Enhancing Children’s Literacy Opportunities with Environmental Print

© Katie Ward and the University of Sheffield
What is ‘environmental print’?

Environmental print is everything from a huge advertisement on a skyscraper to the ‘on’ button on the television. We can enhance children’s opportunities to experience environmental print- which, because of its familiarity, often goes unnoticed.

*Print in the local area can include:* café menus on chalk boards, posters on buses, shop displays, car number plates, street and road signs, carrier bags, telephone boxes.

We have taken photos of print in the nursery area on a recent ‘print walk’ and the children had lots to say about what they saw.

*Home print can include:* remote controls for television and dvd player, computer keyboards, computer screen, TV screen, ipod, ipad, household appliances such as vacuum cleaner, cooker, washing machine, print on clothing, bed covers, curtains, toothpaste, food packaging, shopping catalogues, newspapers, posters, print on audio and video tapes and books.
Why use environmental print?

‘Children, from birth, are witnesses to both the existence of print and the relationship between print and people.’ Hall: 1987

Environmental print is important to early literacy development, as children are surrounded by it from birth. It stimulates talk about literacy as children ask questions like ‘what does that say?’ It can prompt children to identify letters in signs that are important to them, such as those in their own name. Their interests are often reflected in the things that they recognise.

Research shows:
• The importance of experiences before school, the ‘roots of literacy’.
• The path to reading begins when children become aware of environmental print.
• Environmental print can stimulate writing – children often imitate writing they see.

Examples:
• A child approached me and pointed to my badge, saying ‘that says Kate’.
• A child held up a packet from the junk modelling box and exclaimed ‘popcorn!’
• A child looked at a ‘no fouling’ sign and told me ‘that says no dogs allowed!’
• A child turned over a toy car and pointed out a tiny logo to me, ‘that says Hotwheels. It’s how you know it’s Hotwheels.’
**Opportunities to use environmental print**

There are lots of ways to use environmental print from day to day.

- Print walks/bus rides (just spotting print, or using a camera/video)
- Print shopping. Supermarket or local shops are not the easiest places to enjoy young children, but sometimes taking time to shop slowly and involving children in finding items is an effective way to enhance the frequency and quality of print interactions.
- Print food (or even a print party with food- food with letters e.g. dough shapes, letters on a cake or cupcakes, alphabet spaghetti, biscuits with letters.
- Magnetic letters on the fridge.
- Posters with print.
- Collecting packaging to make disposable bingo games (make a grid on a piece of card, stick one of each pair of logos onto it).
Recognition of children’s environmental print achievements

Young children interact with print in their environment. From a young age children show an interest in familiar environmental print and can link particular signs or logos with particular experiences. For example, they see the tomato sauce bottle and know that it contains the red stuff they want on their food, and know what to call it! Later children use their developing knowledge of familiar print to ask questions such as ‘What does that say?’ or draw attention to unusual or particularly striking signs and ask questions about them.

• **Using a film or camera** on a walk about your house or the neighbourhood, trying to pick up the things they say about the print they see.

• **Collecting environmental print** and assembling it in a scrap book. This becomes a record of the print they pay attention to and gives the message that their understanding and interest in print is recognised as something important.
Environmental print activities you could do at home:

• An environmental print jigsaw.
• A scrapbook or poster of environmental print you have found in your area or in your house. You could find the letters of your child’s name on packaging, to cut out and reassemble on the first page.
• A scrapbook of environmental print your child recognises e.g. packaging, signs, logos on technology.
• Playing a print version of ‘I Spy’.
• Making posters using cut up packaging.

We would love to see any of the above, or anything else you have done, if you bring them in to nursery. Your child might also enjoy the other ideas suggested earlier in the presentation.

Remember to make it obvious when you are using print. ‘I just need to check the packet to see how much to add... I’m just looking at the timetable to see what time the next bus is... I need to read the price to see how much to pay.’