

Using the Cardstock Movable Alphabet

Young children are keenly interested in language, including written words. Even before they can hold a pencil, they want to learn all about the letters and their sounds. Once they know the sounds, they want to use them to write words! The movable alphabet lets children “write” words even if they can not yet draw letters with a pencil.

When they first start writing words with the movable alphabet, the children usually write words by sound/phonetically. For example, instead of writing ‘waffles,’ they might write ‘woflz.’ The fact that they are writing and getting any of the sounds correct is a great sign! Don’t correct them. The more they write and, eventually, read, their spelling abilities will naturally refine. For now, just encourage them to write and enjoy the beauty of language. In general, try to meet the children at their developmental stage. If they want correct spellings, give them correct spellings. If they are satisfied with phonetic spellings, don’t even notice misspellings.



Before you Begin

Before introducing the movable alphabet to a child, you want to be sure the child has the potential to succeed in its use. The following table describes aspects of development that occur before or in tandem with the ability to phonetically spell words.

Writing Prerequisite	Primary Means of Development
Self confidence	Ongoing experience and success with practical life activities. These include anything children will ultimately learn to do for themselves in order to dress, wash, eat, toilet, clean-up, behave graciously in common social situations, and generally master their living environment. Examples include buttoning, zipping, sweeping, washing a table, hand washing, and role playing how to excuse one's self, greet a guest, apologize, offer help, take turns, etc.
An organized mind (so they can express themselves logically)	Exposure to a logically-organized physical environment; Predictable daily routines; Experience with the logical consequences of one's actions (e.g., seeing that a glass breaks if it is dropped and then helping to clean up the broken glass); Also see “Self Confidence” above
Knowledge of words to form sentences	Natural conversations where children have the opportunity and inspiration to speak; Reading stories; Vocabulary lessons
Phonemic Awareness	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of sounds 	Hearing and speaking our language; Hearing and singing songs; Hearing and reciting poems; Playing rhyming games; Hearing music; Singing; Enjoying rhythm (via dance, clapping, marching, drumming, etc.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to recognize sounds in words 	Experience speaking and pronouncing words; Hearing words slowly and carefully pronounced; Repeating new words; Singing songs; Reading books; Reciting poetry; Playing sound games like “I Spy”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to recognize the symbols that correspond to different sounds/ associating the sounds with symbols 	Sandpaper letters taught via the 3-period lesson; Don't introduce the alphabet until the child can recognize almost all of the sounds in the alphabet. For example, if you have three letters in front of you and you say, “Which one says mmmm,” the child can find the ‘m.’
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to link letters together to make words 	Experience in sequencing via Practical Life exercises (see “Self Confidence” above) and Sensorial exercises (e.g., ordering blocks from short to tall; matching color tablets, matching fabrics while wearing a blindfold, etc.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The desire to write 	Inspiration, joy, enthusiasm; Witnessing and participating in the magic that is alive in the world

Preparing the Alphabet

The letters are sized to fit inside a craft box or a container you can make yourself from egg cartons. For egg cartons, use two carton bottoms: one that will hold 12 sets of letters and another that will hold 18 sets of letters. Hot glue the cartons to cardboard, foam board, or some other sturdy base to support the cartons. Remove all elastics and organize the letters alphabetically beginning with ‘a’ on the top left.

1. Finding and Replacing Letters in the Box

Note: The child may need to repeat this first lesson many times before being confident they can use the letters/box.

1. Find a clean workspace that is free from distractions. Show the child how to carry the alphabet box and place it on the work area.
2. Say, "These letters are so special. They are made from cardstock. We need to wash and dry our hands before we use them." Go together to do so. Make this part of your routine every time you use the alphabet.
3. Say, "This is how you open and close the box." Show the child carefully and then give her a turn.
4. Choose the first sound in the child's name. Say, "Let's see if we can find the 'm' sound." Start scanning through the letters, starting at the top left and proceeding to the right, row by row. Using your index finger and thumb, carefully take the top letter m and place it in front of the box.
5. Encourage the child to find a few more sounds, remove them, and place them in front of the box (each in its own space). This is your test to make sure the child knows enough sounds to proceed to Lesson 2 (below).
6. Say, "Now I'll show you how we put the letters back so carefully." Demonstrate carefully and then give the child a turn with the other sounds.
7. Say, "You're so careful with these letters! You can take them out and put them back as much as you like."



2. Writing the First Words

1. Bring the alphabet to a clean workspace that is free from distractions.
2. Say, "I had a lovely visit with my brother this weekend. We played cards and went for a hike. I want to write a story about that. I think I'll write the word lovely first." Slowly articulate each sound in the word. Say, "Let's see if we can find that first sound." Sound out the word again and isolate the "l" sound. Look at the letters slowly, discover the l, and place it below the alphabet carton. Continue until you have written the entire word. When you get to the "ee" sound at the end of lovely, pause for a moment and say, "Oh I remember, I need two letters to make this sound, just like the green sandpaper letters." Then, make the "ee" phonogram with two e's. Don't worry about spelling at this stage. Spell phonetically for now.
3. Say, "Oh, I liked doing that. Let's write more of my story. I had a lovely visit with my brother this weekend. We played cards and went for a hike. Which word should we write next?" Pause to see if she will choose. If not, you can. Say, "Let's write visit. This time you can do it!" Help the child if she needs it.
4. Continue to write as many words from your story as the child would like but be sure to stop before fatigue sets in. You want to leave her loving this work and wanting more. When you're done, celebrate the accomplishment, "Look at the story we've written!"
5. Clean up by saying, "Which one is your favorite sound? Let's put all of those away first." Do this for each letter.
6. Say, "You could do this again tomorrow and write about something that happened to you. I wonder what you'll write..." If the child is not ready to work independently, work with her again until she is able to do it alone. Slowly make your presence less and less necessary.



3. Writing Lists

You might notice how much they love eating snack and you could say, "I wonder if you could write down the names of all of your favorite snacks." Encourage them to do this with all kinds of categories of things (e.g., animals, names, fruit, flowers, etc.).

4. Writing the Child's Topics

This frees the child to work with phrases and complete thoughts instead of just words. Instead of just writing sneaker, you can encourage her to write, "I have new sneakers." How exciting! If they are telling you a story, you might say, "Oh this is so interesting but I just don't even have a moment right now. Can you write it down for me so I can read it later? I don't want to miss it!" Set an example by using the alphabet to write notes for the children who have begun to read. Once they begin reading and ask you if something is spelled correctly or question a word that you spelled correctly, you can explain the concept of spelling. Say, "That is how that word *sounds* like it is spelled. This is the way it is spelled. Everyone got together and agreed on one way to spell every word in the whole language. When you spell it this way, everyone knows which word you mean." Then, gently correct the spelling. Don't do too much at once!

