

HELPING THE CHILD IN THE CONQUEST OF THE WRITTEN LANGUAGE

by A. M. Joosten

A. M. Joosten writes from his deep and long classroom experience of the many activities to use with the movable alphabet for solidifying language skills. He is always sensitive to situations where a child may have come late to the House of Children and therefore might need incentives to engage with the materials. This valuable information is for the directress whose children need extra help in learning the sounds of the sandpaper letters. In the "how-to" details, Joosten is careful not to correct the child but to structure a lesson so that practice and repetition entice the child. Some suggested activities involve small group work and many involve movement. The children will not even realize how many different activities are directed to increasing their fluency with the sandpaper letters and the movable alphabet.

There are suggested below a number of activities which can be of help when children have difficulty with the letter material. Lack of interest in tracing and becoming familiar with letters will occur mostly when children have come late to the House of Children and have been presented with this material at too late a stage. They may show more interest in the movable alphabet but are handicapped by their lack of familiarity with the letters needed to represent sounds they have analysed. The difficulties with the movable alphabet itself are more common and more independent of the particular moment when it is first offered.

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All the activities mentioned should be understood as “additional” to the regular successive presentations which are needed by all children. They are therefore “possibilities” specially meant for a particular purpose, and need not be given until a special need arises. At the same time children showing interest in them (whether they really need them or not) and spontaneously joining should naturally not be hindered at all and be given a warm welcome.

I. SANDPAPER LETTERS

To encourage children to trace sandpaper letters we could gather those in need and do the following activity:

1. Take those letters which most of the children forming the group already know. Distribute them among the children and propose: “Who has (m) [letter name] please trace it and then give it to me.” This is repeated for all the letters that have been distributed. There may be a child among the group who does not know the sound value of the letter that is with him. Naturally he will then neither trace it nor give it (but others may point it out). At the end of the series of requests those letters will then remain with the children in question. There is no need to draw any special attention to this, but we can ask those children to give their letters to us, pronounce the sounds they represent and mix them up with the others. The whole lot can then be re-distributed and the activity repeated. At some other time those that were not known can be individually presented to the children who were unfamiliar with them and it is naturally advisable to make a note of this.

2. A group of letters can also be spread out on a mat. One of the children of the group gathered around them can be asked to show a particular letter, take it to its own place and trace it there.

The tracing stimulated by these activities does not, of course, substitute the prolonged and concentrated individual tracing by children who have themselves chosen a particular letter from the boxes containing them or that which follows individual presentation to an individual child. It merely serves as a stimulus when this is found necessary.

II. MOVABLE ALPHABET

After presenting the movable alphabet when a child comes to us and asks us to look what it has done, we should do precisely what he asked for : look, appreciate the effort made, but NOT correct. Only if the child asks us whether the words composed on its mat are correct should we apply the control of error by slowly (but naturally and preserving the link between successive sounds) reading the words composed in a voice sufficiently loud for the child to hear what we say. Thus the child is given an opportunity to discover where what we read does not correspond to the word he had in mind or which is represented by the picture by its side. By re-analysing the word intended we can then together try and find out where a mistake was made and how it can be rectified. Both when we merely look at what the child has done and when helping him to discover and rectify mistakes, our primary object should, however, be to observe what type of mistakes were made. Most of these mistakes fall in several categories which really represent difficulties the child meets. We should then help the child overcome these without direct reference to the mistakes which revealed them to us. We shall not be referring here to mistakes caused by carelessness, premature handling of the material etc. For these the remedy should be well known. Here we would like to draw attention to some other types.

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1. Letters not known. At an early stage the child might be making mistakes because he does not know the symbol for certain sounds. When the language is one of our vernaculars we now think f. i. [sic] of certain consonants belonging to the group which the child has reached, not to those belonging to later groups. Such letters will, of course, have to be presented individually and the child will have to trace them and associate them with words in which they occur for

quite some time. He may, however, at this particular moment not be sufficiently interested and the help given is, therefore, similar to that mentioned under I [section I above]. It aims at arousing or re-arousing interest in the sandpaper letters. For this purpose there are a number of different activities in addition to the all-important group activities in oral phonetic analysis.

(a) We can take all the letters of a particular group of consonants of the movable alphabet (all the vowels are supposed to be known before the child is presented with the movable alphabet except those which represent diphthongs or the short version of a basic vowel sound) and spread them on a mat. We then ask one of the children to show us a particular letter mentioning the sound it represents and taking care in pronouncing the pure consonantal sound 'without addition of [letter name]. Another child can be asked to show another letter and so on. If the letters are left on the mat, this can be continued as long as the children show interest. If they should take the letter from the mat, we naturally can continue only as long as there are letters left on the mat. If a child does not know the letter we ask for, he will not take it *or* take a wrong one unless helped by other children forming the group. These can then be presented at another time in the usual manner and we shall take a note to help us remember to do so.

(b) Put all the letters of a particular group of consonants in a heap by your side. Take one of them. show it and ask a child: "Which is its sound ?" and so on.

(c) Take any of the consonant boxes with which the child is already familiar and ask him to take out all the letters he knows and to mention their sounds while doing so. This is really an individual activity, but can be done as a group activity by asking one child at the time to take one of the letters it knows.

(d) Suppose an individual child does not know a particular letter. We can then draw his attention to the sound it represents by pronouncing it clearly and thereafter mention a number of familiar nouns which contain this sound. Each time, after having mentioned a word, we can ask the child whether he hears the sound in question. "Did you hear ____ (mentioning the sound in question)?" In



Maria Montessori observing children at work, Adyar, 1940

conclusion we can ask the child: “Would you like to know the letter for ___ (again mentioning the sound), so that you can make these words with the movable alphabet?” If the child expresses a desire to know this letter, we still have to ascertain of course, whether he would like to be presented with it at that very moment or at some other time. In the latter case a note reminding us to do so some other day will, naturally, not be superfluous.

(e) Show a letter (either sandpaper letter or one of those from the movable alphabet), let the child mention the sound it represents and then ask: “Can you tell me some words in which this sound is heard?” This can also be done with the help of a number or pictures representing words some of which contain that particular sound whilst others do not. The child can then be asked to find those pictures representing words containing that sound. The latter is easier than the former and both activities are much more difficult than the ones mentioned earlier. The moment to initiate them has, therefore, to be chosen carefully on the basis of observation.

With the help of the above mentioned activities the child is helped to realize that there are a number of letters he does not yet know. This may encourage him to acquaint himself with more letters which are, of course, presented by means of the sandpaper letters in the usual manner.

2. Sound recognition: imperfect pronunciation. The child who analyses spoken speech has at times difficulty in recognizing certain sounds. This is occasionally due to the defective pronunciation on the part of the child (we should naturally be able to neglect the possibility of a speech defect on the part of the adult and with even more reason that of careless pronunciation by the adult.) If the child has a serious speech defect caused by organic lesions or malformations or by deep seated psychological difficulties the help of a specialist will have to be taken. If it is a case of mere imperfection we also can be of help. There are several means:

(a) We can find, or even compose, some attractive lines or rhymes in which the sound in question often occurs and learn and recite them with the child(ren).

(b) We can do some speech gymnastics with small groups (movements of the lips and tongue touching the teeth, etc.) as described in the old edition of "The Montessori Method", chapter IX or in the many books on the subject.

(c) This, also, is a group-activity. Take the letter, representing the sound which the child(ren) finds difficult to pronounce correctly. (Not all members of the group need have these difficulties). Pronounce this sound clearly, e.g., (r) which many children pronounce like an el (l) or (y). Then ask one of the children: "Do you hear (r) in anar (anar)? If possible, encourage him to repeat both the word and the sound in question. It may say (anal), we then emphasize the (r) in (anar) and that we hear (r) in it. Then ask another child " Do you hear (r) in (sitar) ?' and so on. It is desirable, as already mentioned that the child repeats both sound and word, but the simple answer "yes" should be respected.

3. First sound. It is quite common to observe that children who have composed words with the movable alphabet leave out the

first sound of some, or all, of them. This reflects the difficulty of catching the first sound which passes before having been listened to attentively. This is really a psychological difficulty of a general nature. In processions, etc., we always find that the person, float or whatever is expected to be its most important component is placed somewhere in the middle or at the end, when the attention is prepared by the preceding parts. The child, therefore, needs practice and conscious effort in order to be ready to catch the first sound. A general preparation is, of course given by the repeated group-activities in oral phonetic analysis when we ask the children in turn to mention (or show) the first sound of familiar nouns pronounced clearly and repeated by them before indicating the first sounds. Here we suggest a number of additional possibilities:

(a) Bring the movable alphabet and say a word (always familiar nouns). Ask one of the children to bring the symbol for the first sound he hears in that word which he may repeat before doing so.

(b) We collect some pictures and ourselves take from the movable alphabet the letters representing the first sounds of the words shown by these pictures. Distribute these letters to the children. Say one of the words represented by these pictures, or—without saying anything—show *one* of them. Then ask “Who has the letter for the first sound you hear in this word ?” (or “in the word shown by this picture?”)

(c) Distribute pictures among the children forming the group (or give a number of them to one child) and ask them to take from the movable alphabet box the letter corresponding to the first sound heard in the words shown by them. If this is a group activity we ask the children one by one. The letter corresponding to the first sound is put on or near to the picture showing the word in question.

(d) The above mentioned activity (c) can also be done the other way round; We collect all the letters representing the first sounds of the words shown by the pictures we are using and which will be distributed among the children taking part. Then we show one of these letters and ask “Who has a picture of a word of which this letter shows the first sound?” One of the children will say “I” “It is the first sound of the picture I have !” We then give that letter

to the child in question or he can give its picture to us. The end of the activity is reached when either the children have no pictures left or we [have] no letters. If more than one picture should show a word

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of which a particular letter represents the first sound, we should, naturally have a corresponding number of such a letter and when several children will reply that it represents the first sound of the words shown by their picture, each of them will receive that letter. Such a duplication of letters is not necessary when the children give their pictures to us, in which case we would receive several pictures each showing a word beginning with the sound of which we have shown the letter.

(e) A variation would be to spread on a mat a number of pictures. We keep with us the letters representing the first sounds of each one of them. We then show one of these letters and ask one child to bring us a picture showing a word of which this letter shows the first sound. We can also spread the letters on a second mat and ask a child to choose a picture and then take from that second mat the letter corresponding to the first sound of the word shown on it or vice versa.

4. Last sound. It also happens quite often that children working with the movable alphabet do not put down the letter corresponding to the last sound of the words they have analysed. The difficulty in recognizing the first sound was mainly psychological, when mistakes are made with regard to the last sound they indicate a difficulty that is often only physical. It is common (though not correct) that in speaking we lower our voice and even almost omit to enunciate clearly the last sound of words, particularly at the end of a sentence. It is natural for the children to speak in the same manner and to pronounce indistinctly or to leave out the last sounds. When they then analyse words, they do not hear that last sound sufficiently clearly and therefore omit to add the letter corresponding to it.

The help we have to give with regard to this is, naturally, first of all to correct our own pronunciation where necessary. Secondly to help the children do the same which can be done in group activities

where we either pronounce words or show pictures representing them and ask the children to repeat what we said or mention the word shown, whereafter we ask for its last sound. This is, in fact, one of the regular activities in phonetic analysis. In addition and as and when required, we can then do all the activities mentioned for the first sound applying them to the last one.

5. Succession. One of the main purposes of the movable alphabet is precisely to help the children analyse not only ALL the sounds of a word, but to do so following their succession in the word. In the beginning specially this proves at times somewhat difficult. We then observe that, though the sounds of a given word are all represented by their corresponding letters, these are not placed in correct succession. We may then, at some other time, present the following special activity:

Mention a familiar noun and take out of the movable alphabet boxes all the letters corresponding to the sounds in that word. Scatter these letters on the mat where we are sitting with the child . Now ask the child which letter represents the sound he hears first in the word (which we repeat). Let him find the letter for that sound and put it aside. The same is then done for the sound the child hears after the first sound and we mention the word and the sound immediately preceding (“What do you hear in___after this, and here we indicate the letter put aside ___”) and so on until all the scattered symbols have been placed in their proper succession and the whole word is reproduced in sound symbols.

By means of this activity the child can concentrate entirely on the succession of sounds without having to select them from the boxes. It is an instance of “analysis of the difficulties” on a special level and for a special purpose.

It may be noted that whenever we mention “pictures” we refer to pictures showing only one single familiar object. These are, in fact, the same pictures the children use when working with the movable alphabet and they do NOT carry even a single letter (much less words) on the side showing the picture and on the back ONLY a serial number and/or letter. These same pictures can be used later on for reading activities when name-slips are added to them to be matched.

