



Little Learners

Preschool and Academy

"Where every day is a BIG adventure in learning"

No more Letter-of-the-Week and no more Worksheets!

Here at Little Learners, our philosophy in teaching is with a hands-on approach. This also applies to academic instruction. We believe that children of preschool age are not only ready to learn, but have an insatiable desire to learn!

Obviously, one of the first academic tools a child needs is to learn the letters and letter sounds in order to build a foundation for reading. Several recent, reliable studies have shown that the best approach to teaching students how to read is by not isolating letters (hence the letter-of-the-week approach), but rather by demonstrating to the students that while each letter has a separate sound, they can be linked together to form words.

One of the best approaches to introducing this concept is through the use of the student's name. "Once children learn that their names are words and that they are made with the same letters in the same order each time, they begin to understand the concept of *word*." (Literacy Beginnings, Gay Su Pinnell and Irene C. Fountas). Their names are usually the first real words that students can identify. And once they determine that other letters in print form words, the concept of reading begins to emerge. We identify these students as emergent readers.

It is our goal at Little Learners that all our Preschool and Academy students discover letters and words in this manner. To simply "learn" a letter once a week, then move on to the next letter, does not allow the student to develop a cohesive process in which to form letters into words.

We begin each group time with the "Morning Message". Each day, the teacher uncovers the "Leader of the Day" in a clever way. No one, not even the teacher, knows who the LOD will be ahead of time. The LOD enjoys tremendous privileges that day. They get to do EVERYTHING! No longer do we have job helpers for each task. The LOD gets to perform all the tasks, and can call on friends to help when needed.

After discovering the LOD, the teacher writes the Morning Message on a large paper tablet. It is a simple sentence: "(Student's name) is the leader of the day." The teacher emphasizes that we begin at the left hand side of the paper when we write, we use finger spaces between each word when we write, we always begin a sentence with a capital letter, and we end the sentence with some form of punctuation, usually a period. The teacher also spells each word as she writes it.

The next sentence written describes something that the LOD likes. The sentence might look like this: "Henry likes pizza." As this exercise continues, the teacher is constantly stressing the letter sounds for each word. "P says pizza, p, p, p."

At the beginning of the year, and then again during each semester, our families receive a Progress Report indicating what the teachers have discovered about their students, such as what letters and numbers they know, colors, shapes, etc. The teachers use this information to create their lessons, based on the letters that they found the students weren't as knowledgeable about.

This discovery is introduced in a number of fun and exciting ways. Students may get to wear magic hats and use magnifying glasses to search for the mystery letter. Perhaps they will use gel tablets or sand containers to write the letter and sound it out as they go.

Of course, whenever a student has the mystery letter in their name, there are all kinds of celebrations!

Why not a lot of worksheets? After years of watching preschoolers struggling to write the letter "just right", and after reading further studies on the subject, it has been determined that while we want to encourage our students to write - - and to write the letters properly and correctly - - forcing them to adhere to a pre-programmed worksheet is not the best way to attain our goals. Instead, we want the students to first learn how to hold a writing instrument correctly, then learn how to correctly form the letters in a hands-on approach. They might write in the air, on their friends' back (with their finger), in the sand, or on a gel tablet. And yes, sometimes a worksheet. Most often though, any letter writing they do will be done either on sentence strips or in blank books. Again, a one-letter worksheet isolates that letter and impedes the concept that letters together form words.

What can you do at home? So glad you asked!

You can "play" with words with your child anytime, anywhere. Children can already identify many "environmental words", such as McDonalds, Toys-R-Us, and any of their other favorite places. Explain to your child that they are really reading when they look at those words and symbols. And then see what other words they can identify.

Post environmental words at home. A great learning process for emergent readers is to see a symbol or picture alongside a word. Label their toy bins with the picture of the object that belongs in that bin, with the word alongside of it. Label objects in your home like a "door", "chair", "window", etc. You don't need to post a picture to go along with these words. The object is the picture!

And use their name whenever, however you can in print! Label the door to their bedroom with their name. "Sarah's door" (rather than room, as you want them to read and identify the word "door" in conjunction with their name). Write their name on a piece of paper, then cut apart the paper with each letter separately, and have them put the "puzzle" together and spell their name. See how letters form a word?

Play name games. What words rhyme with their name? What other words begin with the same letter as their name does? These are fun games that can be played even while driving in the car.

We, the staff at Little Learners, are so excited about this new adventure in learning! We hope you will join us in this journey to help develop your child into an emergent reader!