Use Everyday Print to Build Reading Skills

Think back to how you learned to read. Did you look at picture books with simple words? Did you use flash cards with common words or word parts? Did you sing the alphabet song and practice making the sounds of each letter?

It’s hard to remember the process of learning to read. One reason is that it doesn’t happen overnight. Another reason is that the process is often not visible or obvious.

THE MORE YOU READ, THE MORE THINGS
YOU WILL KNOW.
THE MORE THAT YOU LEARN, THE MORE
PLACES YOU’LL GO.

~Dr. Seuss, I Can Read with My Eyes Shut

Reading starts long before children enter school. They see you reading mail and begin to understand that reading is useful. They listen as you read to them and understand that books contain wonderful stories. They begin to recognize signs on roads and stores and realize that symbols represent certain things. For example, arrows show direction.

Actually, signs, symbols, and other print all around you can be a big tool in helping your child learn to read. Consider, for example, things like the following inside your home:

- T-shirts and caps, printed with names of sports teams
- Toys, like Elmo from Sesame Street
- Food cartons like milk and Cheerios
- Fast-food packaging from Domino’s pizza or Subway
- Shoe boxes and shopping bags
- TV programs and movies
- Computer and video games

Outside your home, you will find other examples of popular print, such as:

- Posters, banners, and billboards,
- Signs on stores and restaurants,
- Street and traffic signs,
- Signs on doors like “Exit” and “Restrooms”
- Names on buses, trucks, and trains

To be most effective, popular print should be meaningful to children. A Nemo t-shirt will be more interesting to a child who has seen the movie than a t-shirt for a local dry cleaners, for example.

At first, children will more easily recognize pictures, logos, and colors. A logo is a company’s unique symbol, often the company’s name and a picture or graphic. Chuck E. Cheese’s logo, for example, is the name in red letters and a cartoon rat with a C on its cap and shirt.

As children become more adept at recognizing these elements, they will begin to pick up other clues. They will discern that names are words and that words are separated by spaces. They will notice that
words are made up of letters, and they will begin to connect letters to sounds, especially the first letters of words. At the same time, they will learn that the first letter of a word is at the left, and that reading is done left to right. They will also realize that words can be written.

The process is vastly more complex, but this simple explanation suggests ways to use popular print in helping your child get ready to read.

- Identify different forms of your child’s favorite popular print items. Talk about the pictures, logos, and colors associated with each item. Encourage your child to recognize those elements as you encounter them. “Michaela, how can you tell that’s says Michaels?”
- Read the name or title of the item, moving your finger from left to right: “Hannah Montana.” Stop at each space to indicate the end of a word.
- Collect a name in different colors if you can. For example: regular Cheerios in black against a yellow background, Honey Nut Cheerios in yellow against a brown background, and Apple Cinnamon Cheerios in red and white against a green background. Cover the words so that only the pictures are showing, and talk about the pictures. Then cover the pictures so that only the words are showing. Talk about the colors and shapes of the words. Ask which word is the same on each box.
- Sound out the first letter of key words in the name. “Batman starts with a B, and the sound is ‘buh.’ Now you say that sound.”

CHILDREN ARE MADE READERS ON THE LAPS OF THEIR PARENTS.

~Emilie Buchwald, Founder Milkweed Editions Children’s Books

Using popular print is a handy and economical way to help your child develop reading skills. But don’t forget books. Borrow books from a public library or your child’s teacher. Educational experts recommend:

- Read aloud to your children from birth.
- Read favorite stories again and again.
- Read any time, but especially at bedtime.
- Read with lots of expression and feeling.
- Be playful with words, pointing out words that rhyme and encouraging your child to repeat refrains.
- Discuss what you read to make sure children comprehend the story. Change a part of a story and ask, “What would happen if...?”

While it is true that many children learn to read at school, remember that children develop the basic skills for reading at home.

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