

THE Montessori METHOD



Barbara Isaacs suggests a proven technique for nurturing fledgling literacy skills...

Montessori recognised the child's need for a language rich environment more than a hundred years ago. She advocated babies' exposure to the spoken word used in the context of everyday life. She recognised adults' role in promoting rich vocabulary and grammatically correct use of language. She also acknowledged the child's inherent potential to absorb and learn several languages at the same time, if used in appropriate social context.

She experienced the same pressures many Early Years Practitioners experience today; the mothers of the children attending her first nursery pleaded with her to help their children to learn how to read and write, and this is how her multisensory approach to using phonics was born.

She introduced phonics because her native language, Italian, is eminently suited to this approach. It gave young children the opportunity to encode words using the one to one correspondence between the phonemes and graphemes, between the letter sounds

and shapes. She added the kinaesthetic experience to the sounds and shapes in the form of the sandpaper letters. Children trace the shape of the letter as they see it, say it and feel it. The sandpaper letters (using a lower case cursive or script alphabet) are used by all Montessori settings, but also by many other nursery schools and particularly with children with special educational needs. They give a solid start to recognising as well as reproducing the letters of the alphabet.

Easy as ABC

This knowledge is consolidated when children start using the moveable alphabet. It's a tray containing all the letters of the alphabet which distinguishes vowels (blue) and consonants (red). The moveable alphabet facilitates the building of short words with direct letter shape and sound correspondence as in cat, bin, frog, pond and so on. The children use collections of suitable objects to remind them of an appropriate word, then sound it out and build the word. Those who have the skill also have an opportunity to then copy the 'build' words into their word books.

This activity can be easily reproduced using the lower case magnetic

letters available through many education suppliers (however, the colour coding of vowels and consonants may not be possible). The adult can begin by suggesting the words and the child composes them from the letter sounds comprising each word.

Once introduced to the activity by an adult, having a basket of objects will enable the child to build their own words. This is really enticing to young children and enhances their interest in the activity. It's also a relatively cheap and fun resource that could be made into a home-based activity. You'll need:

- One set of lower case magnetic alphabet letters.
- Collections of objects kept in a box.

Organising the boxes according to a level of difficulty is helpful; I'd suggest the following:

Box 1 can contain objects such as: cat, hat, mat, pan, fan, dog, pot, box, etc.

Box 2 can focus on objects representing words with initial blends such as: pram, frog, flat, crab, plum, clip, stag.

Box 3 should look at final blends as in: lamp, desk, kilt, band, list, milk, tent.

Box 4 could be a mixture of blends and could introduce more complex words such as: tractor, taxi, panda, strap, zebra, zigzag, dustbin.

Try it!
Using a magnetic board on which to build the words will make copying them onto a piece of paper easier and will contain each child's work.

taking it further

Introduction to the Montessori Approach for Early Years Practitioners

Attend an introductory workshop this August, on the principles underpinning the Montessori approach when working with children between the ages of two-and-a-half and five. It introduces participants to the key materials within the five areas of learning traditionally found in Montessori nurseries and explores the links between the Montessori curriculum and the EYFS. Email susan@montessori.org.uk for more information.

