

Using the Movable Alphabet

Traditionally when we think of writing, we think of putting pen to paper. But there is more to it than this. Before one can have success with writing by way of the hand, one must be able to build words in the mind. This is the intellectual component of writing. It refers to the ability to put letters together to create a word. It can be done even if one has no muscular control of the hands. As such, this intellectual component of writing may develop even before the hand is able to hold a pencil. The movable alphabet gives children the opportunity to use their minds in this capacity without waiting for the hand. It provides a critical bridge between pencil writing and the intellectual formation of words. With a selection of letters before them, children do not need to sort through their entire memory of written symbols (which include numbers and graphical representations) to find what they seek. There is a limited selection before them which increases their possibility of success. Thus, we can give the children a gradual path to follow as they master writing. They can take baby steps, build on their success, and build their confidence along the way.



The movable alphabet is designed to help children reproduce words with symbols. But more than this, the alphabet provides limitless opportunities for children to analyze and explore language. It gives them the motive and means to practice using letters and words. It is this work, this repeatedly laying their hands upon the components of our language, that directly prepares children for reading.

Before you Begin

Before introducing the movable alphabet to a child, we must be sure the child has the potential to succeed in its use. For this to effortlessly arrive, we must prepare the child's mind for writing as described in the table below.

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 he can express himself logically)	Exposure to a logically-organized physical environment; Predictable daily routines; Experience with the logical consequences of one's actions (eg, 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 complete sentences	Natural conversations where children have the opportunity and inspiration to speak; Reading stories; Hearing poems; Learning rhymes; Playing sound games; Singing songs; Vocabulary lessons via the 3-period lesson
Phonetic Awareness	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of sounds 	Hearing 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; Once the child knows 10 or 12 of the pink and blue letters (vowels and consonants), start right in with using the 3-period lesson to teach the phonograms found on the green sandpaper letters
<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 (eg, 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 container you can make yourself from recycled egg cartons. Use two clear plastic cartons with clear lids: one that will hold 12 and another that will hold 18 sets of letters. Fill the smaller carton with the first 10-12 letters your child knows (including at least two vowels). Place the remaining letters in the larger carton. Decide whether you will treat “y” as a vowel (blue) or consonant (pink). Store the “y” you are not using (do not keep it with the alphabet). Keep the cartons next to each other on a shelf with the lids closed.

I. Writing the First Words

1. Find a clean workspace that is free from distractions. Show the child how to carry the smaller alphabet carton and place it in the top left corner of the work space. Open the lid.
2. Begin by confirming that the child does indeed know the 10-12 sounds before her. Point to the first letter say, “Do you remember this?” Have the child say the sound. If the child doesn’t know it, simply turn it around so the blank side is showing. Proceed as long as you have enough letters to phonetically spell a few words.
3. Say, “Let’s write the word mat.” 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 “mmmm” sound. Look at the letters slowly, discover the m, and place it below the alphabet carton. Continue until the whole word is written. Be careful to proceed slowly enough so that the child is able to step in but quickly enough to maintain attention.
4. Say, “Oh, I liked doing that. Would you like to write another one? Let’s write the word pen. This time you can do it!” Help the child if she needs it.
5. Continue to write as many words 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 how many words we’ve written!”
6. Clean up by saying, “Which one is your favorite sound? Let’s put all of those away first.” Do this for each letter.
7. Say, “You could do this again tomorrow and write even more words. 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.

II. Writing the Child’s Words

As soon as the children know enough sounds, you have the critical and essential task of encouraging and inspiring them to use the alphabet to write what THEY want to write. 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. It is this grouping of concepts into categories that forms a strong foundation for logic and critical thinking. If they are telling you a story, you might say, “That is so interesting. Would you like to write it out with the alphabet?” 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. This is also the time to encourage the use of phonograms. When the child wants to write a word that includes a phonogram, say, “Oh I remember that sound. It’s a phonogram. Let’s see if we can find the green sandpaper letters that make that sound.” Don’t be intimidated. This is a seamless process for the child. It’s also not a problem if you are spelling the word shoe with the ue phonogram. We are focused on process and not product at this stage (*see Note below*).

III. Writing the Child’s Topics

This is the same as Exercise II above but now frees the child to work with phrases and complete thoughts. Instead of just writing sneaker, you can encourage her to write, “I have new sneakers.” How exciting! This is when you can start to correct 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!

Notes

In general, we don’t worry about the accuracy of the spelling until around age 6. The point of early writing, of phonetically spelling words, is for the child to practice using the letters of our alphabet and expressing thoughts with written words. The more the child works at creating words, the easier it becomes. As she gains confidence with this process, she slowly begins to refine her skills and to develop her own voice. We do not wish to discourage her along this path and at the same time, we must guard the child’s need for perfection. Some children show an early facility with language. They may seek out spelling corrections at an early age. We must meet the child at her developmental stage. If she wants correct spellings, we give them to her but if she is satisfied with phonetic spellings, that is just fine. Spelling is something that the child will naturally refine as her language abilities grow. It is not our focus at this stage of development.