
  – By letter-sound relationship?
  – By ease of discrimination?
Assessing letter name knowledge

• Accuracy?
• Rate?
• Writing letters?
When should we worry?

• We worry about children entering second grade without letter knowledge. How much earlier should we worry?