

Language Activity 7: Becoming Familiar with Letters and Their Sounds

Primary Goal

Becoming familiar with the letters of the alphabet and their sounds.

Secondary Goals

Laying the basis for reading skills; developing cognitive, sensory, and fine motor skills.

Material

Work mat.

Basket.

Set of 26 small boxes identical in size, color, and shape. Find boxes that have lids. On each lid, use a thick marker to clearly print a lowercase letter of the alphabet. To be consistent with the way letters will be presented to the child in many Montessori preschools, use red for vowels and blue for consonants. Inside each box, place several small objects and pictures that start with the phonetic sound represented by the letter on the lid. Try to avoid choosing items that emphasize the letter's name. For example, inside the *p* box you would not place a pea, which has the same sound as the letter's name. Instead, you could place a small plastic pig, a picture of some pots, a picture of a plant, and a picture of some pliers, all beginning with the sound "puh." Present just one box at a time. Once the child has worked with all 26 boxes, replace some of the objects and pictures to maintain the child's interest.

Special notes:

(1) This activity is not designed for the child to name letters, but to begin to understand that letters represent sounds. In the Montessori preschool program, lowercase letters and the sounds of letters are presented first, before capital letters and the names of letters. If the child is interested in naming letters, as much as possible present their sounds rather than



their names. For information about sounds, see the phonetic chart in the introduction to this section.

(2) This activity uses red for vowels and blue for consonants in order to be consistent with the way letters are presented in many Montessori preschools. However, some Montessori preschools use blue for vowels and red or pink for consonants.

Presentation

- This activity appeals particularly to the abilities of twos 27–33 months old.
- In advance, choose the box you will present and place it in the basket.
- Ask the child to get the work mat and put it in a place you specify.
- With the child, get the prepared basket and place it on the work mat.
- Sit beside the child with the basket in front of you.
- Take the box out of the basket and place the box on the work mat. Set the basket aside.
- Pick up the box. Trace the letter on the lid slowly with your finger and say the sound. For example, trace the letter *p* and say, “Puh.”
- Remove the lid and place it letter-side-up to the right of the box.
- Take out one of the items in the box, hold it, and name it. Speak slowly and clearly, and pause to emphasize the first letter. For example, say, “P-ig. Pig.” Place the item to the right of the lid on the work mat.
- One by one, take the other items out of the box, name them, and line them up horizontally on the work mat, continuing to move from left to right. Make sure to emphasize the first sound in each word.
- Pause and smile at the child. Then slowly pick up each object, name it, and return it to the box. Finish by replacing the lid, then tracing the letter and saying the sound.
- Invite the child to do the activity. For example, say, “Now you see what *p* sounds are inside the box.”
- Give the child time to start the activity.



- If the child begins focusing on the activity, get up quietly and allow the child to work undisturbed.
- If the child does not start or does not seem to know what to do, ask, “May I help?” Gently guide the child’s hand to trace the letter on the lid of the box, then remove the lid. As soon as you feel the child engaging, gently remove your hand and let the child work on his/her own. Do not cajole the child to name the object.
- When the child has finished the activity, encourage the child to put the items in the box and put the box in the basket, then return the work mat and materials to their proper places. If necessary, do these tasks with the child. This completes the activity.
- Make sure that the materials presented stay available — on a low shelf, for example — for the child to work on again when she/he wishes.