

# The strands of LITERACY



**Professor Cathy Nutbrown's**

series on working with parents to

support early reading and writing continues with a look at three settings' efforts to engage children with environmental print...



## about the author

This article was contributed by Julie Bowels, Children's Services Department, Eastbourne, East Sussex; Sandie Piper, Sure Start Nursery, Hailsham, East Sussex; and Rachel Hitchens-Orr, First Steps Nursery, Sheffield, in partnership with Professor Cathy Nutbrown, and is based on work carried out as part of an ESRC-funded project, 'A Framework for Early Literacy With Parents' - visit [tinyurl.com/TNORIM](http://tinyurl.com/TNORIM)

## Exploring environmental print

**Sure Start Nursery, Hailsham, East Sussex**

Two boys from the nursery had previously shown no desire to write or engage with any symbols. However, the external environment around the children's centre where the nursery is based proved a fertile context for raising their awareness. Giving them ownership of this new and exciting world, encouraging them to find meaning in print, fired their imaginations - and adding a camera, to be used to record their new world, resulted in complete captivation!

Exploring car licence plates to search for known letters; discussing the meaning of printed signs; discovering the ubiquitous Tesco trolley; investigating the café sign, designed by children; and talking about why someone had set fire to the 'no smoking' sign - all offerings were greeted with enthusiasm. Follow-up activities rekindled the emotions of the experience: using photos to recreate the walk and draw maps; matching labels and signs; and deconstructing signs to identify letters and words, as well as designing new signs for the nursery.

For the two boys this was the start of a conscious engagement with reading and writing that they shared with their families. Appealing to visual and kinaesthetic characteristics of learning, the activities the boys engaged in empowered them to explore and attribute meaning to previously unremarked upon symbols.

The work described in this article is based on the ORIM Framework. For more information on this and early literacy work with parents, visit [real-online.group.shef.ac.uk](http://real-online.group.shef.ac.uk) or email [ORIM@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:ORIM@sheffield.ac.uk)

Children begin to engage with print in their environment from a very early age. As a result, adults can create opportunities to encourage literacy by looking at writing in the home, for example, on electrical appliances, food packaging and clothes; what can be spotted around the nursery or school, for example, labels, instructions and signs; and what children might see when out and about, for example, road signs, car names, train information, billboards and labels on packaging.

Here are three examples of the many ways in which early years practitioners can help parents discover the value of environmental print.

## Environmental print walk

**Childminders from Hastings, East Sussex**

A small group of childminders and their minded children went for a walk in the old town of Hastings. The childminders pointed out signs to the children and explained their meaning, and also took photos to enable them to recall the walk - with the children - later on. The children, aged between 18 months and three years, some walking and some in pushchairs, were fascinated by the signs at their eye level and on the floor, and quickly became experts at spotting signs and words.

Back at their childminder's house, the children looked at the photos they had taken

and helped to create displays to show their parents. A book of the photos was added to the book corner and used to prompt discussion. The childminders talked to the parents about the walk, and added photos and notes in learning journeys.

## Environmental print morning

**First Steps Nursery School, Sheffield**

In response to an open invitation to an 'Environmental Print morning', over 40 families came to the nursery one Saturday morning. Practitioners designed around 30 different activities to promote the value of environmental print, using packaging, magazines, leaflets, tickets and photographs of print around us. The idea was to show parents how they could support their children's developing early language and literacy skills in a wide variety of contexts.

Activities included finding signs around the nursery; looking for specific signs in the community; using a map of the local environment; logo-matching games; writing letters and posting them; making signs for a building site; spotting road signs and print on cars; role play in the 'supermarket'; shopping games; and using snack menus.

Why not invite parents in to your setting to share your knowledge of how print in the environment can provide opportunities for literacy?