

Reading is Child's Play

— A Reading Activity While Grocery Shopping —
(Ages 3–9)



Preschoolers recognize signs and labels. With this they learn “print is talk written down!”



Older children help write and check lists, compare signs, and evaluate information on packages. This is especially valuable for a child struggling to read books.

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Reading Is Child's Play!

A child's "play" is actually more like what an adult calls "work." Much of a child's impulse to play is aimed at developing the communication skills needed to survive and flourish as adults.

The child begins by developing speech, a process that happens naturally, without much planning on our part. Soon after they can talk, they are ready to begin learning about communication through print. To help them with this, we need to be more intentional.

Without enough play with words in print, too many children will struggle to learn to read -- too many will fail. In the age of digital devices, it seems likely this will increase.

But parents, grandparents, and other caregivers can easily prepare a preschool child for success. They can also help an older child who's struggling with reading in school — all through play.

This page from the website, *KidsWriteToRead*, describes an activity designed to do just that. It explains *how* a child learns to read and *why* your help is so important. And it starts you off with a simple activity you can weave into your regular routine — as you go grocery shopping!

First Consider How a Small Child Learns -- Naturally

To see why the following activity works and how you can make it most effective, let's first look at the skill-building strategies nature has given a child.

Consider walking. The infant doesn't go directly from sitting up to walking. They first creep, crawl, stand, take a few steps while holding on -- then one day they walk. So their progress is a *series of stages*, each a little more complex.

Also, you didn't "teach" the infant to walk, but you did provide the *environment* for it.

Think of learning to read as unfolding in stages, too, with you providing a *print-rich environment*.

Now recall how a child learns to speak. You didn't sit them in their high chair and demonstrate how to say a word you had chosen to focus on that day.

You didn't tell them the meaning of that word, then describe how to place their tongue just so and use their breath in certain ways to make the sounds needed.

No, as you carried out some activity with *special meaning for your child*, you *modeled* the words associated with it. For instance, as you handed them their cup of milk and saw them smiling with delight, you said something like, "You love your milk!" or, "Milk is sooo good!" Then before long, as soon as they saw you pouring their milk, they began excitedly calling out some version of "Milk, milk milk!"

So the child *spontaneously absorbs information*, and in ways we cannot fully see, and they *develop the skills* needed to copy what someone *models* for them. We don't "teach" them that directly. We provide the modeling.

So you provide a *print-rich environment* and a *model*, and the child *spontaneously absorbs* (and in ways we don't fully understand), *figures out how to copy what you do*.

We can capitalize on this set of strategies nature has given the child. So let's look at how this plays out in a child's path toward reading.



5 Stages in A child's Path toward Reading -- and what we can do to help

From birth forward, a child is striving to develop increasingly complex ways to communicate. Within a *print-rich environment*, the child naturally works through the following 5 Stages:

1. *Crying/body language* --> 2. *Speech* --> 3. *Scribbling/Drawing* --> 4. *Writing* -->

5. *Reading Books*¹

The first two stages unfold without our thinking much about our role in it. But to move beyond Speech, we need to be more aware of modeling what we're doing.

For to move past Speech, a child needs to see others writing. So at home this means seeing someone write notes, make grocery lists, etc. And before today's digital age, children could easily see this happen.

But now, with most of us using our devices to write, it means we need to make a point occasionally of showing them what we're doing as we write emails and texts.



So while nature provides the path and the child's innate ability to absorb and practice on their own, we provide the print-rich environment and modeling essential for a child to become literate.

But for a variety of reasons, some children have very little chance to see someone writing. This leaves them paused at Speech.

Children who have not gone beyond Speech are at a disadvantage, as they are likely to struggle, perhaps fail, with a traditional reading program in school.



Traditional Reading Programs Leave a Gap

Formal reading instruction begins in 1st grade and is usually done with a traditional reading program. This may be a basal reading series (i.e., *Dick and Jane*, or later, *Janet and Mark*), which uses **leveled books**. Or it may be a phonics program, which features phonics worksheets, with practice in **corresponding books**.

So traditional approaches skip over the two stages in the child's natural path -- Scribbling/Drawing and Writing -- and begin with books. And for a child not coming from a print-rich environment, this leaves a very large gap.

Here's how the path looks for a child with little or no experience with print, when faced with a traditional reading program: Before today's digital age, children could easily see this happen.

1. *Crying/body language* --> 2. *Speech* --> 3. *Scribbling/Drawing* --> 4. *Writing* ----> 5. *Reading Books*

Such a child struggles to jump over that gap. And too many of them fail to make the leap.

The good news is that anyone interested enough in this topic to read this far has probably already been reading to their child and given them opportunities to see them writing. So they have already taken their child well into the Scribbling/Drawing stage.

This means their child already knows talk can be turned into print. And once a child discovers that, they want to do it themselves. So now let's take a look at a simple activity you can use to get your child even farther down the path.

Learn more about print while grocery shopping!

This activity will help your child move into writing on their own, by learning more about how to translate their "talk" into print. Here's how to do it --

1. Gather materials:

- large index cards, cut in half, lengthwise. (Small recipe cards cut in half will do, too, or any other sturdy paper you can find.)
- one fat felt-tip marker for you to use, and some thin-tipped colored pens or colored pencils -- for the child to draw.
- one metal ring -- it can be a shower curtain ring or a sturdier ring that opens and closes easily
- a paper hole punch

2. Create a Key Word:

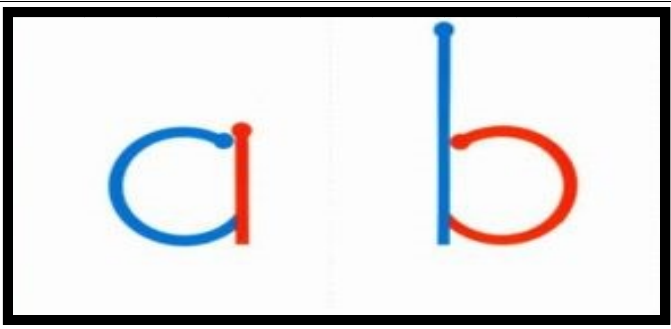
- Shortly before you actually leave for your next trip grocery shopping, tell the child what's on your list, and have them choose the ONE item they want the most. Encourage them to talk about it. For example, if it's ice cream: what flavor they like best, when you last bought them a cone, where to look for it in the grocery store, what the carton looks like etc. Make sure they are envisioning it.
- With the fat tip pen, print the word (see below for charts for printing) saying the name of each letter as you go.
- If their attention drifts, stop, and tell them you can't go on until they watch.
- Have them trace over each letter with the index finger of their writing hand. You say the letter names as they go.
- Hold the word card about 2 or 3 ft. away from them, and say the word again. Then ask them to say it, too.
- Punch a hole on in the corner of the word card and help them place the word on the metal ring.



- 3. Let them carry the word with them as you go to the store. While shopping, help them match the card to the words written by or on that item. See how many places they can find the word written close by. As you put the item on the conveyor belt at the check stand, let them place the word on top of it momentarily. (In short, do whatever you can think of to tie the word card to the item.)
- 4. The next time you do this (hopefully in the next 2 or 3 days), show them the word card and wait. Don't say the word, wait to see if they remember it. If yes, then keep it on the word ring and add another word. If no, take it off and set it aside, without remarking on it -- and give them a new word. This time, try to be sure they are choosing something they really like, and perhaps talk about it a bit longer. It's extremely important only words they recognize stay on the ring.

Alphabet Formation Guides

Your printing does not have to be perfect, but the style you use should be clear and consistent. Here's a chart to use as to guide, in case you feel you need it.



In most cases, lines go from top to bottom. Curves also begin at the top. Blue in the example below indicates where to begin. Again, the main thing is to decide how you want to print, then be consistent.

Helping Your Child Move Farther Along Their Path

You can easily *expand* on this activity. You can take a similar approach at home, having the child choose words with special meaning to them -- things they love, fear, want, etc. For how to support them as they grow, google KidsWriteToRead.com and follow the directions on the page, [Giving Key Words at Each Step](#).

For more about *why this activity is so valuable*, see the page in that website, [Writing Fills The Gap](#), and the introductory paragraphs in [Key Words and The Steps](#).

Good luck! And please don't hesitate to leave [Comments or Questions](#) in the website, as you go.

¹The term "Reading Books" is used to acknowledge that children are reading familiar things all along. They are reading your expression, labels to know which carton holds their favorite cereal, etc. So Book Reading, refers to what we might call "cold reading" of books written by someone else.

