

10

ACTIVITIES TO

SPARK



EARLY LITERACY

IOWA

Iowa Reading
Research Center

10 ACTIVITIES TO SPARK EARLY LITERACY

Caregivers play an important role in sparking a child’s early literacy skills. The activities in this booklet are designed to help you support your child’s early reading development in simple, engaging ways. They are easy to fit into your everyday routines and can be implemented while your child is playing, during a car ride, or while eating meals.

The “10 Activities to Spark Early Literacy” booklet focuses on two important early literacy skills: phonological awareness and knowledge of the relationships between letters and sounds. The first five activities focus on building phonological awareness skills, and the last five activities focus on letter-sound knowledge. Both of these skills are important building blocks of learning to read words, as they will help your child develop an understanding of how spoken language connects to print.

You can learn more about your child’s development of skills that support word reading in our eLearning module: “Supporting Your Child’s Early Word Recognition Skills.” The eLearning module includes downloadable resources, a web-based application you can use with your child, and videos demonstrating each activity in action. Many of the activities incorporate the IRRC Letter-Sound Cards, which are designed to help your child learn the most common sounds for the letters of the alphabet. You can download and print these cards to use for several of the activities in this booklet.

In the pages that follow, directions for each activity are provided as well as suggestions for providing your child some feedback or support. Within each section, activities are listed in order of difficulty, progressing from the easiest skill to the most challenging skill. Activities emphasize letter names, letter sounds, or both. Quotation marks around the letter indicate the letter name (e.g., “b”) and forward slashes indicate the letter sound (e.g., /b/).

Referenced materials are available for download and can be accessed via the hyperlink and QR code provided on the activity page or by visiting the Spark Early Literacy Hub.



<https://irrc.education.uiowa.edu/spark-early-literacy>

FIRST SOUND MATCH-UP

Directions:

1. Introduce the following chant to your child:

**Listen, listen,
Use your ear!
Match the sound
That you hear!**



Materials:

- None

2. Choose a beginning sound (e.g., /s/ in sun).

3. Say, "The sound is /s/. Sun! What else starts with /s/ like sun?"

4. After your child names a word, say "Do /s/ sun and /s/ star start with the same sound?"

a. If the sounds match, provide positive reinforcement (e.g., clap, cheer, high five).

b. If the sounds do not match, say, "Good try! /S/ /s/ sun and /c/ /c/ cake. Those sounds are different. /S/ /s/ sun and /s/ /s/ soap start with the same sound. Can you think of another word that starts with /s/?"

5. Continue naming words with the same sound; then, repeat these steps with 1-2 other sounds.

Feedback/Support

- Model how you think about whether words have a matching first sound. "The sound is /s/, like /s/ sun! Hmm (look around the room), what else starts with /s/? /R/ /r/ refrigerator? Nope! /S/ /s/ stove? Yes!"
- To provide more support, exaggerate the first sound in each word by repeating the first sound (e.g., /g/ /g/ /g/ game, /m/ /m/ /m/ monkey).

Additional Tips



- Start with a sound/word that is meaningful to your child, such as their name, a family member's name, or favorite toys/activities (e.g., **S**ophia—**s**un, **s**oap, **s**nake).
- To introduce more movement, ask your child to find something that begins with the same sound as the chosen sound and bring it to you.

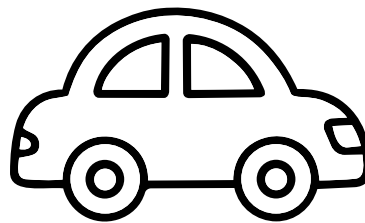
RHYME TIME

Directions:

1. Select any two toys or household objects (e.g., a toy car and a dog).
2. Think of a word that rhymes with one of the selected objects (e.g., star).
3. As you gesture to each object, say "It's Rhyme Time! Car, dog. Which one rhymes with star?"
 - a. If your child responds correctly, say, "Great job! Car rhymes with star! They both end with /ar/!"
 - b. If your child responds incorrectly, say, "Car rhymes with star. Listen, star /ar/, car /ar/."
4. Repeat with different toys or objects.

Materials:

- Any household objects/toys of your choice
- [Supplemental word list](#)



Feedback/Support

- To help your child understand the concept of rhyme, repeat the ending part of each word. For example, "Car /ar/ /ar/, dog /og/ /og/. Which one rhymes with star /ar/ /ar/?"

Additional Tips

- Keep this activity brief, with no more than three to five rhymes.
- This activity can be incorporated while your child is playing or eating. For example, "You have corn and rice! Take a bite of the one that rhymes with mice. Take a bite of the one that rhymes with horn."
- You could also do this activity in the car, highlighting objects or signs you or your child notices outside of the car. For example, "I see corn and grass. Which one rhymes with gas?"



WAKE UP THE TOYS!

Directions:

1. Choose toys that correspond with words that have two parts. These can be compound words (e.g., cup/cake, foot/ball, rain/bow), or other two-syllable words (e.g., mon/key, rab/bit, spi/der, li/on, ap/ple).
2. Say, "These toys are sleepy! Let's wake them up by saying their name in two parts, /foot/.../ball/. Can you say /foot/.../ball/?"
3. After your child responds, say, "Good job!" Then, make the object do some sort of motion (e.g., toss the football).
4. Repeat these steps with different toys, making them do different actions after you and your child break the word in two parts.

Materials:

- Any toys or objects of your choice
- [Supplemental word list](#)



Feedback/Support

- Once your child can segment syllables in words, you can increase the difficulty of this activity and ask them to segment the onset and rime in a word:
 - Choose toys that correspond with simple, one-syllable words (e.g., dog, cat, man, bin, bug, truck).
 - Say, "These toys are sleepy! Let's wake them up by saying their name in two parts, /c/ /ar/. Can you say /c/ /ar/?"
- Note: Say the first sound or sounds before the vowel (the onset), then the rest of the word starting with the vowel (the rime). For example, truck would be segmented as /tr/ /uck/.

Additional Tips

- You could use a similar activity while your child is eating. For example, "Your spoon is sleepy! Let's make it work by saying its name in two parts, /sp/ /oon/!"



SOUND HUNT

Directions:

1. Choose some simple one-syllable words that include only continuous sounds (e.g., sun, run, fun, fin, rim, lamb, hill, miss). Each of these example words has three sounds.
2. Arrange three objects/tokens in a line.
3. **For Initial Sounds:** Say, "Let's hunt for the sounds in words! The word is 'sun!'" *[Touch each object/token as you say the sounds in the word.]* Say, "/S/ /ŭ/ /n/. Where is the sound /s/ hiding? Can you find it?" *[Wait for your child to touch the first token. If needed, model segmenting the three sounds while touching the blocks again.]*
4. **For Ending Sounds:** Say, "Let's hunt for the sounds in words! The word is 'fin!'" *[Touch each object/token as you say the sounds in the word.]* Say, "/F/ /i/ /n/. Where is the sound /n/ hiding? Can you find it?" *[Wait for your child to touch the last token.]*
5. **For Medial Sounds:** Say, "Let's hunt for the sounds in words! The word is 'room!'" *[Touch each object/token as you say the sounds in the word.]* Say, "/R/ /ō/ /m/. Where is the sound /ō/ hiding? Can you find it?" *[Wait for your child to touch the middle token.]*

Materials:

- Three blocks/tokens or squares of paper
- [Supplemental word list](#)



Feedback/Support

- Use this activity first with initial sounds. As your child gets more comfortable, move on to ending and medial sounds.
- Once your child is able to blend continuous sounds, you can move on to words with a combination of continuous and stop sounds (e.g., cup, hat, bed, bath, boat, feet). Each of these example words has three sounds.

Additional Tips

- Reinforce your child's understanding of the words "first," "second," and "last" by providing feedback such as, "Great job! /S/ is the first sound in sun!" while tapping the corresponding object.



SOUND BLENDING TRAIN

Directions:

1. Choose some simple one-syllable words that have continuous sounds (e.g., sun, run, fun, fin, rim, lamb, hill, miss). Each of these example words has three sounds.
2. Line up one block or paper square for each sound in the word (e.g., The word “rim” has three sounds, /r/ /ĭ/ /m/, so you would line up three squares).
3. Say, “All aboard the word train! Let’s roll the car over each block (left to right) and say some letter sounds. /r/...../ ĭ /...../m/. Now you try!”
4. Say, “Let’s try it faster! /r/.../ ĭ /.../m/. Now you try!”
5. Say, “One more time! Let’s say the sounds as fast as we can. /r/ / ĭ / /m/. Now you try!”
6. Say “What’s the word? *[Roll the car smoothly and quickly the final time and say the blended word with your child.]* Rim!”
7. Repeat with a few other words.

Materials:

- Any small toy with wheels
- Blocks (or squares of paper)
- [Supplemental word list](#)



Feedback/Support

- Once your child is able to blend continuous sounds, you can move on to words with a combination of continuous and stop sounds (e.g., cup, hat, bed, bath, boat, feet). Each of these example words has three sounds.
- You can increase the difficulty by incorporating words with four (e.g., stop, block, frog, clap, swim) or five (e.g., splash, scrap, twist) sounds.

Additional Tips

- Have your child drive the car over the blocks/paper squares from left to right. This helps your child build awareness of print direction.
- For a child who has been introduced to letter-sound correspondences, you could write the letters on paper squares and make connections between the sounds and letters in each word.



MEET THE LETTERS AND THEIR SOUNDS!

Directions:

1. Select two to three Letter-Sound Cards to introduce to your child.
2. Say to your child, "We're going to meet some letters and their sounds today!"

We illustrate the following steps using the letter "a" as an example.

3. Point to the Letter-Sound card and say, "This letter has an apple inside! Say 'apple!'" *[Wait for your child's response.]*
4. "Listen to the first sound in 'apple': /ă/ /ă/ /ă/ apple. The sound of this letter is /ă/. What is the letter sound?" *[Wait for your child's response.]*
5. If you prefer, you can play the letter sound in the Letter-Sound Spark Application.
6. The name of this letter is "a." What is the letter name?" *[Wait for your child's response.]*
7. Say, "The sound of the letter "a" is /ă/, like /ă/ /ă/ apple."
8. Say, "Let's practice one more time. The sound of the letter is /a/. What is the sound?" *[Wait for your child's response.]*
9. Say, "The name of the letter is "a." What is the letter name?" *[Wait for your child's response.]*

Materials:

- [IRRC Letter-Sound Cards](#)
- [IRRC Letter-Sound Spark Application](#)



Feedback/Support

- If your child does not pronounce the sound correctly, model the sound again or play the letter sound in the Letter-Sound Spark Application.
- If your child struggles with a particular letter sound, reintroduce that Letter-Sound Card after presenting a few new letters.

Additional Tips

- Introduce the letters in an Easy-to-Learn order: a, m, s, t, p, f, i, n, o, d, c, u, g, b, e, s, k, h, r, l, w, j, y, x, q, v, z. This order introduces frequently used letters prior to introducing less frequently used letters.
- Introduce no more than two to three letters each week. You can also incorporate a review of previously introduced letters using the IRRC Letter-Sound Match game.
- Be sure to offer praise every time your child produces the correct sound. This positive feedback will strengthen your child's connection between the letter names and sounds.



LETTER-SOUND SCAVENGER HUNT

Directions:

1. Choose up to five Letter-Sound Cards (e.g., “a,” “m,” “s,” “t,” and “p”).
2. Place the cards around the room—on a table, the floor, or taped to the wall. Ensure that each card is easy for your child to see and reach.
3. Say to your child, “Find the letter that that spells /ă/ like in apple.”
4. Encourage your child to look around, find the correct card, and bring it back to you.
5. When your child returns with the correct letter, reinforce the skills by saying, “Yes, the sound of the letter “a” is /ă/ like in apple.”
6. Continue the same steps with the other Letter-Sound Cards until all the cards have been found.
7. Repeat with different groups of letters.

Materials:

- Tape
- [IRRC Letter-Sound Cards](#)



Feedback/Support

- Select letters that you have introduced to your child (see Activity #1).
- If finding a letter from a group of five is too difficult for your child, reduce the number of choices. For example, select two or three letters instead of five.
- If moving around is not an option, line up the Letter-Sound Cards in front of your child. Give your child a small, fun object, like a toy car or figurine, and have them place it on the letter that matches the sound you say.

Additional Tips

- Some children may be able to find a letter from a larger group of five. If so, you can place the letters in different rooms to make the hunt more challenging and increase the number of letters they need to choose from.
- Variation: Place the letter cards on objects that begin with that letter sound. For example, tape the “l” card on a lamp or the “h” card on a hat. When your child returns with the correct letter card, you can extend the learning by saying, “Yes, the sound of the letter “l” is /l/ as in ‘lamp.’”



ALPHABET SOUP

Directions:

1. Fold three to five IRRC Letter-Sound Cards in half and place them in a bowl.
2. Say to your child, "I made alphabet soup so we can practice letter sounds today!"
3. Ask your child to pull one piece of paper from the bowl.
4. Say, "What letter is in your soup?" Prompt your child to say the letter name and sound.
5. Give specific praise and connect the sound to a familiar word. For example, "Nice job! The sound of the letter 't' is /t/ like the first sound in 'taco.'"
6. Keep playing until the bowl is empty.

Materials:

- [IRRC Letter-Sound Cards](#)
- Bowl or Basket



Feedback/Support

- Start with letters that your child has already learned or practiced before.
- You can make the game easier by putting fewer letters in the bowl. To make it more challenging, add more letters.
- If your child is having difficulty with a certain letter sound, put the folded paper back in the bowl to increase your child's opportunities to practice the letter.

Additional Tips

- You can help children remember new letters by linking them to familiar, meaningful experiences that begin with the same sound. For example, when discussing the letter "b" and the /b/ sound, remind your child about a time they blew bubbles or went to the beach. Connecting the letter to a hands-on experience can make the sound easier to recall.

LETTER-SOUND MEMORY GAME

Directions:

1. The IRRC Letter-Sound Memory Game includes 26 letter-sound cards and 26 corresponding picture cards. Cut out the letter-sound cards and picture cards.
2. Shuffle the letter-sound cards with the picture cards and lay them face down in rows. You can play the game with as few as two pairs (four cards total) or as many as 26 pairs (52 cards total).
3. Tell your child, "We are going to take turns flipping over two cards to see if they match. We want to match the letter with the picture that starts with that letter sound. For example, the letter 's' matches with a picture of a snake because the sound of the letter 's' is /s/, like in 'snake.'"
4. Let your child go first and flip over two cards.
5. Say the name of each card out loud when it's turned over. For example, after turning over a letter-sound card, say, "You found 'g' which spells /g/." After turning over a picture card, say, "You found a goat!"
6. If the letter and picture match, keep the pair and take another turn.
7. If the pair does not match, turn the cards back over, and the next player takes a turn.
8. Keep playing until all matches are found.
9. Count how many matches each player found at the end.

Materials:

- [IRRC Letter-Sound Memory Game](#) (includes Letter-Sound Cards and Picture Cards)



Feedback/Support

- For Step 5, if your child is able, have them identify each card, and provide support as needed.
- To make the game easier, use as few as two letters (four cards total). To make it more challenging, add more letter-sound and picture cards.

Additional Tips

- Keep it fun by cheering when a match is made.
- To give your child extra practice, you can end your turn after finding one match.
- Although practicing taking turns is important, try to keep the game fun and focused on learning instead of who ends up with the most matches.



DRIVE THE LETTER PATH

Directions:

1. Place two to three IRRC Traceable Letter-Sound Cards in front of your child.
2. Select the first letter. Prompt your child to say the letter name and sound.
3. Say, "Hold up your pointer finger. Pretend it is a car, and we are going to drive the letter path."
4. Model using your index finger to trace the letter, following the arrows and numbers on the card. Make car sounds while you trace the letter shape. For example, you could make "vroooooom, vroooooom" sounds while tracing straight lines and screeching noises while going around corners/curves of the letter form.
5. Ask your child to take a turn tracing the letter.
6. Praise your child and connect the sound to the key word. For example, "Great job tracing! The sound of the letter 'm' is /m/ like in 'mountain.'"
7. Repeat these steps with the next letter.

Materials:

- [IRRC Traceable Letter-Sound Cards](#)
- Dry-erase marker (optional)
- Clear resealable bag (optional)



Feedback/Support

- Show your child what to do by demonstrating how you use one finger to trace the letter shape.
- To provide more support, you can place your hand over or under your child's and guide them to trace the letter.
- Don't worry if they don't trace neatly. The goal is to help children begin to make the connection between written and spoken letters.

Additional Tips

- Start with the letters in your child's name. Use their name as an example for the letter sound. For example, if your child's name is Adam, teach "a" makes the /ă/ sound, such as in your name, Adam. Next, you can connect the letters with other important names in your child's life (i.e., siblings, pets).
- If your child can hold a writing utensil, place the letter card inside a clear resealable bag and have them trace the letter with a dry-erase marker. After each attempt, simply wipe it clean with a tissue or cloth and practice with other letters.

