

Letter Lab

Module 2





Letter Lab

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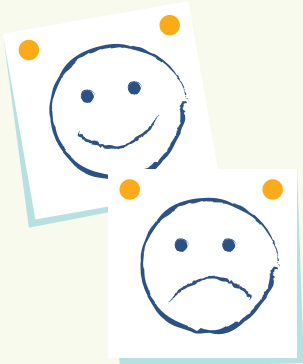




Letter Lab

Letter Lab allows children to have different and essential experiences with letters. Using hands-on activities they will learn the following about our written language:

- Letters are formed from different shapes
- Which letters are personal to them
- There are 26 letters, but only four basic shapes are required to write all of the capital letters
- All letters come together to form the alphabet



Learning about letters

From the age of around just two years, children begin to discover written language and writing by imitating others. They “write” shapes that look like letters: Ms for mountains, Os like balls, Ds like full tummies, and they scribble notes.

During their time at nursery, children begin to learn that letters represent certain sounds. They see black and coloured characters in their immediate environment. Sometimes they are small, sometimes huge, and sometimes they are lit-up or flashing. When adults read aloud, children learn that these characters come together to tell stories in books. They must be something special... maybe they're a secret code for adults?

Children naturally try to understand what letters mean and why certain letters represent specific sounds. Most children want to write their own name. That is why the letters that represent themselves are the most meaningful at the beginning. They don't yet identify the sounded values of the letters of their name, but they have a personal value and importance.

The number of children who intuitively find an economic way of moving their hand in order to write, and unconsciously start working from left to right, is astounding. In this phase, children are particularly influenced by the model of correct writing in their attempts.

Use the Letter Lab activities to support your young writers to develop the skills they need to form letters.



Letter Lab

1



Create letters

Activity outline:

In this activity children learn how small changes to one distinctive feature (a line, a dot or a stroke) can change the meaning of images and letters.

Warm up:

Give each child some paper circles or circles drawn on a piece of paper and a pencil/crayon. Ask the children to draw one happy face and one sad face using simple lines and dots. How many different happy and sad faces are there in the class? What happens when they draw straight or slanting lines over the eyes? Can they change the faces more by adding hairstyles, glasses and accessories?

Now discuss all the faces. What shapes have the children used to create the faces? What changes do the different shapes add to the faces? How do the children vary the shapes to change the faces from happy to sad?

Main task:

M A R K

Use the concept in the faces activity to change the letters of the children's names. Ask the children to write out their names or initials in capitals on a piece of paper. Now see what happens when they add lines, leave lines out/remove them, or turn the letters around or upside down. Can they make a new letter? Let the children discover the changes they can make, simply by trying them out.

The basic form of the letters is maintained. The changes made are small and simple. When the children consciously change the letters, they pay close attention to the different elements making up the shape. This is important for flowing

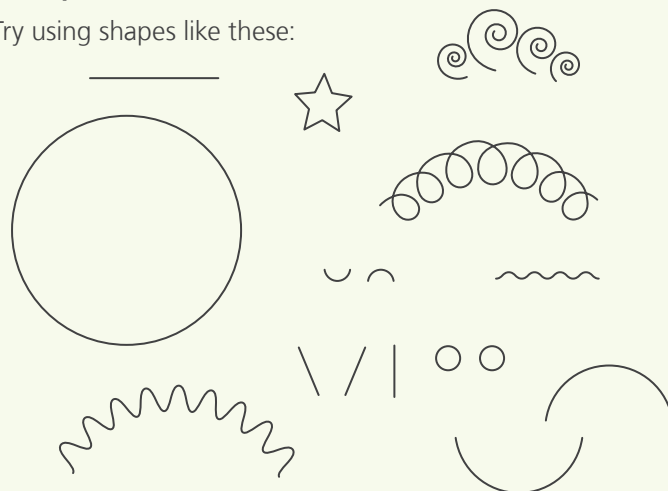
Materials required:

- Paper with circles drawn on or at least two paper circles per child
- Pencils or crayons
- Eraser/rubber



Examples:

Try using shapes like these:



Follow up:

Talk about what caused the changes in meaning for the faces and letters. Discuss how it only takes a short, horizontal line, to make an F into an E.

Talk about how each letter stands as a character for a specific sound. The letter P stands for the sound P(ea) and the words post office and Peter, for example. If you add just one slanted line, then it becomes the letter R which stands for the sound (a)R and words like rocket and Robert.

Extension:

- If there are children whose parents use different writing systems, for example, Chinese or Arabic with a different alphabet it is very engaging for them to look at the basic elements, examine their meaning and compare them with other letters.

Observation points:

- Have the children understood why it is important to make the strokes precisely and what effect can be achieved with changing small lines?
- Can the children talk about and explain what they have understood in their own words?



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Letter Lab



Shaping letters

Activity outline:

In this activity children are asked to create shapes based on the structure of letters, to help them engage and recognise their use in the formation of letters and numbers. This requires a lot of intuitive dexterity and concentration.

Warm up:

Look at a range of different letters on the poster, in books and other stimuli. Which letters do the children recognise and which ones can they name?

Main task:

The children become letter artists. Ask them to form different letters using pipe cleaners. Start with something easy like O and then progress to more difficult shapes like B and A. Which letter is the hardest to shape?

After the children have shaped their letters ask them to write them out using a pencil or crayon, using similar movements to physically shape the letters. In this exercise, care should be taken to ensure that economical movements are made. Pen stroke from top to bottom, curves in one stroke with a short pause before beginning the second curve (see Alphabet poster).



Materials required

- A selection of pipe cleaners: different colours, lengths and thicknesses.
- A range of materials which can be used to shape letters.
- Pencils/crayons
- Pieces of paper for writing
- Alphabet poster

Follow up:

The general relevance of activities such as this should never be forgotten, all exercises about letters should always have the goal of appreciative, development-oriented activity with diverse experiences. If the child doesn't manage the task, then don't see this as a problem. Instead, it represents the opportunity to give some gentle help along the way towards writing, and some time to experience, reflect and communicate.

This activity is about structuring shapes, which promotes hand and finger dexterity. It will be possible for the children to make some shapes straightaway, but others will need more time. Discuss with the children which letters were simple to shape and the ones that were more difficult. Were there some letters they needed help with?

Extension:

Numerous life experiences that use motor skills support children on their way to forming letters with increasing confidence in terms of structure and quality. Children can try shaping letters with paper strips, florists' wire, small wooden sticks, for example. Combine with learning activities that involve physical shaping experiences, for example. kneading and shaping clay, marking sand with hands or with a stick, making large paintings on paper on the floor or on a wall. The children begin with the letters that make up their own name and add to these using the Alphabet poster. To extend further try shaping numbers too.

Observation points:

- How quickly do the children grasp the instructions and are they able to carry out the exercises successfully?
- Can they coordinate hand and finger movements appropriately for the exercise?
- Do they come up with other ideas themselves about how letters can be written?



Letter Lab

3



Letter building blocks

Activity outline:

Capital letters that the children recognise can be composed out of four basic shapes. This activity challenges them to make recognisable letters by choosing the correct shapes to use.

Warm up:

Share images of capital letters and ask the children which basic shapes they recognise in the letters (a curve, a short straight line, a long straight line etc). Provide the children with some example shapes and discuss which ones are needed to form some example letters. Arrange the shapes as they suggest and see what you can create. The shapes can overlap and ovals can be made with two large curves.

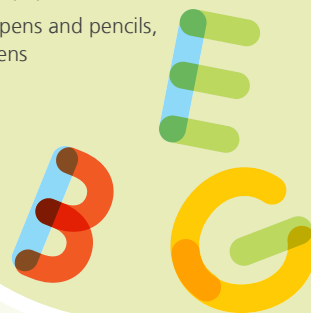
Main task:

Provide the four basic shapes in sufficient numbers (you could ask the children to cut them out if you have time). They can colour in the shapes. Ask the children to work in small groups and allocate each group a selection of letters which they work together to create, using the shapes. Give each group a different selection and see if the whole class can make up the whole alphabet. Once the letters have been created ask the children to write them out replicating the shapes they have been using.



Materials required

- The four basic shapes on white or coloured paper/card
- Coloured pens and pencils, fibre-tip pens
- Scissors



Follow up:

The children have to think carefully about the shapes that they need and the spatial positioning when they mark out or lay down their letters. Which letters contain the most/least shapes? Can they see how some letters use the same shapes, like A and H, or E and F? Highlight how some letters will always have an open top like H and some have lots of curves like B.

Perceiving a letter, initially as several shapes and then later as a whole, is an important pre-requisite for flowing handwriting. Children who have difficulties with abstraction may require more time to practise.

Extension:

Ask the children to use the shapes to form the capital letters of their name.

Look at which shapes might be needed to form lowercase letters and then move on to look at the shapes used in numbers. Are they as easy to identify?

Observation points:

- Do the children understand the activity?
- Can they lay out the structural elements of different letters according to the templates?
- Do the children understand that letters can be made out of just a few basic elements?
- Some children need help with abstraction. These children need special attention and encouragement to help them develop flowing handwriting in the future.



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Letter Lab



Feel letters

Activity outline:

This activity encourages children to create tactile, 3D letters which they can physically engage with, move and manipulate. Every child uses the letters of their name to make different tactile letters with the materials available.

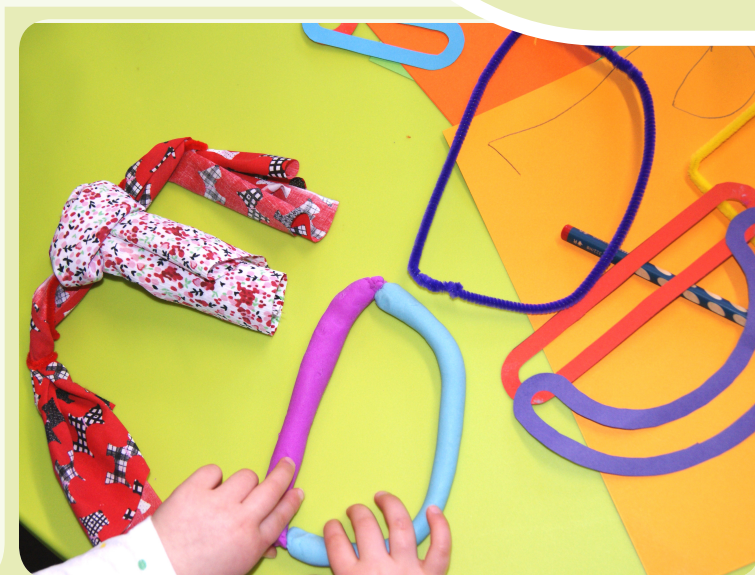
Warm up:

Engage the children with a range of tactile materials such as fabrics, modelling clay, paper and card, or pipe cleaners. Discuss the feel and texture of these materials, ask the children to name the different properties they have: hard, soft, smooth or rough for example.

Main task:

Explain to the children that they will be creating their own 3D letter(s) using the materials they have been looking at. The children can choose the material they would like to use to shape the first letter of their name (or their initials). The children should draw their letter on a piece of paper first and then shape it out of their chosen materials using the same movements they used to draw it.

This activity allows the children to literally “grasp” the letter thanks to tactile, kinesthetic perception skills, and feel the shape and course of movement. Once the children have shaped their letter they can then decorate it if time allows.



Materials required

- A range of tactile materials; fabrics, modelling clay, paper and card, pipe cleaners etc
- Paper
- Pencils/crayons

Follow up:

With regular activities based on feeling the shapes of the letters and writing on “grippy” surfaces (e.g. textured wallpaper, rough surfaces, surfaces that are slightly resistant to the pressure of a hand when writing), the feel of the movements are stored in the children’s memories.

Discuss which movements the children used to shape their letters: were they short sharp movements, smooth movements or a mixture of both? Did they need to shape curves or straight lines for their letters? Talk about how the movements they used to make their letters were different or similar to the movements they use to write their letters.

Extension:

Use the letters which the children have made to see if you can create a whole tactile ABC.

Which letters are missing? Ask the children to make the missing letters to complete the alphabet.

Observation points:

- Do children increasingly manage to recognise the basic elements of making up letters and quickly write these from memory?
- Do some children find it difficult to grip and feel?
- Can children replicate movements used to shape their letters physically (like making curves and straight lines) using pens and paper? This shows the connection between physical action and how to actively write.



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Letter Lab



Letters in the alphabet

Activity outline:

This activity allows the children to understand that all letters are part of the alphabet and follow a pattern and order. It helps them to recognise the order of the alphabet and where the letters from their own names will feature.

Warm up:

Ask the children to write out their name in capital letters on individual pieces of paper or post-it notes. Ask them to count how many letters are in their name. Who's name contains the most/least letters?

Main task:

Ask the children if they understand what the alphabet is; if a child is willing, ask them to explain what it is; if not, give your own definition. It may be useful to sing an alphabet song which will help the children remember the order of the letters. Explain to the children that you are going to try and create a big alphabet using the letters from their names.

Ask the children which letter the alphabet starts with and then all the children who have A in their name come forward and place their A on the floor or table; this is the start of their alphabet. Next ask for the second letter and so on. See how much of the alphabet can be made using the letters of the children's names. Which letters are missing? Write these out

Materials required

- Coloured note paper/post it notes
- Alphabet poster as a template
- Pens and pencils



Follow up:

Discuss what the alphabet is and why letters are grouped in this way. Talk with the children about when it might be useful to know the alphabet and why it is helpful. Examples could be that the sequence and order of the alphabet can be helpful later in school when they want to look things up in a dictionary or index. This is particularly challenging for some children to grasp, so practice can help.

Recap the order of letters in the alphabet and talk about ways the children can remember the order.

Extension:

Using the post-its, see if the children can make words other than their names. Suggest animal names, colours and foods, and see if they can identify the letters needed for particular words.

Observation points:

- Do the children enjoy writing the letters from their names?
- Do children treat learning activity materials that they have created themselves with greater care?
- Is the type of task appreciated, or do some children find learning about the ABC boring or difficult?

These children may need further support.