

Bare Bones Phonics

~ Level 1 ~

Simple explanations for parents on:

- letters and their sounds
- phonemic awareness
- games to reinforce skills



by Jen Strange

illustrations by
Kate Hadfield



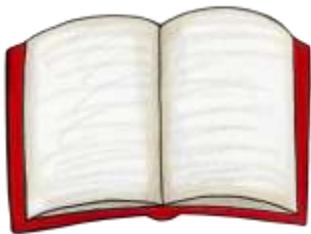
preface

I learned to read almost by osmosis. My mom read to me, and one day at age four I could read. I have always loved reading, and when my son Jake was born I was determined to pass that interest on to him. Because we had so much fun reading together, and because his brain happens to be the kind that picks right up on such things, his process of learning to read happened as naturally as mine did: no struggle and no confusion. I didn't give much thought to how I was teaching him, because we were enjoying ourselves; I didn't feel pressured to meet certain goals by certain ages, because he wasn't in school yet. He went off to Kindergarten able to sound out words, and I figured I had done my job well. His reading skills have progressed beautifully and he is way ahead of grade level.

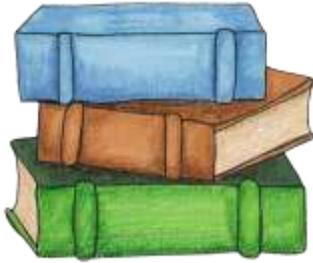
My son and I are not normal.

I mean this in terms of learning to read (though our friends might have some things to add.) Learning to *speak* is a very natural human process; learning to *read* is not. It typically takes a lot of systematic and concerted effort in order to teach a person to read. For most of my life this never occurred to me, because learning to read was easy for me, and then it was easy for Jake.

In the middle of Jake's 2nd grade year, I noticed a Facebook post from a mother of a little girl Jake had been in preschool with. She said that "A" was failing 2nd grade: she couldn't read, she wasn't making any progress with reading, and they were considering holding her back. Her mom didn't know how to help her, and I volunteered to work with her. I figured I could help since I enjoy kids, I love to read, and I had been successful teaching Jake. Add to this I had been teaching piano lessons since I was fifteen, so I was comfortable sitting with a child to work one on one.



During our first meeting I tried to get a sense of A's current abilities and I also tried to show her how fun reading can be: I read several books TO her, just so she didn't feel so put on the spot and discouraged. After she left, I realized that I needed to know something more systematic about teaching someone to read; winging it was fine for my own child before he started school, but this was high stakes. And I was going to make it work.



Before, when I said I love reading? That's a bit of an understatement. When I get a new book, I inhale it, then greedily search for the next one I'm going to read. I love going to Goodwill to search for books that other people have discarded. I buy books by the dozens and stack them wherever I can find a spot, then plot how I'm going to get around to reading them all. I browse Amazon.com and GoodReads.com just to see what other people are reading, to keep up with what's new in different genres, and to read book summaries. If I need to learn about a new topic - such as when my son was diagnosed with sensory processing disorder - I will read at least half a dozen books on the subject to get a good grip on it.

Keep this in mind when I say that I started to learn about teaching someone to read.

For a solid six months I read almost nothing but literacy texts. I scoured the web and became particularly interested in how many different approaches to early literacy I found. It seems like everyone has a different opinion on the matter. I was most interested to learn about phonemes (sounds in language) and how different letters or letter combinations can represent the same sound. I had never thought about this before. (I also didn't realize how messed up R-controlled vowels are, but that's a story for much later.)

I started making lists of various words, then lists to organize and rearrange my lists, then other lists to make sense of my lists. It was an odd and complicated process, but that's how I learn: I over-think every possible step of a topic until it seems so complicated I'll never get it. Then it inexplicably becomes simple. (What? I told you already that I'm not normal.)



You, my dear friend, are about to benefit from my not normal-ness. What I didn't find in all my searching and reading, what I was actually looking for in the first place, was a simple explanation of the process of learning to read. I found it odd there were no texts that explain in simple language how *parents* can help their *children* learn to read. This really bothered me. So here we are.



intro

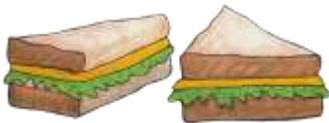
Learning to read can be one of the most exciting experiences of childhood. It can also be one of the scariest and most frustrating. As a parent, you desperately want for your child to become a successful reader: to enjoy school, to learn with ease, and to become immersed in books and discover the magic of words. (And ok, some of us are hoping our children will love *Anne of Green Gables* or *Little House on the Prairie* as much as we did.)

Some children learn to read so easily, it's as though they were born with the ability. These lucky children (like Jake and I) are not normal. While it's amazing that it occurs at all, it skews the perception of teachers and parents regarding the difficulty of the process. This seemingly natural ability is the *exception*, not the norm. Learning to *speak* is a very natural process. Learning to *read and write* is not; this takes very deliberate and sustained effort. (Almost everyone across all cultures learns to speak the language they grow up with. We cannot say that for reading.) Most children require a very systematic explanation of the English alphabetic code in order to become proficient readers. Unfortunately, whether they receive that instruction at school is hit or miss - and this is where reading delays develop.

Teachers do the best they can. But they are at the mercy of (a) the training they received in college, which may or may not have focused on effective ways to teach reading, and (b) the administration of their school, county, and state. (Not to mention the particular dynamic of each year's classroom!) Your child's teacher wants all of her students to succeed - but the task at hand is enormous, especially considering the large ability gap in classrooms. Some children come to school already reading, some have learned quite a bit in preschool and are prepared to learn, while others begin Kindergarten not even able to recognize the letters of the alphabet.



What can a parent do to ensure their child is successful in learning to read? It's very simple. You can give your child a basic foundation of knowledge to draw on, so no matter WHAT methods or systems she experiences in a classroom, she is starting on firm footing. (Remember in the preface when I said I figured I had done my job well? I felt that I should teach Jake to read before I sent him to school. I think in an ideal world, every parent would be able to do the same - or at least put their child on the right path.)



You have been in charge of your child's development and well-being from the moment of her birth. You have made sure she had enough food, attention and affection, and a safe environment in which to develop. You took her to doctor's appointments to make sure she was healthy and took care of her

when she was sick. You encouraged her to roll over, to learn to eat, and to take her first steps. You potty-trained her, helped her transition from a crib to a big-girl bed, and probably taught her to get dressed herself. It's only natural that you should take charge of the most important skill your child will ever be challenged with: learning to read.



Look, as a parent you're going to spend a LOT of time with your child every day anyway. Why not work in 10 or 15 minutes of deliberate instruction where you can? Your child doesn't have to know you have an agenda - when you frame the activities as fun with mommy, he will be thrilled to be there with you.

When you start early with deliberate time together like this, your child will never know anything different - and will even come to expect it. Learning is the main task of childhood, and children LOVE to learn. It's play to them. They love to explore, discover new things, play new games - and most of all, they love direct attention from their parents.

You're going to be amazed how easy this actually is. The more I read about early literacy, the more I think that experts on the subject have an inability to write in plain language. Almost everything I've read during my research is in academic-speak or technical language (which would be extremely overwhelming for someone who is not already a nerdy lover of reading.) Sometimes I wonder if they are TRYING to confuse people. Well I'm not going to overwhelm you with jargon. My goal here is to explain the process of learning to read in the clearest way possible. I'm also not going to make you slog through a history of the English language (which actually explains a lot of the variant spellings), or the history of the *whole-words* / *phonics-first* debates amongst educators. (Hint: I am not fond of the *whole-words* teaching concept.) We're just going to review the bare-bones of what you need. If you get super interested in this topic, you can pursue it further on your own. I'll have recommendations for books to read on my blog. (Find all my randomness at www.jenstrange.com)



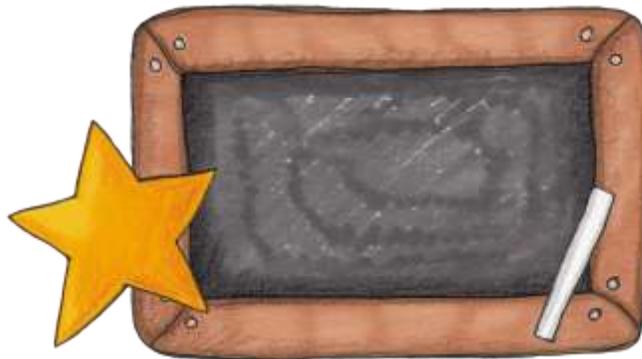
You can choose to introduce your child to as much or as little of this as you want. Maybe you're only comfortable teaching the basic alphabetic code on your own. That's ok! Your child will have a solid phonics foundation, and that's an amazing thing. It will still be important that you familiarize yourself with the more advanced rules and patterns of English, beyond basic code, just so you have an understanding of how our language works. After all, you'll still be helping with homework and reading and studying for spelling tests as your child advances. This knowledge will give you the skills to know *how* to talk to your child about reading (and spelling!) as her schoolwork becomes more complicated.

(Plus, this stuff is so interesting! It's amazing to learn about. It's the very foundation of modern civilization - we can't do ANYTHING without reading and writing! Don't you want to know more?!)



The ideas in this text (and the ones to follow) aren't only about preparing children for Kindergarten. This information can help to influence your mindset concerning letters, literacy, and language in general; you can integrate this information into everyday interactions with your children, based on what they are ready to learn. We use scale when determining how much freedom to give our kids, which foods they're ready to eat, and how many chores they should be responsible for. While I'm not saying you should try to teach a baby to read (because honestly? that whole concept is ridiculous), you CAN respond to a two year old's enthusiasm for a ball by saying "Ball. /b/ /b/ /b/ ball. That starts with the letter b!"

Let's start with a quick overview of how letters come together to form written words, which represent spoken English, then onward to "C is for cat" and advice on starting your kiddo off right.





Speech and Phonemes

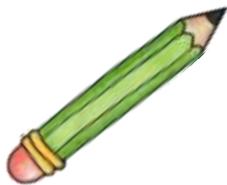
The first topic we'll consider is this: what are we really doing when we read and write? Here's what most of us don't realize: the written word is a representation of the *speech* we use to communicate. When we look at world cultures from a historical perspective, the spoken language in each culture developed first; only out of necessity did a written language sometimes develop to represent that speech. (Not all cultures have a written language, but all use a spoken language to communicate.)

The individual sounds we use in speech are called *phonemes*. (Pronounced *phone-eems*. I think of *talking on a phone* to remember the word.)

Every word we speak can be broken down into phonemes. The word "word" has three phonemes: /w/ /er/ /d/. The word "speech" has four phonemes: /s/ /p/ /ee/ /ch/.

To learn about phonemes, you're going to have to act a little silly. You'll need to say words and sounds very slowly and exaggerate your mouth movements to observe the differences between the sounds in our speech. Once you get the hang of breaking words down into their individual phonemes, you won't have to exaggerate so much to hear them - but you might WANT to, to help your child hear the difference.

Tangent: Since we're deconstructing language here, we need to agree upon how sounds, letters, and words will be represented when used as examples:



1. Sounds - as you see from the previous paragraph, to represent a speech *sound*, letters are placed within slashes. I am using what I think most people will read as a sound representation, rather than using the International Phonetic Alphabet or letters with diacritic markings (diacritics are small marks added to a letter to indicate pronunciation - like a German umlaut or Spanish accent mark.)
2. Letters - when describing a letter of the alphabet used in a word, I'll underline it.
3. Words - when talking about a word, the target word will be in quotations.



For example: The word “dog” has three phonemes. The letter d represents the /d/ sound, the letter o represents the /o/ sound, and the letter g represents the /g/ sound.

So. Back to phonemes (individual speech sounds.) While dialects and accents skew the counting and categorization process, the English language has roughly 44 sounds.

You might be thinking - but wait! 44 sounds? English only has 26 letters! That doesn’t add up! And you, my friend, are right. (Go you!)

English sounds (phonemes) and the letters that represent them do not have a “one to one letter to sound correspondence.”

One to one letter to sound correspondence? What the heck does that phrase mean?

Three things, really:

1. There is more than one way to represent almost all English sounds.
2. Sometimes two or more letters have to work together as *teams* to represent a sound that either (a) doesn’t have its own letter, OR (b) has variant spellings.
3. Some letters or letter teams represent more than one sound possibility, and you need to use context to figure out which one is intended.

Examples:

1. More than one way to represent a sound:
 - a. The /s/ sound is represented as s in “sink,” ss in “class,” c in “cereal,” and sc in “scissors.”
2. Letter teams working together:
 - a. The letters s and c work together in “scissors” to represent /s/.
3. One letter or team representing more than one phoneme:
 - a. The letter c represents /s/ in cereal, but /k/ in cat.
 - b. The letter s represents /s/ in “sink” but /z/ in “is.”



Aaaand this is why learning to read English can seem difficult.



Stay with me! I know this is confusing and possibly makes you rethink everything you thought you knew about the written language. (I had never thought about or realized ANY of these things until I starting researching literacy, and the process of learning about it blew my mind.) What we just looked at will all be learned when studying *advanced code*. We don't have to think about that right now, except in theory. What we're going to learn about first is *basic code*.

Basic code deals *only* with a one to one sound correspondence (each letter represents one sound.)

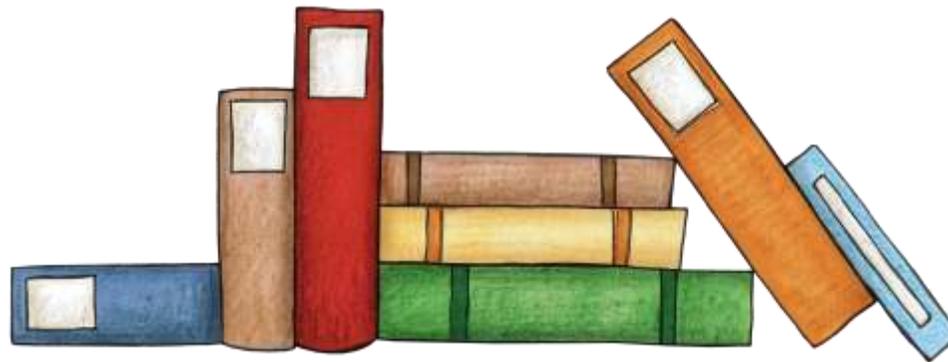
When a child is taught basic code only, reading makes sense: the letter s always represents the /s/ sound, and the letter a always represents the /a/ sound you hear in "cat." Basic code builds confidence and establishes a fundamental grasp of the reading process. It's *after* reading makes sense that we can start introducing spelling exceptions one by one.

An understanding of basic code allows a child to internalize two important concepts:

1. Reading makes sense.
2. Each English word uses letters to represent sounds, which can be read from left to right.

Secure in the knowledge of these two important concepts, learning the exceptions to the alphabetic code is interesting rather than confusing.

We're going to get to basic code very soon. First let's look at the building blocks of the English language: letters. We'll start with vowels, then we'll finish up with consonants.



Vowels



Think about what you know about vowels. How many vowels does the English language have? Five? Six? AEIOU and sometimes Y? Well, yes, those are the letters we use (although sometimes W also participates in vowel teams. And strangely enough, proximity to a R, L, or W can change a vowel sound. Deep thoughts, man. Deep thoughts.)

While there are seven letters which can be used to represent vowels, there are actually nineteen vowel sounds in English. NINETEEN.

I'm just going to sit over here in the corner while you process that.

...

Ready to talk about it a little?

There are the five “short” vowel sounds, as heard in the following words:
cat net pig dog sun

And there are the five “long” vowel sounds, as heard in the following words:
cake sea pie snow cube

Ok, so that's 10 vowel sounds. Where are the other 9?

They're in words like boy, saw, school, book, car, and shirt.

We'll deal with those later. We don't need them in basic code. Right now we just need the five “short” vowel sounds. (See? We can totally do this. Your brain will be ok.)

So that's vowels. Now on to consonants.



Consonants

Let's look at the letter f. The letter f stands for the /f/ sound, right? Such as:
fox, far, fake, feather



But sometimes two f's are needed to represent the /f/ sound:
off, cuff, stuff

And sometimes the /f/ sound is spelled with a ph:
phone, phonics

Other times, a gh represents the /f/ sound:
rough, cough

And *sometimes* the letter f doesn't stand for /f/ at all! It represents the /v/ sound! (Ok, fine, this only happens in the word "of," but it's still a major exception.)

The English alphabet has 21 consonants. Three of them do not have their own unique sound: c has the same sound as k. Q doesn't have a sound to itself, rather q and u work together to represent the /kw/ sound. X, meanwhile, has the basic code sound /ks/. (Odd, isn't it, that the redundant letters all represent variations of "k.")



Some consonants like "f" have a few variant spellings, but they're nowhere as complicated as vowels. Additionally, there are several consonant sounds that do not have their own letter – like the /sh/ sound in ship and the /zh/ sound at the beginning of "genre." But again – that's something we'll worry about when we get to advanced code.





Why We Start With Basic Code

The difficulty in learning to read and write English lies in those exceptions we just talked about. But we're not going to think about the exceptions yet. We're going to hang out in a basic code fantasy world for a while, a place where there are no exceptions. Basic code teaches *just* the most basic phonics, where letters have a one to one relationship with sounds (no exceptions!) Basic code is also called "basic alphabetic code" - and I like to call it "bare-bones phonics." Because I can.

Anything beyond the one to one relationship of basic code is *advanced code*. I would argue that there are some middle - or intermediate - clues which easily build on basic code and make many typical "sight-words" accessible. (We'll cover sight words in a later text. Just letters and sounds today!) It's really not as overwhelming as it seems: even learning advanced code is not hard when it is presented in a *systematic and logical way*, and only presented after basic code has been mastered.

Are you starting to sense that I think basic code should be taught first, before any exceptions or sight words are ever introduced? :)

What's fascinating is that many children who learn basic code somehow jump to being able to read quite fluently. This happened with my son, and I suspect it happened with me. (Even though I was able to read very well in Kindergarten, I couldn't sound out proper names - which, of course, would have required understanding more than just basic code!) For some kids, understanding basic code is *just enough* to give them the confidence they need to try reading a book on their own, even if they can't sound out all the words.



Learning basic code works for kids because it gives them assurance that *reading makes sense*; there's order to the concept, and they CAN (and WILL!) figure it out. It brings them to the light-bulb moment that yes, those combinations of letters MEAN something. (Until they begin to understand this concept, they may as well be looking at pages of Greek writing - it will make about as much sense.)

Before we explore the *specific* ways to teach a child about basic code, let's talk about some ways in which your everyday parenting can help to prepare your child to become a great reader.

Concepts of Print



Concepts of print is a term encompassing the many things we need to understand when learning how a written language works. It seems like a no-brainer to an adult, but children (and beginners to written English) have to *learn* the following concepts about our language:

- (1) English print represents speech sounds.
- (2) English print is read from left to right, and lines of words on a page move from top to bottom. (This is different in other languages! Traditional Japanese, for example, is read from top to bottom, right to left!)
- (3) (a) there are a finite number of letters [learn 26 and you're done!], and
(b) combinations of those letters are consistent - they always represent the same word.

Beginners additionally need guidance in developing several concepts:

- there is an up and down as well as a front and back to a book
- our alphabet uses both upper and lower case letters
- letters work together to form words, and those words work together to form sentences
- punctuation is used to arrange words to make them more understandable
- it is the written words in a book that represent the words we speak to tell the stories, not the pictures
- stories have a beginning and an end
- the title of a book will usually be on the front cover in big letters.

These ideas and others like them work together to make up *concepts of print*.



The best way to teach these concepts, of course, is to read to your young child. Read often, read everywhere, read a wide variety of texts. Point out the words you encounter in your everyday life.

Occasionally when you are reading from a book, move your finger along underneath the words you are reading so your child can see how reading works (this is called *tracking* - for all he knows, you are making up the story based on the pictures as you go along, and you are just talented at story-telling!)

Print Rich Environment



If you want your child to become a reader, you need to prepare your home and set the example. Does he see mom and dad reading? Are there magazines around your house? Does he have books in his room to peruse? Does he know to treat books carefully and with respect? Is there a calendar hanging on the wall? Does your child have access to paper, pencils, crayons, markers, and other art supplies? Do you have an atlas and a globe? Are there board games and card games in the house you can play together to reinforce language skills? Does your family visit the library or bookstores on a regular basis? Is reading together an established part of your every-day schedule?

Children need to see that reading is involved in every part of our lives: reading menus at a restaurant, learning to program a new DVD player, reading road signs while driving, looking up movie times for a trip to the theater, reading product descriptions to decide which Wii game to buy, reading nutritional information while shopping, consulting a recipe while cooking, reading directions on cleaning products, using the internet to search for whether the spider you found in the corner is a poisonous one . . . we use our literacy skills CONSTANTLY, and often without realizing it. Take time when you are in the middle of such a task to call it to your child's attention and let him help when he is able.

Fill your home with books. You can borrow them from the library, get them for a dollar at Goodwill, buy them at a discount from Scholastic, join a *book of the month* club, give books as presents . . . it's important to show your child that books are special. Keep a basket of books by the bed for bedtime reading. If you subscribe to an educational magazine for your child (and you should - kids LOVE getting mail), buy your child a cute magazine holder of her own.

All these things contribute to a *print rich environment* and help a child to see that reading is a necessary AND enjoyable part of life.



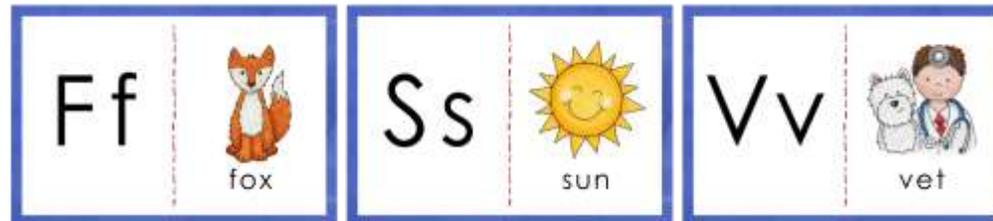


First Learning Goal: Letters and their Sounds

A big problem with the way people think of literacy education is that literacy, literature, writing, spelling, and grammar are all grouped together. They comprise such a vast body of knowledge and concepts, it's overwhelming. To a parent, the thought of teaching a child to read seems like an insurmountable task.

I'm going to propose something crazy. We're going to take a step back from everything. Forget about that other stuff. Most of the complicated stuff, your child will learn quite easily in a classroom setting. It's in the initial *learning to read* skills that some children start slipping through the cracks - and that's what we're going to guard against. With your individual child, first we're just going to make sure she has a good grasp of the most basic building blocks of our language - letters and their sounds. If a child knows the 26 letters of English and their sounds, the rest will soon fall into place.

I have designed a set of flashcards for introducing letter / sound awareness; they are available to purchase and download online. (Check www.jenstrange.com for details - they are called "ABC beginners set.") If you don't want to use my flashcards, I'll also describe how to make your own. (Hint: there are Sharpies and index cards in your future.) The ABC beginners set contains a main set, plus two bonus variation sets; these flashcards are all you will need to teach the *basics* of basic alphabetic code.



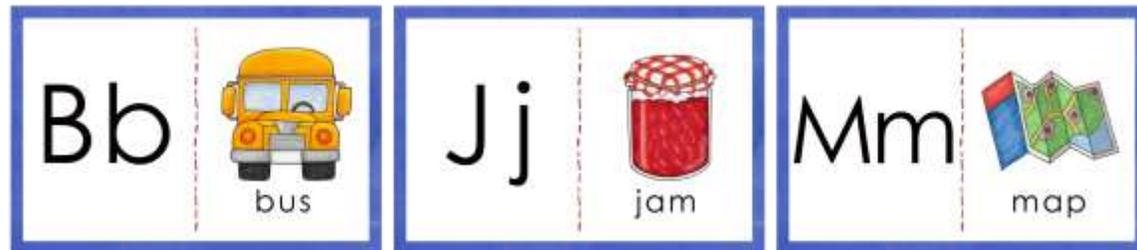
Having a hodge-podge of language-related flashcards can be almost as useless as having none at all. I have amassed quite the collection through the years, and have come to the conclusion that most of the flashcard sets you find in big box stores were not developed by educators, but rather by illustrators or graphic designers. They often have no internal connectedness or logical sequence; they have nothing to do with learning to read. (Which is what led me to create my own, with help from Kate Hadfield.)



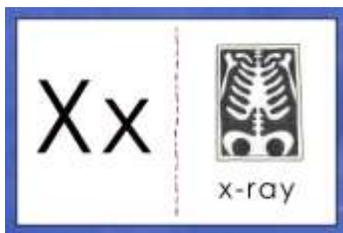
The first thing a child needs to grasp on the path to reading is that English has 26 letters, and these letters represent speech sounds. Each of these 26 letters is represented in both upper case and lower case form. I don't see the sense in introducing upper case and lower case letters separately. Kids are going to need to learn both eventually anyway, so why not start with both and save a step? (Plus, visual learners will automatically associate the two letters with each other after seeing them together.) My flashcards deliberately show both upper and lower case letters together. Aa Bb Cc, etc.

My ABC flashcards are designed as 4x6 inch digital files; they can be printed just like photos from a camera. (Many online photo sites have printing specials where you can upload your files and get photo prints for as little as a penny each. Extremely cost-effective. Hint: get matte prints; glossy will show fingerprints.) They also come in PDF form for home printing.

There are 27 ABC flashcards in the main set (there are two for x. I'll explain why later.) On the left half of each flashcard is a letter shown in both its upper and lower case form. Because it's important that children learn letter sounds **ALONG** with letter recognition, on the right side of the flashcard is a memory prompt: a picture which begins with that letter's basic code sound.



The words I've chosen to use as an example of each letter's basic code sound are chosen very deliberately. (THIS IS THE REALLY IMPORTANT PART!!!) Almost every word can be *read* using basic code - and not only that, almost every word is an *object* that can be represented with a picture. Children are very concrete thinkers, so you'll be more successful teaching them new skills when you use concrete examples. The word "web" as an example of *the sound the letter w represents* is much easier for a child to grasp than the word "with." Spiders build webs, and every child has seen a spider's web - what is she going to visualize for the word "with"? And picture words like "wagon" or "walrus" (or "watch" or "witch") cannot be easily sounded out by a beginner.



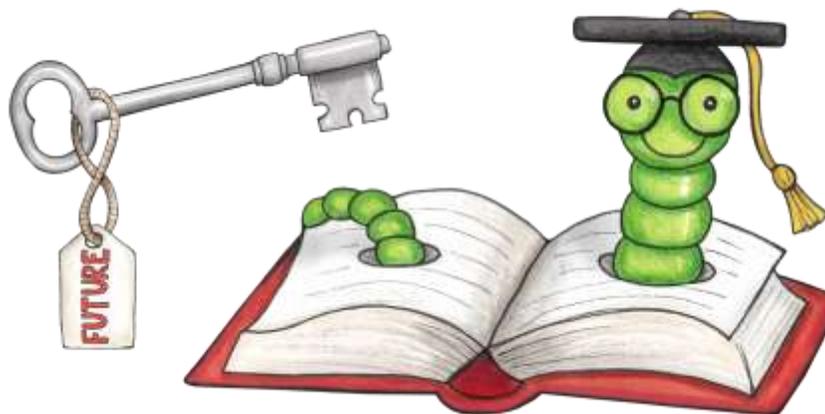
X has two cards because there are really no good picture words for children that begin with the /ks/ sound that x typically represents. Thus your options are “x-ray” or the ending sound in “box.” I’ll let you decide which one your child might understand better.

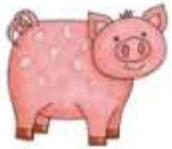
The vowel words are not ideal, as not many basic code picture words begin with short vowel sounds. We will remedy this in later activities (in the next text) when we work with vowels in the *middle* of words.

As your child learns that d stands for the /d/ sound in basic code, she’ll also see the word “dog” under the picture of the dog. Later when we are listening for first and last sounds in a word, we will again use “dog.” We’ll continue to use the picture and word “dog” when vowel recognition practice is introduced (in the next text.) This list of 26 pictures / words to represent each letter of the alphabet will remain consistent for the course of the basic code activities.

I haven’t seen something so simple and obvious - and most importantly, so deliberately designed for beginning literacy skills - anywhere else. And I don’t mean to brag, but that’s kind of the genius of the words / images I’ve chosen. :) (It needs to be said here that the AMAZING Kate Hadfield is my illustrator, and the cuteness of her images alone is worth the purchase. Find her at www.katehadfielddesigns.com)

Ready for that letter / word list?





Picture Words for Basic Code Sounds



a apple

b bus

c cat

d dog

e egg

f fox

g gift

h hat

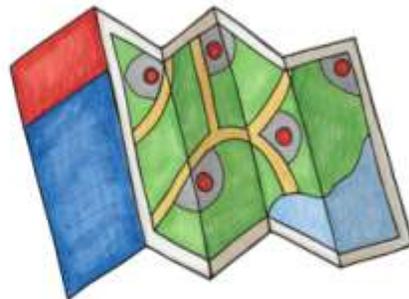
i igloo

j jam

k kiss

l leg

m map



n net

o octopus

p pig

q queen

r rug

s sun

t tub

u umbrella

v vet

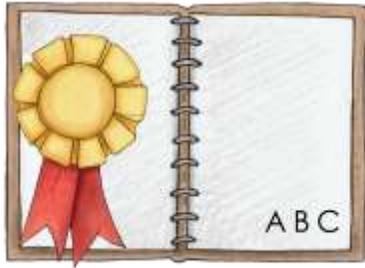
w web

x x-ray or box

y yo-yo

z zip





About the Flashcards

Now that you've seen the list of words for each letter's basic code sound, let's talk about some things you need to consider **before** you use them with your child.

1. Many literacy experts suggest one should never tell a child that a letter "says" a sound. A letter doesn't SAY anything; it *represents* a sound. This is very important. Letters exist to represent the sounds we use in speech. **WE are the ones who "say" sounds.** Because two to four letters will later be working together to represent single sounds, a child should learn from the beginning that letters REPRESENT sounds. (Caveat: when I teach advanced code, I *do* use terminology that describes vowels as "acting" differently in varied situations, and vowels no more "act" than they do "say" - but for right now I don't have a better description for variant vowels.)

2. When introducing letter sounds, be careful to not add extra syllables to consonant sounds. The sounds in "cat" are not "cuh-ah-tuh." It's /c/ /a/ /t/. "Tub" is not "tuh-uh-buh." It's /t/ /u/ /b/.

To understand why we naturally add extra sounds, we need to know a little more about consonants:

- Some consonants are easy to voice continually: the sound for the letter m can be made for as long as you have breath to support it: mmmmmmmmmmm. The letters f, h, l, m, n, r, s, v, and z are all consonants that can be *sustained* on their own.
- Some consonants really need to be attached to a vowel in order for their sound to have volume: try making a /b/ sound without adding a vowel. These consonants are b, c, d, g, j, k, p, t, w, and y; they are the ones you will be tempted to augment with vowel sounds.
- (You might notice that q and x aren't in this list at all. That's because they technically don't have their own sounds. Q has to work together with u to make the /kw/ sound, while x is really a /ks/ sound.)



3. In the main set, each flashcard's picture has its word below it; seeing a word the letter is in gives context for how letters work together to make words. This will make sounding out words more familiar when it is taught *later*. The words are there for visual reference. Don't talk about *spelling* yet, and don't try to have your child read the words on the ABC flashcards. First things first: before we move on to anything else, we want your child to master *letter identification* and the basic code *sound* that goes with each letter.



4. The goal of this flashcard work is automacity; your child needs to reach automacity with letter names and sounds. Automacity is when you know a skill so well, you don't even have to consciously think about how to complete a task. When you first learned to drive, you had to think about every move you made.

At this point, however, you can most likely listen to the radio, discipline your kids, and drink your coffee, all while driving quite well, thank you. That's because you long ago reached automacity with your driving skills.

5. These concepts are not meant to be taught all on one day. Just as your child didn't learn to speak all at once, she's not going to learn all 26 letters all at once. Using these flashcards should be a bright spot in the time you spend together, much like reading books each night before bed. It's important that your child never feels put on the spot, or feels that she is sitting down to do drills. Children very naturally have a curiosity about letters and words, and a love of learning - but this can be squelched by miseducation.

As her parent, you know when your child needs to stop for the day. And you know when she has it in her to tell you the letters for three more flashcards.

Don't ever think that games must be played in their entirety or that learning can only take place using every single flashcard in a set. When a child needs to build confidence while reinforcing a skill, narrow down the choices. Learning letter sounds? Hold up a H and a P card and ask: *which letter represents the /h/ sound?* If your child is working on matching uppercase letters to their lowercase counterparts, pick out five sets for her to work with. Once she's confident with those, maybe move her up to ten sets. Don't just hand her the entire set and say "ok, have at it."

Your goal is for your child to always be challenged, but never overwhelmed. These activities should be FUN: they should leave her feeling confident in her ability to learn, not discouraged. All children are different, and will react to challenges differently; this is where your expertise as your child's parent comes in very handy. You are the ideal teacher for your child because you know her better than anyone in the world.



And while we're on the subject: activities with these flashcards are meant to be parent/tutor lead - at least until a particular skill is learned. After that, if your child wants to play with the materials or use them together with another child, that's fine - but these ideas are hardly going to work if you just leave the flashcards sitting on the kitchen table and hope for the best. You need to present each flashcard set and how to use them, not to mention guiding your child through the learning process.

Introducing the Letter / Picture Flashcards

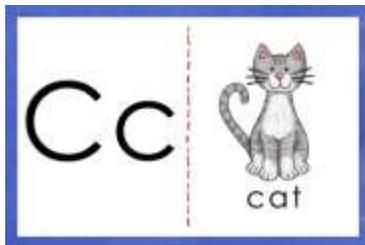


The main set of flashcards we'll be using is the one with an upper and lower case letter set on the left side and a picture representing the letter's basic code sound on the right. These have a dark blue border.

When you show your child one of these flashcards, start by showing the letter side. When she is first learning the letters and sounds, tell her what she's looking at: "This is a c. C represents the /k/ sound." Then as you slide the flashcard to show the picture, you can continue, "The word 'cat' begins with /k/. /K/, /k/, cat."

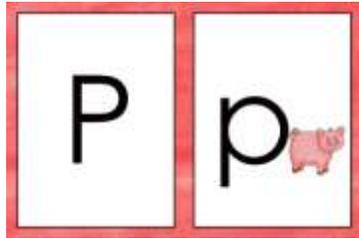
Pause here and allow for your child to react. She will have something to say. Interacting with you and with the learning materials is what makes this fun. Let her express herself, but keep the time between card introductions brief. You can wrap up that card by saying "/k/, /k/, /k/, cat!" If she wants to say it with you, great. If not, no big deal; just move on to the next card.

Your child doesn't have to *memorize* the picture or word that goes with each letter. The pictures are just a reminder, a helpful memory tool for associating the sound the letter represents with something concrete.



Once she seems to be internalizing the letter names and sounds, you might show the letter side of a flashcard and ask "Which letter is this? And which sound does it represent?" When she answers correctly, continue with "Do you know any words that start with that sound?" If she says "cat," then show her the picture and say "that's right! Cat begins with the /k/ sound." If she says "cow," you can reply "You're right! 'Cow' begins with /k/. And (sliding flashcard to picture) so does 'cat'!" If she's up for it, you may ask "Can you think of other words that start with the /k/ sound?"

(This would be where it's helpful to keep in mind that both c and k represent the /k/ sound in basic code, that q must work together with u to represent /kw/, and x represents /ks/. These are the trip-ups in basic code. Annoying, isn't it. Even in simplicity there is complication.)



Letter / Letter Flashcards

The second set of flashcards included in my ABC beginners set download is for upper case and lower case matching. Some children internalize both upper and lower case letters rather quickly, and some children will struggle; this set can be used to reinforce visual recognition for the letter. They can also be used to shore up understanding of the order of letters from A to Z. Instead of letters on one side of the card and pictures on the other, these cards have an upper case letter on one side and a lower case letter on the other, with picture reminders accompanying the lower case letters. These cards have a red border, and are meant to be cut down the middle after being printed (which creates two 4x3 cards. There are faint lines indicating where to cut.)

Be creative when using these cards. Some possible uses for these cards:

- Use just the upper case cards to build a letter snake across the carpet together - place each letter in order in a straight line to see how far the alphabet stretches. You can hand your child just a few letter cards at a time to introduce this activity, then move up to letting her have them all at once.
- *You* make the letter snake first, but keep 5 - 10 cards out of the line (leaving gaps for the missing letters.) Hand the missing letters to your child and see if she can find their correct places.
- Again, make the letter snake yourself with upper case letters. Then allow your child to hold the lower case cards and find their match. When you give her a p card, she can place it on top of P.
- Play "Memory" with the letter sets. Choose four sets at first to introduce the game, then work up to ten sets (or more if you are brave. I'm not talented in the "Memory" department, and the thought of matching 26 sets gives me a headache!)
- Use the cards to play "Go Fish." Use only a portion of the sets if you don't want the game to last forever. Before the game begins you can pull out a certain number of matches to use, and put the others aside.
- There is an extra file with the next set that will allow you to play "Old Maid." Granted, the words "Old Maid" written on a card aren't *quite* as fun as a picture of a granny, but it has the same effect.
- Some children will make up their own games, or just sit on the floor arranging the cards around them. As long as she's not tearing them up, and she puts them away when she's done? Let your child explore with the cards.





Making Your Own Flashcards

If you choose not to purchase the flashcards I designed, I won't hold it against you. It will be more work on your part to make your own, but it's possible. Because I have given you my words list, you'll just need to use your own creativity as to how you'll represent each word. Maybe you have a great clip-art program on your computer. Maybe you draw great cartoons that amuse your children to no end. How you choose to represent the pictures is up to you. (I mean, nothing compares to the adorableness of Kate Hadfield's designs - who, by the way, can be found at www.katehadfielddesigns.com - but hey, it's your choice. LOL)

Ok, so making your own cards. My advice lies with the letters: be very deliberate when you are writing each set of letters (upper case and lower case.) The letters shouldn't touch each other, and they should be distinct - and in as simple print as you can manage. If you have bad handwriting, have someone else write the letters for you - we are trying to make learning enjoyable and as simple as possible for your child, the last thing she needs is letters that can't be deciphered! (Be particularly careful to make the letters consist only of lines, circles, and humps - no flourishes! For example, a lower case t sometimes has a bit of a flourish on the bottom. Go for simple - one line up and down, one line side to side. A lower case a doesn't need a tail that looks like the bottom of a q - it should be just a circle and an up and down line.)

Get some large index cards (you'll find them in any office supply aisle at a big box store, or go to an office supply store.) To replicate the first set of flashcards, draw a thin line down the middle of 26 cards. (I would draw it in pencil - we don't want the line to be distracting.) On the left side of each card, write an upper case and lower case version of each letter, with a little space between. (We want the kiddos to realize that these are two distinctive letters, not one complicated symbol!) On the right side of the card is where the image goes; write the word in lower case print underneath the image.



I like using Sharpies for their precision, but they do tend to bleed through index cards. Use Crayola markers if you don't want any bleed-through. Use new, high-quality markers when making these cards. We want the letters crisp and pleasant to look at! If it looks like you scribbled your way through the cards, what does that say to your child about the importance of reading?



Second Learning Goal: Phonemic Awareness

If you have never heard of *phonemic awareness* before today, you are not alone. I had never heard the term before I started doing literacy research - and I certainly had never stopped to think about the individual sounds of the English language. (Reminder: individual sounds in language are called “phonemes.”) This is such an important topic to understand! And very easy to teach to a child.

Phonemic awareness activities are all about *listening* - no memorization or writing required.

Phonemic awareness usually develops in a predictable sequence.

1. The first sound a child is able to recognize in words is the beginning sound. The word “cat” begins with a /k/ sound.
2. The next sound a child is able to pick out in words is the ending sound. The word “cat” ends with the /t/ sound.

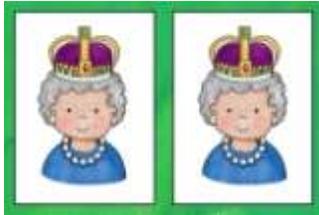
Based on this typical sequence, we now have an understanding of how children who can’t yet read usually attempt to spell words. They almost always include a letter to represent the sound they think they hear at the *beginning* of a word. Very often they will also include a letter for the word’s *final* sound.

The sounds in the middle of the word - and especially the vowel sounds - are the ones that will be missing.



Since the first and last sounds of a word are the first phonemic awareness skills that children can learn, we will start with activities for these. Hearing medial - or middle - sounds (particularly vowels) will be covered in my next text.

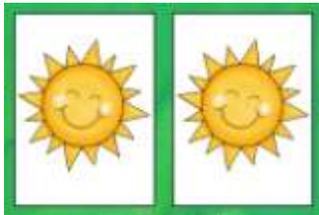




Using the Picture Flashcards

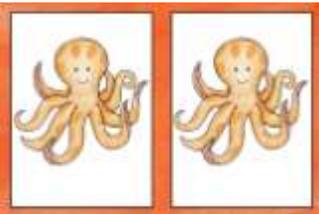
Here is where the pictures we have previously encountered really become important. The third set of flashcards included in my ABC beginners download is a set of just pictures. These files do not have accompanying letters or words underneath; rather, they have the same image on both right and left side.

Because phonemic awareness is a listening activity, we use only the image (if words were listed, little eyes might be tempted to look for visual clues.) These cards have a green border; the card files are meant to be printed as 4x6 images as the others, and then cut down the middle (which creates two identical 4x3 cards. There are faint lines indicating where to cut.)



Note: the “x-ray” image is not used in this set, as it is not a *basic code* word - the /ae/ sound at the end of “ray” is spelled with the letters ay. This is an *advanced code* vowel team, which is not something we’re dealing with yet. Additionally, the beginning sound pictures for the five vowels - AEIOU - are not to be used in this activity, either. Phonemic awareness with vowels is a bit different than with consonants.

Don’t worry, there’s a GREAT activity coming up in the next text for vowel sounds. (However, just because the pictures are so cute, I’ve included the matching picture files for these images, but they have a different color background (orange) – hopefully this will remind you not to use them for phonemic awareness activities!)



You will also need an ABC line for this activity - it’s like a number line used for math concepts, but instead using the alphabet A to Z. The ABC line download AND directions for assembly can be found at www.jenstrange.com.

First, prep your materials. Then when you are ready, proceed with the following.



Sit your child down and introduce the ABC line. It will be a very long strip of paper, so you’ll need a long bit of floor to work on. Sing “The Alphabet Song” a few times while pointing to each letter, taking care to pause in the right places and slow down for “LMNOP” so each individual letter is pointed out. Children love to do this part themselves, but will need guidance pausing in the right places (as well as counting w as *one letter* even though it has *three syllables* when recited.) Next, tell your child you’re going to use this ABC line as you look at some pictures together and listen for their sounds.



At first, you only need one of each picture card. When you pull out the first card - let's say it's "dog," show her the card and say "Which sound do you hear at the beginning of the word 'dog'?" Tell her each card's word; we don't need for her to guess what the picture represents, because that doesn't help our learning goal. This is a *listening* activity. All she needs to focus on is listening.

If she isn't sure of the sound, continue with "I hear the sounds /d/ /o/ /g/. (pause.) What was the first sound?" If she still isn't sure, repeat just the beginning sound: "/d/, /d/, /d/, dog." If she's stumped, just move forward - she'll catch on soon. Say "I hear the /d/ sound at the beginning. I know that /d/ is represented by a d, so I'm going to put this card underneath the letter d on the ABC line."

It's important for your child to identify which *sound* she hears. She might *know* that "dog" starts with the letter d, but we also want for her to *hear* the sound /d/ and make the association that hearing the sound /d/ in a word means there's most likely a letter d used to spell that word. When you ask which sound she hears at the beginning of the word, if she says "D. It's a d," then calmly say "D is a *letter*. We're listening for *sounds*. Which *sound* do you hear?"





Once your child displays the ability to hear beginning sounds in words, you can extend this activity. This is where having two of the same picture cards comes into play. (Prep work for this activity includes putting each picture card set together with their matches.) You will again introduce the ABC line, but instead of pulling one picture card to look at, you will use a set of two identical cards. You'll again show her a card and say "Which sound do you hear at the beginning of the word 'dog'?" Let her place the first card under d. You can then hold out the second card and say "Now let's listen for the sound at the *end* of 'dog.'" And here is a good place to again sound out the word FOR her. Say "I hear the sounds /d/, /o/, and /g/." Ideally she will reply that she hears the /g/ sound at the end, and she will then place the card under g on the ABC line.

As I said before, don't think that you need to use the entire stack of cards in one sitting to play this game. Usually 5 to 10 sets is plenty for a session of listening. (Also, don't forget that you can also use these cards in alternative games, as listed for the previous set.)

When introducing the pictures in an activity, remember to not ask the child to guess which word the picture represents - this guessing doesn't serve an educational purpose, and it wastes time. It can also confuse a child because he'll associate his *guess* with the image rather than the basic code word assigned to it. (Even I say "jelly" for "jam" if I'm not thinking about it.)



It seems odd to us that the entire point of an activity is for the child to just LISTEN. Most people don't realize how important phonemic awareness is to the reading process. Just remember, when working on phonemic awareness, YOU will say the word (and sometimes sound out each phoneme in the word), and then wait for the child to make a decision about the sounds she hears. If she wants to help you sound words out, she can. But her main task is to *listen*.

There is more to phonemic awareness than hearing just the first and last sounds in a simple word, but these are the most important skills to start with. We can build on this foundation as we move forward.

Once your child masters the concepts presented in this text, she is ready to move on to phonemic awareness with vowels, and then sounding out basic code words. And that's what I'll write about next.

Stay tuned. :)