
Word Study Upcycled: Repurposing Life Materials to Support Emergent Readers

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Abstract

In this article, the authors describe how life materials, including plastic spoons, clothespins, beans, rubber ducks, and toy cars, can be repurposed to support emergent readers in word study activities. The article describes hands-on strategies designed to promote practice with letter recognition, phonics, word families, and sight words for emergent readers. The opportunity to explore and manipulate the materials provides an engaging experience for young children, promotes the development of fine motor skills, and builds a strong literacy foundation for young children.

Children in preschool, kindergarten, and early elementary grades are poised to engage in word study. Learning to recognize letters, apply phonics principles, construct words, and automatically read a large bank of sight words with automaticity are foundational stepping stones in learning to read for meaning (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). In this article, we present word study strategies that can be enacted using simple materials found in the home.

Household items such as clothespins, beans, ice cube trays and plastic spoons are durable and inexpensive to purchase for the classroom. With a commitment to repurposing, these materials can be adapted to promote meaningful word study. Further, with thoughtful implementation, young children can also develop fine motor skills by using materials from daily life (Montessori, 1965; Rule & Stewart, 2002). The following word study skills can be promoted through hands-on, engaging strategies using every-day, run-of-the-mill household items.

Letter Recognition

Students build a strong foundation of letter recognition when they engage in a strategic process by:

1) focusing on the shape of the letter; 2) comparing letters with others; 3) recognizing letters in words; and 4) producing letters as a part of meaningful text (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). A sensory-rich approach to letter learning can be created with many, varied materials. Young learners enjoy tracing sandpaper shapes with their fingers to feel the shape of the letter. Similarly, they enjoy opportunities to form letters in sand, salt, and shaving cream. Wet noodles are also fun to form into the shape of letters. The unique textures of these materials encourage letter recognition and formation practice through tactile learning opportunities.

Clothespins are great tools to encourage letter practice and strengthen young children's control over fine motor muscles. Prepare a set of clothespins with colorful lower-case letter stickers on them. Then, encourage children to match the clothespin to the associated upper-case letter printed on an alphabet strip. The matching activity encourages students to focus on the shape of the letters and compare letters with one another in addition to strengthening their hands by manipulating the clothespins. In addition to matching letters, children can be encouraged to match beginning sounds

with corresponding picture cards, providing them with valuable phonemic awareness practice as they match sounds to first letters in words.

Phonics

Once students have mastered letter recognition and phonemic awareness, they are ready to engage in synthetic phonics activities. Synthetic phonics is an approach that provides children with explicit instruction in associating letters with sounds and a toolkit for blending sounds together (Invernizzi & Hayes, 2010). Research supports teaching beginning readers word families, also known as rimes or phonograms, and encouraging them to apply their knowledge to read and spell new words (Rasinski, Rupley, & Nichols, 2008).



Colored foam dice in large plastic cups provide children with hours of differentiated word-building practice. For example, for students working on “short a” words, use a yellow cup with three yellow cubes. On one cube, write “a” with permanent marker on every face. On the other two cubes, write consonants that will allow students to form several CVC words when the dice roll out of the cup. Red cups and dice can be used for “short e” words, while a green set can combine two different vowels such as “ai” or “ee” for more possible combinations. As students strengthen their word building, more letter dice can be added to challenge students to build words with four, five, or six letter combinations.

Word Families

An effective approach for teaching students to understand word structure is to introduce them to onsets

and rimes. A rime, otherwise known as phonogram or word family, is the part of a syllable that begins with a vowel and includes any consonants that follow it. Fry (1998) published a list of most common phonograms. Students who recognize the phonograms can transfer their knowledge to decode over 600 one-syllable words by attaching an onset, a consonant, consonant blend, or consonant digraph to the beginning of the word (Rasinski, Rupley, & Nichols, 2008).

Plastic spoons can be used as a tool to encourage students to blend onsets and rimes to form words. Use an opaque white spoon to write common phonograms such as *-an*, *-at*, *-it*, or *-ot* words. On a clear plastic spoon, write a single consonant, left justified so that it will be visible next to the word family words, such as “p.” When the clear plastic spoon is placed on top of the white plastic spoon, children can blend the word “pan.” Students enjoy layering the spoons to build and blend CVC words. This same strategy is effective using consonant blends, such as “bl” or “ch,” or consonant digraphs, such as “wh” or “th.”



As students master word building tasks using common onsets and rimes, they are ready to learn to construct larger words. Kieffer and Lesaux (2007) recommend explicitly teaching children how words are constructed to help them read for meaning, including sorting words by affixes and roots to discover the patterns and meanings of the word parts.

To provide inexpensive and durable materials for sorting, teachers can use fine-tip permanent markers to print root words, prefixes, and suffixes on lima beans for students to group and sort within columns of plastic ice cube trays. Spray paint the beans on one

side to make them attractive and separate certain-colored bean sets for specific sorting purposes. For example, use an orange set of beans with the prefixes “re,” “un,” and “dis” and various root words including “turn,” “true,” and “appear.” To differentiate within a station, use different colors of beans for more challenging sorts. Encourage students to focus on the prefixes, roots, and suffixes of words that appear most often in the English language (Bromley, 2007).

Sight Words

In addition to teaching students to apply reliable strategies to decode and construct words, students must also learn to recognize a large bank of high-frequency words that may have irregular spellings (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). We recommend encouraging sight-word practice through playful and appealing activities. Sight words such as “give” and “know” can be attached to toy cars and raced down a track. Students use a bar graph organizer to record which car won by writing the sight word each time it crosses the finish line first. In a similar approach, encourage students to select a rubber duck with a sight word written on the bottom from a small basin of water. A student engaging in this activity would read the word “could” on the bottom of the duck and record the sight word on her log sheet. Emergent readers benefit from the practice of writing letters and words (Armbruster, 2010).

The benefits of upcycling life materials to support word study are great. The recommended materials are cost effective and easy to obtain for teachers. A visit to a forgotten storage room or a request for donations can yield ample supplies. The materials can be repurposed and used to support engaging word study for children including practice with letter recognition, phonics, word family explorations, and sight word review. Furthermore, through manipulation of clothespins, cups and letter dice, spoons, and beans, children also promote strength and coordination of their hands. We presented just a few strategies that creatively transform ordinary materials into enticing manipulatives for effective practice of emergent literacy skills. The possibilities are boundless; materials lying dormant in your own cupboards and closets are waiting to be marked with letters and placed in the growing hands of budding readers.

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