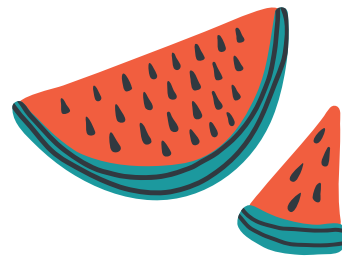


Learning Tools Checklist

Many of the best tools for helping kids learn to read are simple, inexpensive, easy to find, reusable, and adaptable in a myriad of ways. You may already have some of them around the house (though you might not associate them with reading). If not, they're easy to pick up or order online. Here's our checklist of educator-recommended items for your toolbox, so you can infuse your child's days with playful learning.

- ☐ Craft Sticks
- ☐ Playdough
- ☐ Stacking Blocks
- ☐ Index Cards
- ☐ Letter Tiles or Magnets
- ☐ Comic Sans
- ☐ Clear Sheet Protectors/Contact Paper
- ☐ Sidewalk Chalk



Craft Sticks

You can use craft sticks, aka popsicle sticks, in so many ways to promote language learning. Combine them with playdough to make letter shapes. Hold them under the words in a book to draw attention to the text or guide a budding reader. Put letters on the ends of several sticks and swap them around to create different words. Write simple words on one side (e.g., cat or sun) and put an illustration of the word on the other side. Or paste pictures from magazines/printed clip art on the ends to create sweet storytelling puppets.

Playdough

Use playdough to make letter shapes, particularly letters that contain curves. Just create "snakes" of playdough to shape into the lines and curves that make up the letters, or use blunt knives to cut the letters out. You could even invest in some alphabet cookie cutters. Alternatively, write down a letter and ask your child to use the playdough to mold something that begins with that sound. For kids who are starting to read words, write down a word and ask them to make a playdough sculpture of it.

You can even create a phonics sensory experience. For example, to introduce the letter C, pull out toy cars and let your child play with cars and playdough. Create homes for the cars or make car tracks on playdough roads. As you play, just bring up the sound of the target letter or ask questions about other words that start with that sound. It's play infused with phonics at its most simple and subtle.

Stacking Blocks

Stacking blocks are ones that can connect to one another, like Legos, Mega Bloks, or Unifix cubes. You can tape or write letters on the blocks and then connect them together to make words (horizontally or vertically). This mirrors the way teachers and parents have long used wooden blocks, but the letters stay together and you can manipulate the words afterwards.

You can use alphabet stacking blocks in any number of creative ways. For example, tape the letters of your child's name to the blocks and have them stack those together. With other sets of blocks, create more names. You can write "mama," "papa," "daddy," and the names or nicknames of family members, pets, or friends. Then help your child notice which names share letters or similar sounds, or act out scenes with these "characters."





Index Cards

Index cards are so useful and probably have the most versatility. You can ditch the overpriced store-bought flash cards and make your own homemade ones instead, to practice letter sounds, sight words, new vocabulary, spelling words, etc.

You can also write individual letters on the cards and then combine them to practice spelling and reading, like we've done in the activities above, or stick them to things around the house that begin with that letter. Finally, you can ask your child to practice writing on them. For some reason, kids just love writing and illustrating on these sturdy, pint-sized papers. Then hang their writing on the fridge. Or stick a stack of index cards and a pencil or crayon in a go-bag for them during car rides and see what they come up with!

Letter Tiles or Magnets

Letter tiles are durable, versatile, and regiftable. You can grab them from board games like Scrabble, Bananagrams, or Gnu, or purchase a whole bucket for as little as \$6. The ubiquitous letter magnets can also be used in the same ways—and you can treat them as letter blocks even when you're not near the fridge. After all the ideas we've shared above, you'll find plenty of creative ways to teach reading with your tiles or magnets. And you can hang on to them for years to come. Use them to reinforce spelling skills (an easily overlooked skill that parents really should teach at home) later on, as your child blossoms from budding reader to bonafide bibliophile.

Comic Sans

This font gets a bad rap, but it was actually created with children in mind, so they could read it easily. Take a look: The letters are probably pretty similar to how you write, unlike other fonts that can be confusing, with hooded lowercase As or closed-loop Gs. Set your font to Comic Sans any time you let your child type on your computer or you print something out for them. Use it to make signs that your child can hang around the house, such as their name to put on their door or over their bed, and labels for toy bins or shelves. This gets them used to associating print with objects and provides opportunities for reading practice.



Clear Sheet Protectors/Contact Paper

Clear sheet protectors, contact paper, or self-laminating sheets are fun for preserving and displaying your child's early drawing and writing—which encourages them to keep at it. But they're also useful in so many other ways to encourage early literacy skills. Write a letter or a word on paper and stick it in your sheet protector or contact paper to create an easy tracing activity. Just give your child a dry-erase marker and let them trace onto the plastic. It will wipe off easily.

You can also print a page of letters (uppercase and/or lowercase) and go through them with your child. If they can identify the letter or the sound it makes, they get to cross it off. They circle the ones they don't know yet. Then let them try again the next day to see if they can cross more off. As their skills progress, you can upgrade this activity to simple words. You can also use contact paper or self-laminating sheets to make a cute DIY bookmark. Simply cut out a bookmark shape from any plain or patterned paper. Let your child decorate it with markers or hole punches in cute shapes. Then stick it into the contact paper and trim the edges.

Sidewalk Chalk

Take sidewalk chalk outside or bring it along on outings to add a little reading practice to outdoor play. For example, play alphabet hopscotch at the park, write words or messages together, or encourage your child to draw pictures of words that begin with a certain letter sound. Kids love a challenge, and asking how many items they can draw that start with a given sound may spark their interest. You can even draw an alphabet bingo card on the ground and get them to see how many items they can find around the park that start with the letters on the card!

