

Elizabeth W. Kirk and
Patricia Clark

Elizabeth W. Kirk is Assistant Professor, Division of Education, Indiana University East, Richmond. Patricia Clark is Associate Professor, Department of Elementary Education, Teachers College, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana.

Beginning With Names

Using Children's Names To Facilitate Early Literacy Learning

"That's my name!" calls 3-year-old Jason as he points to the letter "J" in an alphabet book. "It's my name too!" asserts Jessica, who is sitting next to Jason. Neither child seems concerned that they have chosen the same symbol to represent two different names. They do not yet know that their names each contain a distinct set of letters. However, both children recognize that "J" is the beginning letter in their names; this recognition is a beginning understanding that written symbols can be used to represent names and words.

Names hold great meaning for children and are, for many, the first word they learn to recognize by sight. Children have a great interest in learning to write their names as well as the names of their family and friends. Adults working with young children can take advantage of this interest to introduce a variety of early literacy concepts. In fact, almost every language skill necessary to learning to read can be introduced by using children's names (Seefeldt & Galper, 2001).

Children have very personal, emotional connections to their own names. An 18-month-old who is beginning to talk and scribble sometimes connects his/her own name to the scribbles that are being produced and begins to associate marks on paper to his/her own name (see photo A). Three-year-old children, while looking at books or signs along the roadside, often shout out "That's my name" when they see the letter that is at the beginning of their own name, just as Jessica and Jason did in the scenario above. A young preschool child typically recognizes and labels the initial letter of his own first name before recognizing and labeling other letters (Treiman & Broderick, 1998), and will make attempts to write his own name and those of his family and friends before acquiring general alphabet and word knowledge (Bloodgood, 1999).

Occasionally, children learn to write other words before they write their own name (Martens, 1999), but it is more common that the first word they attempt to write is some part of their own name (Clay, 1975; Green, 1998). Written names often become more important to children when they are engaged in a school experience and see their own name and other children's

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names being used frequently for functional purposes (Dyson, 1984; Martens, 1999).

Bloodgood (1999) found that names serve "an ongoing role, helping children make connections to letters, words, sounds, and reading and writing concepts" (p. 364). Using children's own names to help beginning readers and writers make connections between letters and sounds has been a practice of preschool and kindergarten teachers for many years. It is extremely important that early childhood educators, while advancing children's literacy skills, maintain a developmentally appropriate curriculum. Activities that use children's own names provide a natural, easy approach to helping children understand functions of print, increasing their phonemic awareness, introducing letter-sound correspondence (the alphabetic principle), and fostering letter and word recognition.

Learning the Functions of Print by Using Names for a Purpose

Children's names are used often in a classroom. Teachers/caregivers can take advantage of this practice to point out names to children, emphasize the purpose of the names, and encourage children to recognize their own names.

Create Name Lists for a Purpose. Often, a teacher will create a list that indicates who is waiting for a turn at the computer or to play with the rocket ship. Why not make the waiting list visible? Post the list where children can see it and refer to it as they try to determine whose turn it is.

Job Lists. Children's names are often posted to show who is assigned certain tasks for the day, such as feeding the fish and watering the plants.

Sign-in/Attendance. Allow children to sign themselves in each day. If children arrive individually, parents and/or teachers can help children find their names on the sign-in list and the child can make a mark, draw a picture, or write his/her name to indicate presence. If all of the children arrive at once, they can be given individual slips of paper on which to write their names. Children can take these slips of paper to different areas of the room where they have time and space to sign the slips. The completed sign-in slips can be placed in an "in" tray or on an attendance sheet. Another option is to create an attendance list on a big chart. For younger children, pictures can be posted next to their names. Have children mark themselves in with crayons or stickers on the attendance chart.

Name Labels. Children's cubbies are usually labeled with their names. For younger children, teachers/caregivers can add a photo next to the name, helping children to recognize each other's names, as well as their own.

Names on Children's Work. Teachers can encourage

children to write their own names on artwork they have done, rather than always relying on an adult to do it. When children have completed a painting or drawing, ask if they would like to put their own name on the paper. If they resist, ask if they would like you to write their name.

Mailboxes. Children love to send each other notes and messages. Teachers/caregivers can encourage this by providing "mailboxes" labeled with each child's name and photo. These can be made simply from cans, small boxes, files, or a shoe organizer hung on the wall. Clear plastic holders are especially good, because children can see when they've "got mail!"

Phonemic Awareness Activities Using Names

Even before they can recognize written letters, most children quickly learn to isolate the first sound in their own name, and they also enjoy finding similarities to other children's names that start with the same sound. As they get older and begin to play with rhyming sounds, they will often try to rhyme words and can be encouraged to think of or make up words that rhyme with their names through games, songs, and chants.

Clap My Name. Show the children how to clap a name. To clap "Jefferson," lead the children in clapping three times for Jef-fer-son. For "Sam," only one clap is needed. For "Alexander," four claps will be needed. After children know how many claps it takes to clap their names, have them help sort names by number of claps. You can continue this game by tapping, stomping, shaking, bouncing a ball, or even using musical instruments as you segment the names.

Circle Time Name Ball. This game is best played with about 6-10 children so that no one waits too long. The teacher calls out the name of a child in the circle (e.g., "Matika") and rolls the ball to her. Matika says the beginning sound of her name ("Ma") and rolls the ball to another child, who leads the whole group in saying the rest of her name ("tika"). The teacher calls out another name and the ball is rolled to that child, who says the initial sound; the game continues. This game works best with multisyllabic names.

Willaby Wallaby Woo. Sing or chant substituting your own children's names.

Willaby Wallaby Woo
An elephant sat on you
Willaby Wallaby Wee
An elephant sat on me
Willaby Wallaby Watisha
An elephant sat on Latisha
Willaby Wallaby Waron
An elephant sat on Aaron.

Names and Actions. After children learn the initial sounds of their names, help them think of a movement that begins with the same sound. Children can say the line and act out the movement: "My name is Barbara and I like to Bounce."

Names and Transitions. When it is time for children to move from one activity to another, calling children one at a time diminishes chaos. Instead of calling children's names, you might say: "If your name starts with /w/ (use the sound, rather than the letter, for phonemic awareness), you can get your coat" or "if your name rhymes with 'lahmas' you can move to the circle area."

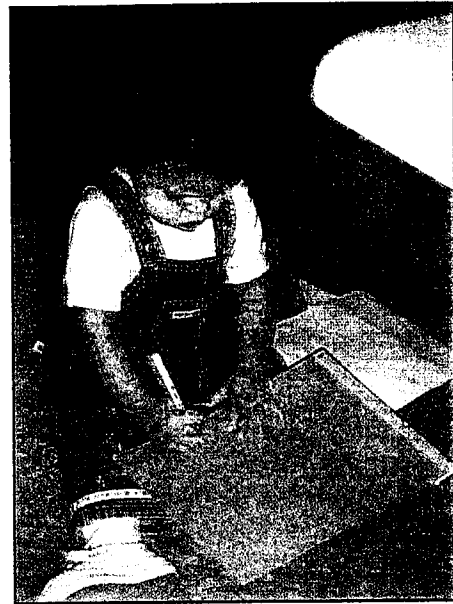
Changing Names. Another activity that can be done after children have learned the initial sound in their names is to create a "new" name for the day. This can be done with the whole group or individually. If you are going to change everyone's name, choose an initial sound and have all the children substitute the initial sound in their name with the new sound. For example, if the sound for the day is /t/, then Maria would be Taria, Zachary would be Tachary, etc. Go through the roster first to be sure that substituting the initial sound with the new letter does not create an undesirable word. Alternatively, one child each day could receive a "new" name, and all the children would use that name for the whole day. In this case, you might let the child pick the new initial sound.

Whose Name Starts Like This? The teacher sings, to the tune of "Old McDonald," "Whose name starts like this? Sand, safe, and silly." Students then sing with the teacher, "Sarah's name starts like this, sand and safe and silly. With a /s/ /s/ here and a /s/ /s/ there, here a /s/, there a /s/, everywhere a /s/ /s/. Sarah's name starts like this, sand and safe and silly."

Learning the Alphabetic Principle by Using Names

As they learn to recognize and produce the letters of their own names, children can be led to compare their own letters to the letters in other children's names and then to connect letters to sounds. Matching sounds to letters, often referred to as the alphabetic principle, is not an easy task for children. Not only is the connection between letters and sounds an abstract concept, but the sound/symbol relationship is inconsistent; the 26 letters of the English alphabet are used to make approximately 44 sounds. Some of the activities used to encourage the development of phonemic awareness can be extended to help children learn the alphabetic principle.

Follow-up to Clap My Name. Print each child's name on card stock. In a small group, show the children one name on the card or place the name in a pocket chart. The children then can clap the child's name, as described earlier. It is not necessary to use the term



photos courtesy of author

photo A

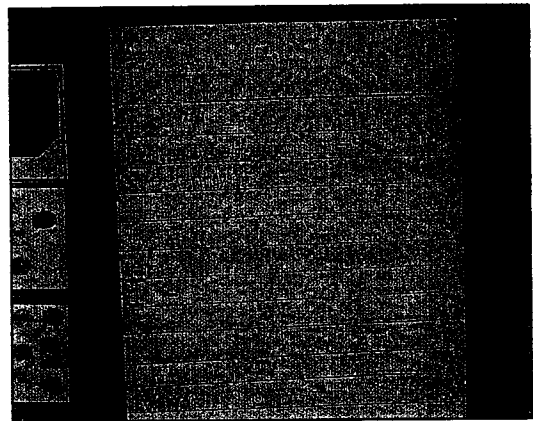


photo B

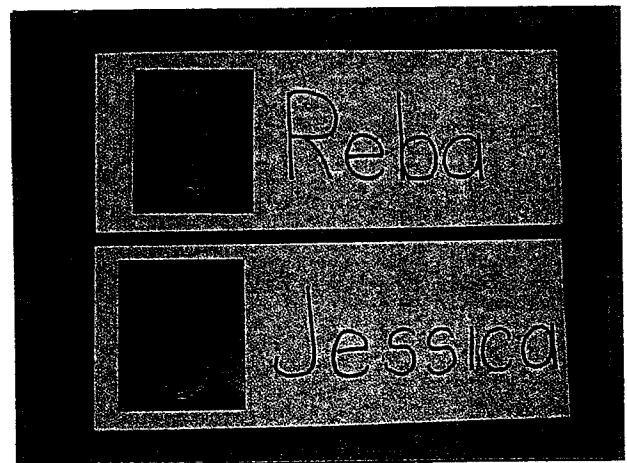


photo C

"syllables" with very young children; the purpose of the activity is to help children hear the separations at the same time they observe the printed name.

Follow-up to the Willaby Wallaby Woo Chant. Make the child's name visible by preparing sentence strips of the phrases to place in a pocket chart. Have names of each child in the group ready to substitute at the end of the lines (e.g., Watisha/Latisha, Waron/Aaron).

Names, Names Chant. This is a traditional beginning-of-the-year chant that encourages children to learn the names of other children. You can extend its use to help children learn sound/symbol correspondence by presenting each child with a card showing his/her name. When leading traditional songs and chants, such as the ones listed below, incorporate the children's printed names occasionally. This will help children make the connection between the letters in their names and the sounds they are making when they sing and chant.

Group: Names, Names, we all have names. Tell us your name so we can play the game.
(Each child in turn holds up a card with his/her name printed on it and says his/her own name; for example, Jabari holds up his name so everyone can see it and says, "Jabari.")

Group: Jabari, Jabari, his name is Jabari.

Cookie Jar Chant. Another traditional name game can be extended to print. Put all the children's names into a decorated can labeled "cookie jar." Pull one name at a time from the jar.

All: Who stole the cookie from the cookie jar?

Leader: Jana stole the cookie from the cookie jar.

Jana: Who, me?

All: Yes, you.

Jana: Couldn't be.

All: Then who?

(Jana gets to pull out the next name from the cookie jar and all say, "___ stole the cookie from the cookie jar" and the game begins again.)

Names in Familiar Songs. Rather than singing "Old MacDonald," substitute children's names ("Shawna Brown had a farm...") and show the child's name card while you are singing that verse.

Charting Names. Make name cards and encourage children to sort them by first letter. These can be posted on a bulletin board or wall for the children to see. In one center, all the children posted their names under the appropriate first letters in the hallway (see photo B).

Alphabet Action Ball. This game can be played outside. A ball is placed in the middle of the circle. The teacher says the initial letter of a child's name (e.g., "A"). Any child whose name begins with A may move into the circle to pick up the ball. The child who gets the ball calls out an action word that begins with that letter (turn). All children follow the action. Then he/she says another letter (e.g., "B"); any child whose name begins with B may move forward to get the ball and call out an action word that begins with his/her name.

Letter/Word Recognition Activities That Use Names

Name-Photo Match Game. Print each child's name on one piece of card stock. Glue a picture of each child on another piece of card stock and laminate. Have children match the photo to the name. Cards may be notched so that they fit together when correctly matched. This can be played as a memory or concentration game for older children.



photo D



photo E

Matching Names Game. A similar game to the one above is to print each child's name onto two pieces of card stock and laminate. Children then match name to name.

Name Puzzle. Print each child's name on card stock and laminate. Cut the letters apart and place them in an envelope with that child's name printed on the front. Children can use the name on the front of the envelope to organize the letters from the envelope to make their own name. They also may choose an envelope with the name of a friend on the front and reassemble their friend's name.

Building Names. Provide a variety of materials, such as plastic letters, foam letters, letter blocks, alphabet puzzles, and even alphabet cereal, pasta, or pretzels, that children can use to "build" their own names.

Graphing Names. Provide children with large graph paper. Children can write names, one letter to a box. This activity provides an opportunity to compare letters in names and length of names.

Writing Activities That Use Names

Writing allows children to express what they are learning about print. We can evaluate children's understanding of the functions of print as they create lists, write notes, and make signs. They demonstrate their understanding of how print works as they write from left to right, leave spaces, and create symbols that look like letters. They make use of the alphabetic principle as they write by using invented spelling. Certainly, every classroom needs a writing table, writing nook, or other designated space that encourages children to write. Near the writing table, post a list of children's names. Alternate materials from month to month to stimulate children's enthusiasm for using this area.

Name/Photo Cards. Write each child's name on card stock. Attach the child's photo and laminate. Keep a box of these name cards on the writing table throughout the year (see photo C).

Three-dimensional Names. Provide a variety of materials children can use to write their names: yarn, pipe cleaners, stamps, alphabet cereal or pretzels, clay, shaving cream, pudding mix. Children's names can be printed on cardboard or card stock to use as a guide to form the letters. Teachers/caregivers also can provide letter-shaped cookie cutters for children.

Painting Names. Give children water buckets and thick paintbrushes. Let them paint their names on the sidewalk, the side of the building, or even playground equipment (see photo D).

Names in the Sand. Children love to draw their names in the sand. Teachers/caregivers can encourage this practice by modeling, and providing utensils for, sand drawing.

Names in Colored Sugar. Seal a small amount of gelatin, colored sugar, or sand in a small plastic bag and lay it flat on the table so a small portion of the colored sugar is evenly distributed inside the bag. Children can draw their names with their fingers through the plastic; this is an easy clean-up activity.

Addressing Cultural Issues

Teachers and caregivers who are sensitive to children's needs know that children's names hold tremendous personal importance. Adults who work with children should be careful to find out from families what the child's given name is and how to pronounce it. Teachers should not create an "American" name for a child simply because they cannot pronounce the child's given name. Teachers can post children's names (on cubbies, lists, etc.) as they are written in the family's language as well as in English. Families are usually more than happy to help with this process (see photo E). Teachers should read children's books with characters whose names are similar to those in the classroom. This is particularly important if a few children are from a similar language background. It might be fun for older children to find out, and share with each other, why they have the names they do. All children should be able to participate in activities based on their names, regardless of cultural background or language. Teachers need to be sensitive to how the child's name is

"Teacher, teacher, how do I start 'chimney'?" Timmy asks while determinedly pulling the shirttail of his kindergarten teacher. "Why don't you check with Chuck. He can help you get started with that word; he has that /ch/ sound in his name," the teacher quickly answers. Timmy scampers across the room to the block area where Chuck takes a few moments from his building project to show Timmy how to write "ch." In this classroom, Chuck is the owner of the /ch/ sound, and is proud to share his special knowledge with his classmates.

Four-year-old José brings his science journal (a small teacher-made book) to the science table where there is an ant farm, magnifying glasses, and books and pictures about ants. His teacher asks him what he wants to record in his journal today. José tells her that he is going to write the names of everyone in the class. He takes a pencil from the jar on the table, and looks at the list of all the children's names that the teacher has posted to keep track of who has been at the center. José begins at the top of the list and copies the names into his journal.

pronounced and realize that similar letters may have different sounds in other languages. When teachers are aware of these differences, they can explain them quite simply to children if questions arise:

Jesse: How come José's name starts like mine, but doesn't say /j/?

Teacher: Sometimes the same letter has different sounds. In José's name, the "j" says /h/.

Conclusion

Early childhood professionals recognize the importance of helping young children understand concepts about literacy and of beginning to develop skills in reading and writing. At the same time, early childhood educators know that literacy activities for young children must be meaningful and developmentally appropriate. Literacy activities should build on children's interests and help them make sense of the world of print. Very young children (infants and toddlers) are intrigued by learning the names of their friends and family. Preschoolers, who are beginning to recognize the fact that print carries meaning, are eager to learn to write and spell their own names, as well as those of

friends and family. Games that play with names capture children's attention to a degree that few other activities manage. Teachers can use these games and activities to encourage young children's literacy development in a natural, meaningful, and developmentally appropriate way.

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CENTER IDEAS

Materials for a Writing Center

<i>list of children's names</i>	<i>notebooks</i>
<i>children's names and photos laminated on card stock</i>	<i>3" x 5" cards</i>
<i>mailboxes</i>	<i>stationery, envelopes, stickers for "stamps"</i>
<i>pencils, pens, markers, colored pencils</i>	<i>note cards, greeting cards</i>
<i>chalkboard, chalk</i>	<i>children's pictures with names on cards</i>
<i>magic slates</i>	<i>letter stamps and stamp pads</i>
<i>dry erase board and markers</i>	<i>stencils</i>
<i>wide variety of paper/sticky notes</i>	<i>homemade blank books</i>
<i>paper/card stock for making signs</i>	<i>typewriter</i>
<i>poster board/rolls of One'sprint</i>	<i>computer with word processing program and printer</i>
<i>notepads/clipboards</i>	<i>hole-punch, stapler, scissors, tape</i>
<i>magazines, calendars,</i>	<i>pencil sharpeners</i>
	<i>telephone book, address book</i>

Materials for a Manipulative Area

list of children's names
name puzzles
name-photo matching game
matching names game
plastic/foam letters
letter blocks

Materials for Art Area

list of children's names
yarn, pipe cleaners
alphabet cereal, macaroni letters, and glue
dry gelatin or colored sugar sealed in a zip-top bag
clay
shaving cream
cornstarch
pudding
paint
letter-shaped cookie cutters
chalk