



What does this say?

Your child is safely tucked in his car seat as you wait at an intersection for the red light to change. Suddenly, his tiny fingers point out the window at a billboard featuring a smiling cow and he happily exclaims, "Milk!"

You are surprised and happy as you think that your child just read his first word. Or did he?

Not exactly. Beginning at an early age, many children begin trying to understand the signs, labels, logos and print they see regularly around them. They are not really reading, but they are using their growing knowledge of the world and interaction with adults to give meaning to some of the familiar words they see. Researchers call this "environmental print awareness" (Westwood, 2004).



Along with sharing books and stories with children, encouraging their early awareness of words seen in the world around them can be a great opportunity to build the kind of warm, supportive relationship that will help children on the road to literacy.

Printed words are everywhere

Environmental print awareness is found in every culture that uses a written language, and nearly every child develops the skill. But it does not mean that your child is actually reading. It shows that your little one is beginning to understand that printed words have meaning, even if your child is too young to actually read words.

Parents and caregivers should encourage and support their children's natural curiosity about written words and signs. There's no shortage of opportunities around the house, in the car, or strolling through the neighborhood to encourage your child's interest in words. And doing so can be a lot of fun.

As children's curiosity about print grows, they might point at a word and ask what it says or means (Goodman, 1986). Tucked in his high chair, your little boy reaches for the box of cereal on the table and asks, "What's that?" "Oat Rings," you say. And pretty soon, he sees the logo on the box and knows that it contains one of his favorite foods. When children are surrounded by print, they are continuously trying to explore, understand, interact and figure out the words and symbols they see (Clay, 1993; Goodman, 1986).

I Know This Word!

Young children are curious about the words they see



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Read signs, labels and words everywhere!

When you point out words on cereal boxes, juice boxes or signs in grocery stores, you are helping your child see that words have meanings. They will begin to see words everywhere. This is called "print awareness." It's a healthy step on the pathway to reading.

Helpful parenting tips

- ★ Around the time your child is 2, look for signs that he is becoming curious about print, for instance, when he asks you to write his name.
- ★ Encourage your child's curiosity about environmental print by following her lead and answering questions about the words and labels she sees.
- ★ Look for opportunities to point out common words your child sees every day, such as street signs or labels.
- ★ Make a game out of the labels your child sees every day. Take a "word walk" to look for print around the house and neighborhood.
- ★ Ask your child, "What does this say?" and be supportive and encouraging even if he doesn't get the answer right.
- ★ Don't push your child to learn letters of the alphabet before she is ready – but do answer questions about them if she asks.
- ★ Children learn best through positive interactions with you!

For more information on parenting and early learning,
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The shape of things

In fact, children are usually able to recognize environmental print before they are able to read print in books (Kuby & Aldridge, 2004; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). It apparently is not the words or letters they are reading. Instead, they seem to recognize words written in a familiar way by the color, shape and background of the lettering.

In the 1960s researchers became interested in testing how children read environmental print (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Many studies in recent years have tested this and found, for example, that children were far more likely to identify a familiar word such as "Coca-Cola" if it appeared like it does on the soda can of the popular drink than if it was shown as plain lettering on a plain background (Hiebert, 1978).

In one study, 20 kindergartners who had no formal reading instruction were shown familiar words such as Coca-Cola, McDonald's and milk. When the words were presented as they normally appear on the side of a can or a restaurant sign, 69 percent of the children correctly identified them. When the same words were presented in a less familiar context, the number of correct answers fell to 32 percent (Goodall, 1984).

A big step forward

If a child isn't actually reading, then what is going on? Children use the knowledge they already have about print and they pretend to read it. Environmental print awareness is a sign that he is beginning to understand that the print he sees means something. Children are surrounded by words and letters. Just look around you: billboards, soup cans, stop signs, restaurant names, popsicle boxes, the logo on your car, a favorite T-shirt. The list is endless.

Long before they start school, children begin developing the skills needed to read and write. So what happens at home is one of the most important factors in a child's development.

Just as reading together and sharing stories can help children learn to read and write, you can use everyday opportunities to encourage their curiosity about the words around them in fun, playful and positive ways. Find moments to talk about the print that your child sees around him.

Ask him:

What does it say? • What does it mean? • What shape is it? • What color is it?
What letters or numbers are in it? • Why is that word there? (Fingon, 2005)

Don't worry if the answers aren't correct. The important thing is to make your time together learning words a positive experience. Your encouragement and support of your child's curiosity in the printed word will help him get excited about being a future reader!

While environmental print awareness is not really reading, it is one step on the road to literacy. It shows that your child is finding new ways to make sense of the world around her and developing an awareness that words have meaning. This can be an exciting and fun time for both of you. So enjoy the experience together.

