Letter Links — for Babies?

From the time children are born they begin to communicate using various cries, facial expressions, and body movements. These methods of communication continue to progress over the next few years as children combine sounds to produce words and articulate their thoughts verbally, identify and combine letters and begin to read, and develop the fine-motor skills to create letters to articulate their thoughts in writing. These three elements of communication, language, and literacy develop in ways that are consistent with the communication methods of the child's culture; that is to say, language learning is experiential — both social and environmental.

As infant and toddler caregivers, we facilitate this learning by establishing early relationships through playful interactions, responsiveness to infants' cues, and intentional decisions about the children's environment. One system for promoting the development of language, literacy, and communication through a combination of interactions and the environment is Letter Links. Initially developed for preschool classrooms, Letter Links also supports infants' and toddlers' communication, language, and literacy growth in a playful and developmentally appropriate way.

What's a Letter Link?

I'll use the term “Letter Links” throughout this book in different ways. When capitalized, Letter Links denotes the system specifically developed by HighScope to facilitate language, communication, and literacy learning in preschoolers, infants, and toddlers. I'll use the term letter links when discussing the association between the image and the initial letter of the child's name. When stressing specifically the image (rather than the relationship between letter and image), I'll use the terms letter-linked image or letter-linked picture.

Letter Links is a system that pairs a child's printed name with a letter-linked picture of an object that starts with the same letter and sound: Benjamin and balloon, Louie and ladybug.

Building on the early attachment relationship, familiarity with caregivers and peers, and daily routines, Letter Links introduces young children to alphabet letter names and sounds through the letters and sounds in their own names.

The Letter Links system is a classroom tool and a collection of strategies for playfully building language, literacy, and communication learning into regular, personal interactions by placing intentional emphasis on a child's name.

It is important to recognize that, while young children will have experiences with the sounds and letters in the names of other children as described through the strategies in this book, Letter Links is not meant as a tool for direct instruction of phonological awareness and alphabetic knowledge. Instead, Letter Links is useful in the classroom as recognition that a language-rich environment is important to children's early brain development and can have strong effects on early language, vocabulary, reading, and math skills, as well as children's social-emotional development (US Department of Education, n.d.).

Using children's names as a foundation for building relationships and exploring sounds and letters keeps learning focused on a personal and meaningful component of the child's life. This book includes many strategies for a variety of multidisciplinary experiences, supporting the simultaneous development of new skills — or strands of learning experiences, another component of authentic and transferable language learning.

“Young children need many opportunities to develop these strands interactively, not in isolation. Meaning, not sounds or letters, drives children's earliest experiences with print” (Neuman & Roskos, 2005).

To help you get started, this book includes a review of the research on the development of symbol recognition, alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness. The review provides the rationale for using letter-linked images with children's names and letter-linked pictures. Chapter 2 provides step-by-step directions for using Letter Links with the children and families in your program. In addition, this chapter includes the answers to several frequently asked questions about the Letter Links system. Chapter 3 provides several strategies — both interactions and activities to use throughout the day to emphasize the communication, language, and literacy concepts introduced through Letter Links. Chapter 4 provides sample images of letter links organized by letters and sounds common to the English language. These sample letter links are organized alphabetically by beginning letters and sounds. Additional images and samples can be found through the online Letter Links program (https://letterlinks.highscope.org/).

What the Research Says

As with any area of development, there is a typical progression of communication, language, and literacy growth that emerges in the infant and toddler years. This progression includes essential components that are directly connected to and supported by the use of the Letter Links system, such as speaking (or producing sounds), symbol recognition (or identification of environmental print), alphabetic principle (or letter recognition), phonological awareness, and writing. In infant and toddler classrooms, we support the development of these skills through social
interactions with adults (and increasingly with peers, as well, as infants become toddlers) and by recognizing these skills as interrelated elements of young children’s development. It is the child’s desire to communicate that drives emerging literacy skills. By engaging in give-and-take conversations with young children, singing, and reading books aloud, we stimulate and scaffold children’s ability to use and comprehend language in a variety of ways (Hohmann, Post, & Epstein, 2011). “Language development occurs in the context of relationships. Emotion and language development in the early years are linked” (California Department of Education, n.d.). By understanding how these skills are intertwined, we can plan intentional ways to effectively support young children’s language learning and their emerging ability to communicate with others.

**Speaking and Producing Sounds**

As soon as children are born they begin exploring sound through crying and, shortly after, through cooing, babbling, and imitating sounds. This development continues to include the creation and consistent use of recognizable syllables such as “ma” to indicate “mom” or “da” to indicate “dad,” and even further to produce words and sentences to verbally express their ideas, feelings, and needs to others. In infancy, children focus on distinguishing phonemes and exploring how to make these sounds over and over. When they coo and babble with a caregiver, for example, they are exploring phonemes (Maguire-Fong, 2015). Caregivers can scaffold this exploration to mastery by offering repetitive sound experiences through stories, songs, rhymes, and fingerplays.

In just a few short years, this exploration and mastery of new sounds becomes beneficial comprehension of how language works and how to communicate verbally with others. Studies of oral language competence show a direct relationship between children’s spoken language vocabulary and their later success as readers (Hart & Risley, 1995). Therefore, the exposure to and scaffolding of communication and language development in the infant-toddler years is essential to later literacy success.

The rate of language acquisition is rapid. By 18 months, most children can use 50 words and comprehend about 100 more; this jumps to about 1,000 words by the child’s third birthday (Medina, 2015). However, there is a significant socioeconomic difference in language exposure and vocabulary development. By three years of age, there is a 30 million word gap between children from the wealthiest and poorest families — that is, by the age of three, children in the top socioeconomic tier hear up to 30 million more words than their counterparts in the lowest socioeconomic tier. A recent study shows that this gap has an effect on vocabulary that is evident in toddlers. By 18 months, children in different socioeconomic groups display dramatic differences in their vocabularies (Collker, 2014). This provides early childhood educators and parents with a unique opportunity and an important responsibility to support children’s long-term communication, language, and literacy development through daily interactions and intentional environmental components.

Like many other components of learning, young children grasp new concepts best when they are engaged in experiences that are personally meaningful. In regard to speaking and producing sounds, these first meaningful experiences often start simply with the child hearing her own name. Everyday routines can be used to emphasize a child’s name. For example, addressing, caring for, and interacting with an infant builds the child’s personal connection to and familiarity with the sounds in his own name. Use children’s names as you say hello, as you are about to pick them up for a diaper change, or any time you are trying to get their attention. It is likewise meaningful to use the names and sounds of other familiar people such as the parents, primary caregiver, or peers. This secures the concept that people and objects can be identified by producing consistent sounds or names.

**Build children’s vocabulary.**

- Read a variety of types of books to children throughout the day.
- Tell made-up stories and real stories about things children have experienced.
- Describe children’s experiences using a variety of words and synonyms for familiar objects.
- Increase vocabulary and verbal skills by using self-talk, parallel talk, and simple sign language.

**Symbol Recognition and the Use of Environmental Print**

As young children become familiar with the idea that people and objects can be identified by consistent names, they will begin to recognize that objects and symbols in the environment also have meaning. The sight of a bottle or a box of Cheerios coming out of the cupboard means that food is coming. As children enter the toddler years they begin to recognize symbols in the community and connect a particular meaning or experience. Understanding that a McDonald’s sign consisting of integrated print and golden arches says “McDonald’s” and means a place to get
food is critical to beginning reading and the ability to comprehend print. At this early phase of literacy development, young children’s ideas about how written text works and how the printed word and symbolic representation are related are not connected to their knowledge of alphabet letters or to the sounds in language. Instead, their understanding is related to emerging awareness of symbols and representation (DeBruin-Parecki & Hohmann, 2003). Repeated exposure to consistent symbols in the environment such as a McDonald’s sign allows young children to build the skill of recognizing and comprehending the meaning of information in their environment.

This is true for any consistent and personally meaningful text, especially the child’s own name and the names of familiar people. Children begin to recognize that the written form of their name is a personal label that belongs to them (DeBruin-Parecki & Hohmann, 2003). Rather than being able to distinguish between each letter in their name, young children begin to recognize their name as a whole or a symbol of identity. This is an initial developmental stage in understanding that words and letters convey meaning, and this early form of symbolic representation establishes the groundwork for young children to recognize words in print. And these experiences are impactful not only during the infant and toddler years, but extend far beyond the time children are in our care. “Studies show that infants who are faster at recognizing familiar words at 18 months have larger vocabularies at age two and score higher on standardized language assessments in kindergarten and elementary school” (Demma & Hickey, 2014).

Through the consistent use of letter links in the classroom, young children can benefit from their developing ability to attach meaning to a familiar symbol and do so increasingly with motivation connected to something personal — their names. Create a print-rich environment.

- Use a combination of pictures and words to label objects, post a daily routine with words and photos, and post photos with children’s names and letter links.
- Incorporate both published and teacher-made books into several areas of the classroom and throughout the daily routine.

Alphabetic Principle and Letter Recognition

Infants and toddlers are born with the ability to see objects and symbols that they begin to recognize through repetition. As they grow and develop and language emerges, they begin to recognize unique characters with specific shapes, and later understand that when those characters are placed in a certain order, form words. As toddlers, they may start by initially seeing their names as a whole symbol representing who they are rather than a collection of individual letters that together create meaning. Also in the toddler years, children begin to distinguish a square from a triangle, a circle from a square, and so on. Being able to decipher one shape from another is an important precursor to distinguishing one letter from another — that is, to notice that a form has specific characteristics that make it different and unique from other forms.

This ability is a precursor to the development of the alphabetic principle, the awareness of the relationship between letters and sounds (DeBruin-Parecki & Hohmann, 2003). As young children are not yet able to read, they may not understand the role that letters play in written text, nor are they aware of the sounds produced to communicate verbally. They must first be able to visually distinguish an m from a d, for example, in order to later attach a unique sound to each letter. Young children then acquire increasing knowledge about these specific connections — that is, the sound(s) associated with each letter — through social interactions and intentional environmental strategies. These skills are critical for children to be able to learn to decode the text on the page. Children will often distinguish letters that are familiar to them first, such as the letters in their name, or other letters they frequently see around them, such as the S on stop signs (Shrier, 2013). We can increase children’s letter identification through repetition and an awareness that children achieve this recognition because their names are of personal importance to them (Epstein, 2014).

Support alphabetic knowledge and letter recognition.

- Provide three-dimensional alphabet materials, identify letters in the environment, and identify commonalities between letters in print and letters in children’s names.
- Refer to letters as natural opportunities arise, keep it playful, and avoid quizzing children or pressuring them to recognize letters.

Phonological Awareness: Cracking the Letter-Sound Code

Infants and toddlers begin exploring and distinguishing the difference between sounds as young infants, starting with recognizing the voices of their primary caregivers, responding physically and verbally to the sounds in the environment,
Sample nametag

**D**

**Deandre**

**Letter links** for names that begin with **D**

- Dog, Door, Duck, Dump truck. *Other choices: Deer, Doll, Dolphin.*

Sample nametag

**E**

**Evan**

**Letter links** for names that begin with **short E**

Heart, Helicopter, Horse, House. **Other choices:** Hammer, Hand, Harmonica, Harp, Hawk, Hat, Hedgehog, Hippo, Hose.

Igloo, Iguana, Infant, Insect. **Other choices:** Inch, Ink.
Letter links for names that begin with **T**

Sample nametag

Tambourine, Teapot, Tiger, Turtle. **Other choices:** Target, Teardrop, Tent, Tiger, Tire, Toe, Tooth, Torch, Turkey.

Sample nametag

Therometer, Thread, Throne, Thumb. **Other choices:** Thimble, Thorn.