

## Whoa...Wait a Minute

A couple weeks ago, a friend came in to look for a gift for her 21 month old granddaughter. One of the toys I suggested was a wooden book that included magnetic pictures that could be matched with the letters of the alphabet. As I explained how it worked, I mentioned that at 21 months the pictures would be meaningful, but I'd hold off on doing anything with the letters. My friend was surprised and said she thought that since we were a "learning store" I would be in favor of teaching the alphabet at 21 months.

Right away I thought –if this is what she's thinking –then what do others think? Our belief at Creative Learning-which is based on solid child development research-is that young children should be exposed to literacy and language in a variety of concrete ways. Everyday experiences with rich oral language engagement (not passive TV or computer games) lay the foundation for an interest in learning to read and write. This is what 21 month olds should be doing. Most children who have experienced life with quality oral language experiences (including being read to and telling stories) will naturally develop a curiosity about reading. Follow your child's lead and introduce reading and writing when they show an interest and understanding. To push letters, sounds and phonics any earlier may do more harm than good. Understanding the connection between the written and spoken word is developmental. When most young children recite the alphabet and name letters and/or their sounds, they are often doing it to please an adult and are not developmentally ready for understanding the more abstract connection.

So the question is; What should I be doing with my young child to enrich the development of language and literacy? Here are some ideas...

-From birth (and some would say before) sing, share finger plays and other rhymes, use language to name and describe, read to them, use language and develop concepts through pretend play, encourage your child to use their own language without correction. Children will self-correct their oral language over time as they hear more language modeled and their physical speech development occurs.

-Create a photo journal for your child. Write simple words (including your child's words) to go along with the photos. When your child is ready to read/write, this may be the first place you'll see an interest. When writing for your child, use upper and lower case letters and punctuation properly.

-Developmentally, whole words are more concrete and meaningful than separate letters-so start with those. Soon, children will usually see/hear the connection (naturally) between letters and their sounds in words. It means so much more to your child when they discover this connection instead of an adult telling them before they're ready. One mom reported that her child said, "Look Danielle (child's name) and Daddy and are the same (as she pointed to the two D's)." Now the mom knew her child was ready to make more comparisons. We have some great book ideas for children when they're at this stage.

-After you have observed a natural understanding of the connection between letters/sounds and words, begin to introduce letters in very concrete forms (letter puzzles and stencils, making letters with play dough or Wikki Stix, drawing in the sand, magnetic letters...)

-Go on a sound hunt around your house or while driving. For example name everything you see that starts with the "d" sound.

-Play with words. Write what your child says and provide fun tools for them to write words. Make word cards or use magnetic words to rearrange to make phrases and sentences and sort in many different ways. Workbooks and drill pages are seldom appropriate.

-Help your child create a personal dictionary. Make a book with each letter of the alphabet on a page or two. Your child can add each new word they learn to the dictionary (and illustrate if they'd like). Include words and names of people and things that are meaningful. This dictionary could then be used as a reference when writing. Many times when a child is just beginning to write, phonetic spelling is acceptable. For this dictionary, correct spelling should be used. This is a great way to learn alphabetical order, too.

I hope this clarifies our position at Creative Learning about how children develop as good readers and writers. We are always happy to assist you in making thoughtful choices and providing ideas that match the development of your child.

Cathy Albro