

Teachers who draw young children's attention to environmental print can increase their awareness of letters, words, and sounds, such as those in familiar logos and signs. Several practical strategies, based on research about the values of environmental print for early literacy, are described here.

# Environmental Print: Real-World Early Reading

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Jennifer Prior

What is environmental print? It is symbols all around. Environmental print is on signs, billboards, packages, junk mail, and everywhere. Young children easily recognize environmental print in their surroundings. Their everyday experiences with print are an important classroom tool to help children connect what they already know about written language and what they are learning. This article reviews some of the most pertinent research about environmental print and describes ways to put research into practice.

**Environmental print is everywhere.**

contain rich contextualized cues, so the identification of environmental print illustrates to children that print is symbolic, functional, and meaningful.

By the time children enter kindergarten, most have gained extensive knowledge about written language from their experiences with literacy in everyday life. They see print everywhere in their environments. Family members, children's librarians, and early childhood teachers often read to them. They observe their families' literacy routines, such as newspaper reading, list making, and reading food labels.

Children construct their own ideas about the function, structure, and conventions of written language (Daniel, Clarke, & Ouellette, 2004) and imitate literacy behaviors based on their interpretations of the acts of reading and writing they observe. By kindergarten entry, most children understand the alphabetic nature of print, how to handle books, and are aware that English print is read from left to right. They use varying degrees of grapho-phonetic, syntactic, and semantic cueing systems and have observed that the writings of others have meaning.

## Environmental Print: Making Meaning From Symbols

Research on environmental print first gained positive attention in the 1980s and then interest tapered off after a few studies (Masonheimer, Drum, & Ehri, 1984; Cloer, Aldridge, & Dean, 1981/1982) refuted its benefits.

In the past 20 years or so, researchers realized how early young children recognize a variety of print at home. The Cheerios® logo, for example, is associated with breakfast cereal. Growing children become aware of the names of many product logos like this. High percentages of children between the ages of 2 and 5 years can read numerous product and restaurant logos (Christie, et al., 2003; Christie, et al., 2007; Masonheimer, Drum, & Ehri, 1984).

These children are typically not able to decode the words in logos, but they are able to use symbolic clues to "read" meanings associated with the colors and graphics. Items in children's everyday surroundings

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## Constructing Literacy Connections

Experiences with environmental print help children make connections between the informal literacy experiences they have at home and the more formal ones they engage in at school. Children often relate written words to the sounds they make even before they have learned conventional reading skills. Families and teachers who use environmental print materials as part of children's early literacy experiences build on the skills children have already developed and convey to them that reading is a valuable skill. For example,

- Discussing print items helps to create meaningful experiences for children (Anderson & Markle, 1985; Christie, et al., 2003; Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003; Prior & Gerard, 2004).
- Drawing attention to logos and reading them with children encourages the connection between reading and the real world (Epstein, 2002; Kantowitz & Wingert, 2002; Rule, 2001) and helps children recognize that reading is everywhere.

The use of environmental print has *constructive* and *instructive* significance (Cloer, Aldridge, & Dean, 1981/1982). Children construct their own knowledge of print through interaction with familiar logos and product labels. At the same time, teachers can use these kinds of materials in an instructional manner to create a transition from reading logos to reading words. This assists children in developing the basic concepts of print (Xu & Rutledge, 2003).

Children's ability to recognize environmental print has been the focus of many studies. The topic has fueled debate about whether or not the recognition of environmental print transfers to the process of reading. After removing visual and contextual cues, children often are no longer able to recognize environmental print words (Cloer, Aldridge, & Dean, 1981/1982; Kuby, Aldridge, & Snyder, 1994; Yliso, 1967). These findings have led to claims that children must have certain skills, such as the alphabetic principle and structures of text, before they are able to read. They also need to have phonological awareness and an interest in the meaning of print (Hill, 2000; Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, 2003).

So, what exactly is necessary for children to become aware of the individual symbols and sounds of environmental print logos? With adult guidance, will children attend to the letters and sounds in environmental print? Can this guided exposure to environmental print transfer to conventional reading?

**Invent hands-on learning opportunities.**

## Teaching Strategies That Build on Children's Print Experiences

Early reading is a combination of experiences, including children's early exposure to print in their world. Supplementing and enriching the curriculum with activities using familiar print provides an auditory and visual anchor to remember letter symbol and sound (Christie et al., 2003).



**Subjects & Predicates**

*Children often relate written words to the sounds they make even before they learn conventional reading skills. Families and teachers who use environmental print materials as part of children's early literacy experiences build on the skills children have already developed and convey to them that reading is a valuable skill.*

Kindergartners' print awareness increases with the use of environmental print materials and the addition of teacher-facilitated instruction brings about increased print awareness (Christie et al., 2003; Christie et al., 2007; Prior & Gerard, 2004). Letter/sound identification also appears to improve through instruction with environmental print.

By intentionally including environmental print activities in their classrooms, teachers can provide opportunities for children to connect their prior knowledge to literacy experiences in school. Experiences with familiar print assist children with word recognition and provide them with a sense of ownership when they recognize logos and product labels that they see every day. Environmental print materials can be used in many different ways, a few of which are described here.

## Set Up Learning Centers

Environmental print can be included in learning centers for independent, small-group explorations. Children benefit the most when they help create these learning tools, often with recycled materials. Imaginative teachers can use these ideas as a springboard for inventing many other hands-on opportunities for children to make and play constructively.

**Games.** Games can draw children's attention to specific letters. These are two examples of games that encourage learning from environmental print.

- **Memory Game.** Place eight cards face down. A child turns

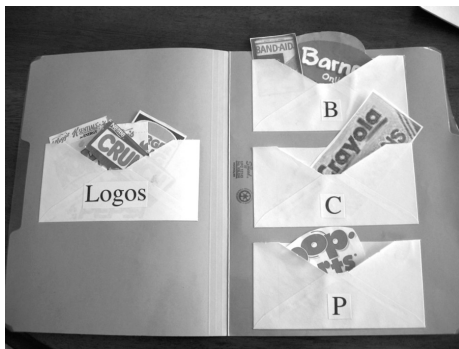


Photo courtesy of the author.

*A child sorts logos by beginning letters. Label three envelopes with different letters. The child places logos in the corresponding envelopes.*



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over two cards at a time and matches a logo with its beginning letter (McDonald's® matches M).

- **Letter Envelopes.** A child sorts logos by beginning letters. Label three envelopes with different letters. The child places logos in the corresponding envelopes.

These games are designed to draw children's attention to beginning letters and decontextualized words. To make them more challenging as children's skills improve, increase the number of cards and/or difficulty of the matches. Children might also play these games in pairs, which

encourages discussion about the symbols and print.

In an all-day kindergarten room, low, oblong tables are transformed into literacy centers. A buzz of activity and chatter fills the classroom.

One group of children is busy cutting, sorting, and pasting coupons from recycled junk mail and magazines.

Two children put together puzzles made from cut-up cereal boxes. Tamika observes, "We are getting this Cocoa Puffs® box back together."

Raul comments, "Look, this is Trix®."

Two others make letter sounds as they encounter the letters on the puzzle pieces. Keri-Anne

Another group is playing a matching game. The children realize that one of the S logos is missing. They all search for the missing logo.

Marco asks, "Is it Sesame Street®?"

Deena wonders, "Is it Skittles®?"

Seth immediately notices, "No, Skittles is right here."



Photo courtesy of the author.

Create logo flip books with two each of four logos. Cut the pages in half. The child flips pages to match the top and bottom of the logo.

**Logo Flip Books.** Create flip books with two each of four logos. Cut the pages in half. The child flips pages to match the top and bottom of the logo.

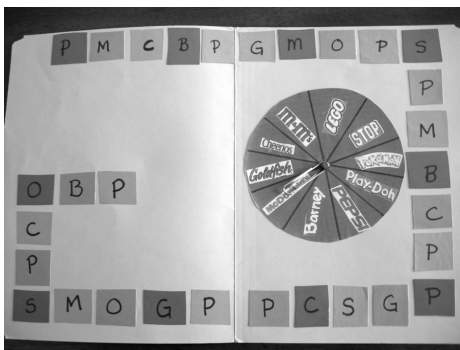


Photo courtesy of the author.

A game board has a trail of squares with different letters. A spinner has 10 different logos. Each player chooses a game piece. Children, in turn, spin the spinner. They move game pieces to the nearest square that has the same beginning letter as the logo on the spinner.

**Two-Letter Folder.** Feature a different letter inside each side of a file folder. The child matches logos to the correct side according to the beginning letter.

**Game Board With Spinner.** A game board has a trail of squares with different letters. A spinner has 10 different logos. Each player chooses a game piece. Children, in turn, spin the spinner. They move game pieces to the nearest square that has the same beginning letter as the logo on the spinner.

**Alphabet Book.** Each page of this book features a letter of the alphabet. Several logos with corresponding beginning letters are displayed on each page.

**Logo Collection.** Children select logos, glue them to paper, and then write or dictate stories about that logo. For example, Henri wrote, "There is a STOP sign on the corner by my house. Cars and bikes are supposed to stop. We stop, too, when we walk on the sidewalk." Punch holes to bind children's logos into books that grow along with their early reading skills.

**Letter Assemblages.** A child selects a letter to feature on an assemblage or collage. Recycled magazines, modeling compounds, writing materials, ribbon, and stamps might be offered as ways to represent the letter.

## Lead Small-Group Learning Experiences

Teachers can also facilitate learning in small groups with environmental print materials. "It is not enough to simply immerse children with print (in homes, classrooms, or community settings) and expect that they will read and make sense of it" (Orellana & Hernandez, 2002, p. 33).

By talking with children about the print they see in their environment, they are able to display and broaden their knowledge about the "rich experiential worlds" where they live (p. 35).

**Mystery Logos.** Discuss the letters children notice in logos and the sounds they represent. This short story illustrates what a teacher might say and how children transfer their alphabet knowledge to decontextualized print.

A teacher of older 4-year-olds is facilitating a small group of children who are matching logos to decontextualized print. Each child has a set of logos written in print form.

The teacher shows a logo. Each child finds a matching word as the teacher asks engaging, open-ended questions such as these:

"How do you know that one stands for Macaroni & Cheese?"

"What other logos begin with the same letter?"

"What other letters in that word do you know?"

"What letter sounds do you hear when you say the word?"

"Who can find an S?"

**Word Walls.** Children attach logos cut from recycled print materials to walls according to categories such as Things we eat, Things we drink, Places we go, and Toys we play with.

**Logo Fishing.** With children, create a deck of about 40 cards by gluing logos to index cards. Make two cards for each logo. Sit with children at first to assist them with the game. Deal four cards to each child. In turn, children ask if others in the group have a particular logo. For example, "Do you have Taco Bell®?" If a child in the group has the requested logo, he or she gives it up. Matches are placed facedown in a pile. If no one has that logo, the child

takes a card from the card pile. The first child to get match all cards is the winner.

**Logos Around the House.** Label each of several sheets of construction paper with the names of and pictures of rooms in a typical house (kitchen, living room, bedroom, bathroom). Children find and cut out logos of household items, then identify in which room of the house that product would be found. For example, children might place Colgate® in the bathroom and Kellogg's® in the kitchen.

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**Environmental print is a bridge between emergent reading and alphabetic decoding.**

Teachers who include environmental print activities in their classrooms provide opportunities for children to connect their prior knowledge to literacy experiences in school. Children begin to recognize words and feel a sense of ownership when they recognize familiar logos and product labels.

Adult/child interaction with environmental print is particularly effective in helping children make the transition from seeing logos as merely graphics to seeing them as graphics that contain letters and words. Children's early reading skills are reinforced by their surroundings.

Environmental print clearly has a place in intentional teaching. It can be a bridge between emergent reading and alphabetic decoding. Print in the real world—signs, billboards, logos, and functional print that saturate the environment—offers many literacy opportunities. Teachers can actively and creatively

build upon these experiences to help children connect sounds to meaningful letters, words, and text.

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## Making Books Part of a Healthy Childhood

### A Community Service Project of the Southern Early Childhood Association

The Southern Early Childhood Association and Reach Out and Read have teamed up to sponsor a project to promote early literacy and ensure that children grow up with books and a love of reading.



[www.reachoutandread.org](http://www.reachoutandread.org)  
1-617-455-0600

# Put These Ideas Into Practice!

## Environmental Print: Real-World Early Reading

by Jennifer Prior

### Why Environmental Print Is a Valuable Teaching Tool

- Environmental print is the print all around—on signs, billboards, product packaging, junk mail, and everywhere. Young children recognize many familiar logos and symbols.
- Environmental print illustrates to children that print is symbolic, functional, and meaningful.
- Environmental print can be an important tool to help children make connections between what they already know about written language and what they are learning.
- Environmental print can be used in many different, intentional ways to help children connect sounds to meaningful letters, words, and text.

### Small-Group Learning Experiences

**Intentional teaching with environmental print can be hands-on and engaging.**

- **Mystery Logos.** Discuss the letters children notice in logos and the sounds they represent.
- **Word Walls.** Children attach logos cut from recycled print materials to walls according to categories.
- **Logo Fishing.** Children play a modified game of Go Fish using cards with matching logos.
- **Logos Around the House.** Children place product logos on paper replicas of rooms in which they are commonly found.

### Learning Centers

**These child- and teacher-made activities make the most of recycled environmental print materials.**

- **Memory Game.** Place eight cards face down. A child turns over two cards at a time and matches a logo with its beginning letter.



Letter Envelopes

- **Letter Envelopes.** A child sorts logos by beginning letters into three envelopes labeled with different letters.

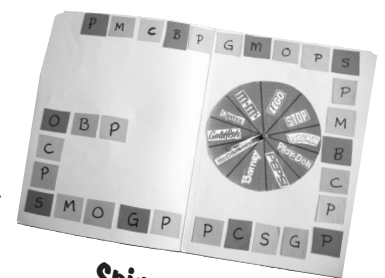
- **Logo Flip Books.** Create flip books with two each of four logos. Cut the pages in half. The child matches the top and bottom of the logo.



Logo Flip Books

- **Two-Letter Folder.** The child matches logos with beginning letters.

- **Game Board With Spinner.** Game pieces are moved to the nearest square that has the same beginning letter as the logo on the spinner.



Spinner Game

- **Alphabet Book.** Several logos with corresponding beginning letters are displayed on each page.

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- **Letter Assemblages.** A child selects a letter to feature on an assemblage.

Note: *Dimensions of Early Childhood* readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.