

Introduction

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Helping children become good readers and writers is no easy task—or is it? While learning to read and write takes time, there are important ways to tap into what a child already knows and use this to jump-start the literacy process. One of these important ways is through environmental print. Environmental print is defined “as print found in the natural environment of the child. This would include logos, labels, road signs, billboards, and other print found in the child’s immediate ecology” (Kirkland, Aldridge, & Kuby, 1991, p. 219).

We have been researching and writing about environmental print for almost 2 decades now. In 1991, we self-published an early version of the book you now hold in your hands. Back then, the educational climate was vastly different, but the need for quality literacy resources for teachers was just as critical. We wrote the book using our own experiences of what worked, combined with research that was current at the time. Research conducted by others since then has emphasized the importance of early instruction in print knowledge and print awareness in creating successful readers. We’ve been heartened by these findings, which convinced us that our work is just as relevant as before—if not more so—given the current emphasis on making every child a reader.



Findings of the National Reading Panel

In 2000, the National Reading Panel released its report *Teaching Children to Read*, which heavily influenced the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, signed into law in early 2002. To assist schools in meeting the reading requirements of NCLB, the federal government added two new initiatives as part of the legislation: the Early Reading First initiative for children ages 3–5 years and the Reading First initiative for children in kindergarten through third grade. Schools receiving Early Reading First grants, Reading First grants, or both, are responsible for achieving marked development in the following areas:

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| <i>Early Reading First</i> | <i>Reading First</i> |
|--|----------------------|
| Oral language (vocabulary, expressive language, listening comprehension) | Phonemic awareness |
| Phonological awareness (rhyming, blending, segmenting) | Phonics |
| Print awareness | Vocabulary |
| Alphabetic knowledge | Fluency |
| | Comprehension |

Based on the findings of the National Reading Panel report, however, even schools that do not receive federal grants for these programs still strive to develop children's abilities in these areas, so children can become successful readers. At the same time, teachers recognize that learning in the early years should be a joyous experience and are searching for effective instructional practices that are both academically sound and developmentally appropriate (Copple & Bredekamp, 2005).



Making Meaningful Connections With Environmental Print

Considering the research pointing toward the critical skills young readers need to be successful, let's turn to three specific questions:

1. Why use environmental print?
2. How can I use environmental print in my classroom?
3. What is the value of environmental print?

Why Use Environmental Print?

Environmental print is important to use throughout the curriculum for a number of reasons, including these few:

Children see environmental print is everywhere. Even children who are not read to often see print in their natural environments (Prior & Gerard, 2004).

Children can use the print they see in the environment to help them learn. Children are not blank slates. They are active constructors of knowledge. Children try to make sense out of what they see in their environment (Christie, Enz, Gerard, & Prior, 2002).

Children can make the transition from home to school much easier when they see something familiar (such as environmental print) in the classroom (Kirkland et al., 1991). Teachers who incorporate an environmental print

alphabet in their classroom allow children to feel at home with logos they have seen in their neighborhood (e.g., logos for Kentucky Fried Chicken, Kmart, McDonald's). Children are more likely to learn the alphabet when it is associated with something familiar (Copple & Bredekamp, 2005).

Children can actively participate by bringing in print from the environment and sharing it with others. Most teachers have a sharing time each day. This sharing time may be called circle time, daily news, or planning time, among other names. Children can be encouraged to bring in logos from their neighborhood and place them in a large environmental print box. At sharing time, the children can discuss all of the logos brought in that day and the experiences they have had with each. A student might say, "My grandma took me to Pizza Hut last night." Another might add, "My cousins went with me and my mom to Toys-R-Us, and we bought a board game." The teacher or a student can serve as a scribe and write the experiences on an overhead, the chalkboard, or a chart.

So why is this important? When children first begin to read, they need to go from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the known to the unknown (Vygotsky, 1978). Having children share environmental print items they are familiar with gives them ownership of their learning. This ownership empowers them. The children share their experiences, and these experiences, in turn, have a profound effect on children's literacy development.

Environmental print breaks through curricular boundaries and supports an integrated curriculum (Kirkland et al., 1991). Many early childhood classrooms use integrated teaching or thematic units. However, it is sometimes hard to authentically incorporate all of the areas of the curriculum into these units. Environmental print naturally breaks through curriculum boundaries and serves as a foundation for literacy activities. Newspapers and catalogs serve as rich material for mathematics—for example, they can be used to make shopping lists. Transportation schedules add a rich dimension to social studies, and using food labels and recipes provides a meaningful source for science activities. Books that use environmental print are listed in Resource A.

Environmental print is one of the most natural ways to build an integrated curriculum.
(Prior & Gerard, 2004)



How Can I Use Environmental Print in My Classroom?

We have come a long way in a short time in learning how to use environmental print. When we first started using it in our classrooms, we became fat, irritable, and exhausted! How did that happen? Well, we drove

all over town, eating junk food, collecting garbage, and making games for our classrooms (often staying up half the night). While we intuitively knew environmental print would be good for our students, we did not yet know how to implement it. Although this was a start, it had little value for our students because the environmental print had not come from them.

Now we know better. Students have to have shared ownership in the program. They must bring in the environmental print, discuss it, classify it, use it, make games with it, and be the primary participants in the process. Based on what we learned, we make the following recommendations on how you can use environmental print.

Inform and involve parents and families. Parents and families will wonder what you are doing if they are not included as important participants in environmental print. To achieve parents' active participation, first meet with parents or guardians. Explain that their children will be asked to bring in print they have already experienced. Parents also need to be encouraged to point out labels and signs and encourage their children to seek them out in their immediate surroundings. A sample letter to parents, explaining how to use environmental print, is included in Appendix B.

Get the children involved immediately. At the beginning of the school year, children should be encouraged to bring in print. Give them examples of where it can be found: restaurants, convenience stores, can or box labels, and billboards. Then tell them to place what they bring to class in the environmental print box. Not only will they discuss the print at share time, but students also will be provided the opportunity to use the environmental print to classify in science, make games and books in math and literacy, invent through creative arts, and develop motor skills through active, hands-on learning.

Have the students help develop the program. Shared involvement is essential. Teachers and children should work together to create the environmental print program by sharing ideas and interests. This book is designed to help you and your students develop the best environmental print program you can.

What Is the Value of Environmental Print?

Environmental print is only one small piece of the learning process and environment. It is by no means the only piece—but it is an important one. Having an early childhood classroom without using environmental print is like having a jigsaw puzzle with one piece missing. Environmental print is important for many reasons. A few are listed in this section.

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Environmental print uses the prior knowledge of the students. We now know that for students to learn at their best we must incorporate, as much as possible, their prior experiences and knowledge into the curriculum (Copple & Bredekamp, 2005).

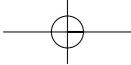
Environmental print provides an authentic, legitimate purpose for learning. Students at every grade level often fail to see the value of what they are learning or its relationship to the real world. Text doesn't get any more "real world" than environmental print. Using the knowledge children bring to school with them sets the stage for further learning (Prior & Gerard, 2004).

Environmental print has both constructive and instructive value. Children construct their own knowledge about print by interacting with logos and sharing them with others. However, children have great difficulty recognizing these logos when they are typed on paper or handwritten on the chalkboard, overhead, or paper. This situation brings about the instructive value of environmental print. Teachers can serve as important models by writing the names of products children bring into the classroom. This way, children can make the transition from logos to standard print. Children are less likely to construct manuscript versions of logos without the teacher's modeling (Prior, 2004).

Environmental print can be used to teach all of the skills that the National Reading Panel (2000) has determined to be the best predictors of how children learn to read. Environmental print can be used to develop oral language fluency, phonological awareness, print awareness, and alphabetic knowledge. Through storytelling and daily news activities, environmental print is a great vehicle for oral language development. Associating the sounds of language with environmental print helps make phonological awareness easier. Awareness of print can also be achieved by assisting children in distinguishing the print found in the environment from supporting background material. And, finally, learning the alphabet is more easily achieved through meaningful experiences using environmental print.

As you'll see, the environmental print activities presented in this book are fun, engaging, and research supported to help you bring about early literacy in all areas of the curriculum. We've specifically pointed out the early literacy skills that each activity helps to develop, while ensuring that learning to read can and should be an enjoyable experience.

We close this introductory chapter by looking at the physical environment of the classroom and how environmental print can be used to enhance it. The following classroom is a print-rich environment, using what the students have brought to it. The literacy center (in particular) presents children with opportunities for experimentation with language as a whole. Whole texts from literature, newspapers, and advertisements—in children's own language as well as the language of learning—are used for language experience charts, pocket charts, and games. Children "play" with language, moving from whole to part. They start with whole texts, move to parts, and then finally move to letters. Alphabet books, word books, and dictionaries are kept in the literacy center as resources for the children when needed. (Note: Some teachers choose to have a literacy center separate from their library.



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Others use the classroom library as a literacy center.) Children make their own books, dictionaries, and games. A storage box or large can is placed in the center and used to keep environmental print labels and logos brought in by the children. Scissors, tape, and glue are readily available to encourage independent work.

Additional ideas for incorporating environmental print in other areas of the classroom and curriculum are detailed in this book. We hope you will enjoy your journey into integrating the curriculum through environmental print. All students can benefit from a jump-start, and a familiar, print-rich environment gets them well on their way to becoming readers.

