

## ASK THE RESEARCHER!

# RESEARCH-BASED ANSWERS TO COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT TEACHING LETTERS AND LETTER SOUND KNOWLEDGE



### Overview

Preschool is an important period for learning letters, a key skill for future reading success. “Current Practices for Teaching Letter and Letter Sound Knowledge in Preschool Including Strategies for Improving Instruction in these Areas” written by Hope K. Gerde provides research-based strategies to promote letter knowledge by answering common questions many early educators have.

### How many letters should children know?

Research indicates that, by the end of preschool, children should know 18 uppercase and 15 lowercase letters to reduce the risk to later literacy difficulties.

The more letters a child knows before they enter kindergarten, the less likely they are to experience reading difficulties and the more prepared they will be for reading.



### What letters do children typically know?

Children often begin by learning the letters in their own name, usually starting with the first initial. Name letters are a great start to letter knowledge because they interest the child. However, children should learn uppercase and lowercase letters beyond their name. Using peers’ names in meaningful ways in the classroom can help children expand their letter knowledge. *This can look like writing letters to peers or having peers names visible on classroom charts.*

My name is Amy and I love airplanes! I know the letter A!



### In what order should I teach letters?

There are no studies on the most effective order for teaching letters, but research shows some letters are easier to learn than others.

Children are more likely to know letters that...

- the letter name and sound align (b, m, p),
- are earlier in the alphabet, or
- are meaningful in other contexts (X and O for tic-tac-toe).

Letter instruction should focus on both familiar and unfamiliar letters. Teachers should teach uppercase and lowercase letters simultaneously to support later reading. Also, encouraging children to write the letter and know its sound is important for letter instruction.



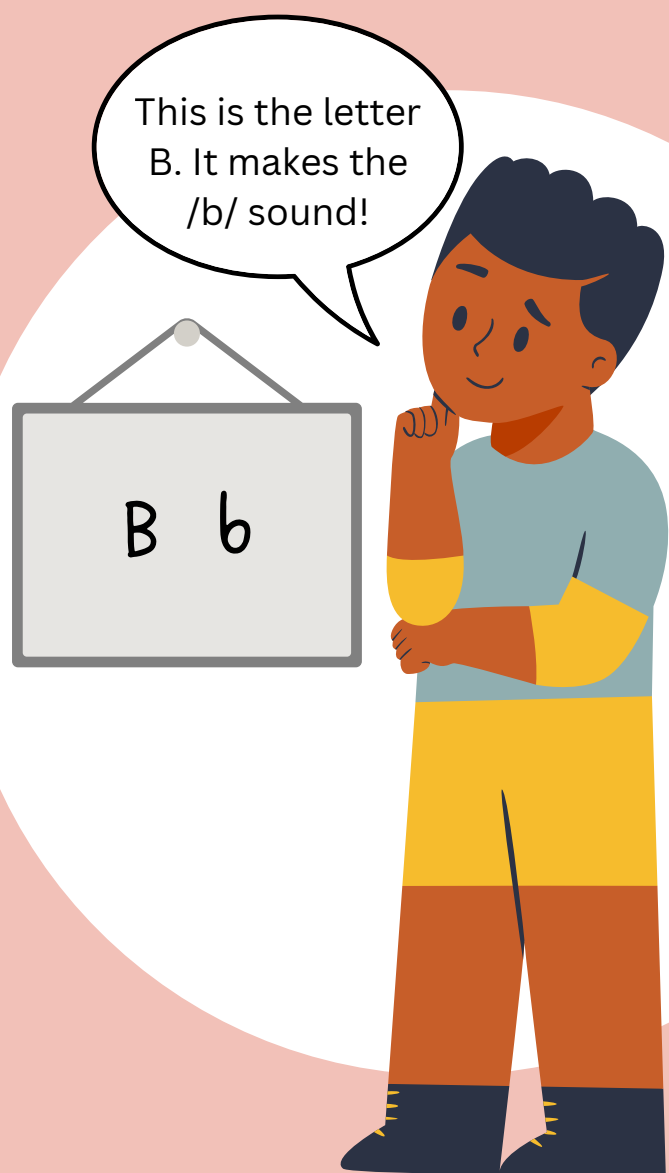


## What pacing should I use to promote letter learning?

Children in classrooms that used a faster pace for letter learning (faster than one letter per week) had higher letter knowledge by the end of preschool. The Letter-of-the-Week approach is too slow; introducing a letter per day or 3-4 each week is more beneficial. Faster pacing helps students see the alphabet as a whole, compare letters, and distinguish letter names, sounds, and forms. A quicker pace gives teachers time to review letters more than once and target instruction to letters that are less familiar to children, reinforcing letter learning.

## How do I promote letter-sound knowledge?

Understanding letter sounds is crucial for early letter learning because it helps children decode words and, eventually, read fluently. **Teaching letter names and sounds simultaneously is the most effective method for promoting literacy development.** Children benefit from direct instruction about the relationship between speech sounds (phonemes) and printed letters (graphemes) and opportunities to use letters and letter sounds in their play.



## How do I learn what children know about letters?

**Successful teachers assess children's letter and sound knowledge.** Some assessments focus on a few letter items (Test of Early Reading Ability), while others assess all letters and sounds (Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening). Quick and easy classroom assessments like the Quick Letter Name Knowledge (Q-LNK) assessment are useful to monitor progress throughout the year.

These assessments allow teachers to identify:

- Which letters children know and which should be the focus of future instruction.
- Which letters most children know, allowing teachers to target other letters.



### Strategies Supported By:

Gerde, H. K. (2019). Current Practices for Teaching Letter and Letter Sound Knowledge in Preschool Including Strategies for Improving Instruction in these Areas. *Head Start Dialog*, 22(2). <https://doi.org/10.55370/hsdialog.v22i2.1003>