

Babes without Books: Workshop Activities

Biggie things to remember:

- trying counts (it doesn't always have to be right to be right)
- there are no wrong ways to play, as long as people are all playing the same way and having fun!
- if you are talking about the game to someone else, explain how you made the activity, how you could modify it, and why you are playing;
- allow the kids to direct the timeline and rules of the games: are kids willing to stand in line, and take turn? Do you need to set up multiple stations at once, to keep all hands occupied? Do what works best for your audience;
- encourage/expect parents (if they're around) to get involved in play. Talk them through the activities while they play alongside their children;
- keep activities short and manageable. Stress that games can be played in bits and pieces, that children don't have to "focus" on the game exclusively for the game to be successful;

1. Give Me the Apple: This is a game that can be played with actual physical objects or with picture cards of objects, depending on the age and stage of the players. The idea is to introduce and practice matching vocabulary (the words out loud) with the actual picture or object.

Card version: Build vocabulary and "knowledge by association" by using pictures of familiar and everyday objects on cards. Cards can be tailor-made to include the interests of the players (such as fire trucks, dinosaurs, princesses, horses, or whatever) and the familiar pictures will build confidence as players know some of the answers before even beginning a game.

Paste pictures of objects onto 3x5 index cards cut in half. Use colour pictures from catalogues or magazines, add colour to drawings by hand, or print some to size using clip art or a website like Google Images. A full set of cards can range anywhere from 12-24 cards: try to choose pictures of things that any player will easily recognize and know the proper word for.

Ideally, aim to develop a set of four under broad themes such as fruits, furniture, animals, dinosaurs, buildings, vehicles or sports. Base the cards on the interests of those who will regularly play with them. For a simple starting version of the game, lay out between six and eight cards with the pictures facing up. The cards can be from the same set or from different sets. A game leader selects an object on one of the cards and says, "Give me the banana." The player then selects the card, picks it up, and sets it aside. The game continues until all the cards have been chosen, or until the player fails to select the correct picture cards.

Give Me the Apple can also be played by sets, where the request is "Give me the four fruit," or "Can you find the four animals?" instead of asking for a particular card. A "hide and seek" version of the game can

be played by turning the cards face down and allowing the player to peek under two cards per play to see if he/she can find the sought after card. However, if cards are placed face down, it's important that the game leader know (and remember) what objects and images are included in the game. As in any memory game, cards that are "found" can be left face up or removed from the playing grid; or, for a greater challenge, can be flipped face down and left in their original positions, testing a player's ability to remember the spots that he/she has or hasn't chosen.

Object version: An object based version of Give Me the Apple can easily be developed with items around the house or common toys (make sure none are a choking hazard) that can be used to introduce colour, vocabulary, shape, size, etc. This version will appeal to younger children who may not have the dexterity or attention span to grasp or manipulate actual cards. Choose objects that are sturdy and clean and have no detachable pieces. Again, as the game develops more and more vocabulary and comprehension, consider encouraging the player to group like items ("Can you find me all the things that are red? What is that one called?" or "Find me all of the animals") as a way to develop association. Use a simple background or play surface, such as a white tea towel or blanket, and place the objects between you and your child. Allow your child to feel and explore the objects first, with you providing the names and descriptions of each item he/she selects. Keep your explanations simple, and repeat the words as necessary.

Variation: If you are playing with children who are old enough, encourage them to come up with their own questions or riddles. Though the riddles that a child may come up with will be simple ("find me the bird") this is a fantastic exercise for kids to learn to observe and describe different characteristics of common objects. They also love to try and trick a grown-up with their own cool riddles.

2. Sense-Sational Stuff: there are a myriad of around the house objects that can introduce texture, sound, colour, shape and language to young children. We use many simple things every day that are safe for children to explore and that will also appeal to their senses. This activity allows you to introduce language such as soft, sticky, hard, round, square, loud, noisy, quiet, smooth, shake, bounce, square, top, bottom, full, empty, etc...

Do an inventory of the many daily objects that you come into contact with that will introduce your child to new sensations. Exploration is key: it is important to choose objects that you will not worry about a child swallowing, drooling on, or destroying. Look for items that a child will be able to pick up and feel, manipulate and explore. Be on the lookout for items with strings or detachable pieces, and take care that a little one doesn't accidentally bonk himself or herself in the head with something during the exploration process.

Once you have collected your "stuff" (you probably won't need more than four or six items at a time, set aside some play time when the child is curious and alert to explore. Sit together on a blanket on the floor, with items spread out between the two of you. Choose an item and explain what it is, how it feels, etc. If the little one is dextrous enough, allow him/her to explore each item (keeping in mind that things may go in his/her mouth, and therefore should be clean). Or, allow the child to select and then describe the item he/she has chosen.

Some questions to consider when developing your Sense-sational stash:

- do we have objects with different colours?
- what shapes can I introduce?

- how will an object feel?
- what sounds do the objects make?
- are there objects of different sizes?
- is everything clean and safe for a child to easily explore?

Some sense-sational suggestions (vocabulary that can be used to describe the objects are in square brackets):

- tight ball of aluminum foil (well worked with no sharp edges)
- a disposable diaper (plastic crinkles, soft inside, adhesive spots) [crackle, sticky, soft]
- tennis ball [round, fuzzy, bounce]
- socks (different colours, different sizes) [soft, fuzzy, furry, touch, clean, inside, outside]
- the inner roll inside plastic wrap or aluminum foil (it is much sturdier than a toilet paper roll and will survive drool) [hard, round, long, cylinder, roll, hole, circle]
- margarine container with lid [open, close, inside, outside, upside down, right side up, top, bottom, empty, full, smooth]
- a container with pasta or rice inside to shake or roll (make sure it is securely closed and taped) [shake, rattle, sound, roll, spin, turn]
- large spoons [scoop, lift, tap]
- building block or a square box (ie., a box that a coffee mug came in, taped closed) [square, cube, box, top, bottom, outside]
- stackable or different sized plastic measuring cups [round, empty, full, big, little]
- small sieve or colander (screen) [holes, screen, rough]
- coasters or placemats (cloth and/or plastic, different colours) [soft, hard, bend, fold, colours, shapes]
- sponge stress-ball [soft, sponge, squish, roll]
- box of Kraft Dinner [rattle, shake, rectangle, top, bottom]
- bubble wrap (make sure the piece is large enough that it doesn't become a choking hazard—you can even securely tape the edges together into a sort of cylinder or square shape) [squish, pop, roll, bubbles, crackle, crinkle, plastic]

Be creative, and consider what other items you have on hand that will introduce different sensations and concepts to a young child. Though children may not be old enough yet to repeat (or even recall) your descriptions, the tactile and exploratory sensations are great ways to promote learning and development.

3. Sign Me Up: This is a game that can be played almost anywhere, particularly if you don't mind a child "signing you" while waiting in line at a bank, sitting in a waiting room, or waiting for the bus. Using sticky notes (or Post It Notes) are the easiest way to play, but you can also play with masking tape, tape and paper, or even labels, if you like.

Young children love to write, even if they don't know how to form words or even letters. The key to Sign Me Up is not spelling, but instead is having a child associate a physical object (ie., a body part, a piece of furniture, or whatever) with an actual "out-loud" word. Even young children can play, because there is no need to know how to spell—or even know the letters of the alphabet—in order to make the Signs.

To play:

- Decide first what you will label. It can be anything: body parts, kitchen furniture, laundry or toys. Remember, the most fun thing to label will be the other player!
- Start by identifying one item. Say, “This is a chair.”
- Write a label that says “chair,” or, have the child write it. It doesn’t matter if the word is spelled properly or if the child is using invented language.
- Have the child attach the label to the object, and then have him/her read the label back to you.
- Continue until you’ve written ten or more labels. Then, read them through again with the child, and have the child “read” from the label while doing so.

Of course, the greatest fun is to show a parent and child how to “sign one another up,” each taking turns to label body parts, clothes, etc. Remember that play must go both ways: encourage your child to sign you up first, have him/her read back his labels, and then you do the same. Older children will, of course, become more creative with their signs, instead of “nose” writing, “nostril” or instead of “ear,” writing “ear lobe.”

You can make this more complex by labelling parts of larger objects with older children (ie., the refrigerator has a door, a crisper, a meat drawer, shelves, a light bulb, a plug, etc.). It’s also a fun and easy way to practice beginning vocabulary, for example, the parts of a room or house. Soon nothing will be safe from being “signed up!”

4. A Moveable Feast: magnetic letters are one of the easiest and most effective ways to reinforce learning the alphabet and increase a child’s familiarity with upper case and lower case letters. The key to having a “feast for a child’s eyes” is to go beyond the usual A-Z letter combination that is usually sold as a single package. Having multiple letters allows you to introduce your child to simple words such as mom, dad, or even the child’s name.

Magnetic letters are simple to make if you aren’t willing to invest in several sets of them. Use sturdy cardboard (such as the box board from cereal or Kleenex boxes) and cut into squares. Print upper case and lower case letters with magic marker (take care to print) or paste letters from a printed source (such as a magazine, or printed by computer) onto the cardboard backing. You can also purchase magnetic sheets that will run through a printer, and make a series of letters that way. Remember that you want your letters to be clear enough and large enough that they are easily distinguishable and aren’t a choking hazard. Covering the letters in book tape or mactac is also effective, especially if you’re gluing pieces of magnet to the back, as then your letters are sturdier and there’s no chance of the magnet peeling off.

Simple play ideas to start:

- have a child point to matches (all the A’s) or, choose a letter and encourage your child to find the same one;
- have a child sort the letters into groups (all the A’s, all the B’s, etc.)
- name the letters aloud. You can sing the Alphabet Song while doing this, but for the first little while, it is worthwhile to work in smaller batches--A to D, or K to P, especially when you have multiple copies of the same letter;
- for older children, spell simple words with the letters. You can spell familiar words (names of family members, animals, etc.) that even beginning readers will recognize;
- leave messages—brief, fun ones! Wait for the child to notice the message, and then read it to him/her (if need be)

Other Magnetic Letter games and activities include:

1. Print a child's name on a piece of paper. Have your child pick out magnetic letters (and name the letters as he/she finds them) to "build" his/her name. Remember to use uppercase for the starting letter of his/her name! He/She can place the letters on top of your printing, or underneath them. Take care to point out the proper positioning of the letters (*"We start from the left end and put our letters to the right. And look, the "e" in your name faces this way, just like how we printed it first."*)

You can also encourage a child to spell out his/her name with a crayon, first by tracing your letters, and then by copying them underneath. Then, ask the child to match the magnetic letters in his/her name to his/her own printed version—have him/her read the letters aloud as they are placed in order.

2. Spell out a child's name with the magnetic letters, but omit one letter. Can the child find/tell you what letter is missing, and put it in its proper place? If the child is already familiar with the letters in his/her name, spell out your child's name but reverse the order of the first and last letters (ie., NEVIK instead of KEVIN). Then encourage your child to find what's wrong and "fix it." (*"What's the first letter of your name? K? Well, where's the K? Oops, there it is! Where should it really go?"*)

3. Sing the Alphabet Song while pointing to the letters. Sing the song backwards while moving through the letters as well. Or, mix up your alphabet letters, then sing the song while choosing which letter corresponds with the Alphabet Song. Then, sing the letters in your child's name while pointing to the letters as well. Other "spelling songs" are great ways to match letters, as well. (A terrific one is The "Chicken Song," found on the *Wee Sing* series of kids' music.)

C, that's the way we begin;

H, is the next letter in;

I, that is the third;

C, we've already heard;

K, now that letter's our friend;

E, now we're nearing the end;

C, H, I, C, K, E, N, that is the way to spell chicken!

C, H, I, C, K, E, N!

4. Plan a scavenger hunt to find the letters. Hide letters of the alphabet on magnetic surfaces (file cabinet, sink, fridge, garbage can, step stool, chairs, heat vents, etc.). Tell your child *"I'm looking for the letter A. Can you find it in anywhere?"* If your child is just beginning to familiarize him/herself with the alphabet, have a print version of the alphabet to show (*"See, this is what the A looks like. Do you think you can find it somewhere?"*)

5. Fish for letters: print the letters of the alphabet on separate cards or pieces of paper or cardboard. Place the printed alphabet letters in a bowl, or "fish tank." Have your child "fish" for a letter, and then agree on what the letter is. Then, have your child find the matching magnetic letter to make a match. If a match is made, set the match aside—cards that aren't matched correctly go back into the fishbowl for another turn. To familiarize your child with both upper and lower case letters, use both sets of magnetic letters, and encourage him or her to fish both letters out. You can also use upper case cards to match with the lower case magnetic letters, or vice versa.

5. Spin and Tell: This is a simple learning variation of Pin the Tail on the Donkey that can reinforce numbers, letters, colours, shapes, or other objects. Note that the key here is to reinforce: you want to choose pictures of things that a child (or any players) will recognize, as a means to build vocabulary and descriptive words. Now and then it's okay to "throw a toughie in," but the key to the game's success is that it be fun and accessible for all who play (and not just the oldest players, if playing in a group).

Setup: the play surface can be developed in two different ways. A clear wall space is needed in order to set up the play board. You can use a variety of different things to design the playboard:

- a piece of Bristol Board or a sheet of flip chart paper, taped to the wall;
- a large square of clear plastic, or even a clear plastic shoe organizer;
- a rubberized mat (such as the non-slip ones sold at Dollarama);
- any kind of plastic or cardboard backing that you can attach (with glue, masking tape, or even Velcro) pictures to.

Pictures: cut out pictures of everyday objects, or use a set of inexpensive flash cards as your images. The idea of "pictures" is general: use letters of the alphabet, the number 0-9, and any image that you are confident the players will be able to recognize and name (ie., animals, vehicles, fruits or vegetables, etc.)

To play: Attach the pictures or flash cards to the playboard in random order (not too close together). Add a mix of different shapes, letters, numbers, colours, objects, etc. Make sure the images you are using are large enough that a child only chooses one at a time. Provided you are not actually gluing the pieces to the play surface, the playboard can be "redesigned" every time you play...though all players should be able to play from the same playboard in one game.

You can also opt to glue pictures directly onto a piece of paper or Bristol Board, or even draw the images yourself, if you choose. However, the problem with this method is that players will eventually memorize where the pictures are on the playboard, and because the pictures are glued/drawn on, they can't be moved around.

Follow the simple "one, two, three, spin" rules of Pin the Tail on the Donkey, either using a blindfold or with eyes closed tight (it doesn't really matter if players cheat a little, unless they are already quite familiar with the play board). When a player chooses a spot, remove the blindfold and ask him/her to tell you what that is (*ie., what colour is that, Jason?; do you know what shape that is?; hmm, what do you call that animal? etc.*). If a player answers incorrectly, encourage him/her to try again, or see if they can find that answer on the playboard (*ie., "No, that's not a seven, but can you find a seven somewhere else on the board?"*)

For older children: you can develop a variation of this game if you have flash cards or other picture cards that have the actual word spelled on the reverse side of the card. Set up the playboard with either all of the words or all of the pictures showing, and then have the players either spell the word associated with the picture, or read the word that is there.

6. At Your Command: This is an easy game that is sure to provoke a whole bunch of laughs and shrieks from younger players. If an available adult is willing to act as a leader/explainer for At Your Command, the game is easily adaptable for pre-school age children as well. Really young children will require leaders to act as "translators" for the words on the cards, but can then do the actions on their own.

Prepare a pile of action words (a sample list is below). Using index cards or small squares of cardboard or box-board, print one command word on one card. Then, as a way to help younger or beginning readers, draw stick figures next to the word to illustrate what the action word is (or use clip art, magazine cut-outs, or stickers instead).

The game can be played with one or more children. It is wise to have an open space for the game to take place, with space for kids to sit in a circle or off to one side to watch. Shuffle the cards and fan them out face down on a counter or table.

The youngest player can start the game. Have the child choose one card from the deck and look at it, without sharing it with anyone. *[If playing with a group of children, it might be worthwhile for an adult to check in and make sure that the child understands how to play the game and what the word on the card says.]*

The player then begins to act out the “command” on the card, using action (and no words) to try and tell the group what the command is. The rest of the players then try to guess what word has been chosen. If playing with a parent or other adult, the child tries to imitate the action on the picture for the adult to guess the command.

Take turns until all the commands have been acted out, or until everyone has had enough guessing!

Some suggested words for At Your Command:

jump	run	kick
yawn	dance	sing
cheer	hide	peek
hop	clap	sleep
spin	laugh	