

Power of print

What is the difference between a print-rich environment and visual noise? **Emma Davis** argues for meaning, and against the laminator

We already know the importance of an enabling environment in the early years, but what does this look like in terms of print? The definition of a print-rich environment is totally open to interpretation, so because of this, it can often be challenging to get the balance right. With an increased focus on literacy in the revised EYFS, the way we incorporate print is worthy of consideration.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'PRINT-RICH'?

It is not endless laminated labels, signs, words, numbers, instructions and questions. This becomes confusing, overstimulating and the print loses any meaning. In essence, it just becomes wallpaper which does not serve a purpose in any way. If the environment is too busy, children switch off so the print becomes irrelevant.

It is valuable to reflect on what print-rich means to you and your setting. Your understanding of this will depend on the culture and ethos of the setting, but the print needs to be authentic and:

- meaningful to the children
- have a purpose
- engaging
- have a variety of different fonts and texts
- include the children's own words
- carefully planned and considered.

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

In practice, what a print-rich environment should look like is not set in stone. It will be dependent on your culture, the needs and interests

of the children, your community and what makes your setting unique. However, there will be some commonalities; for instance, many settings have a mark-making area which will probably include print to inspire reading. There could be magazines, name labels, catalogues, signs, symbols and pattern cards. Likewise, a book corner is an ideal space to include a range of print. Do the books represent the cultures and interests of the children?

Text can easily be integrated into a setting without it becoming visual noise. Consider what is meaningful for the cohort rather than using laminated generic words, signs and banners. Some ideas to include are:

- Cookery books and recipe cards.
- Photos of local landmarks with labels.
- Maps.
- A self-registration station.
- Calendars.
- Diaries.
- Children's words to accompany photos on display.
- Real food packaging.
- Menus
- Forms and letters.

Children can be encouraged to engage in routines and practices which link to print in the environment. Simple but effective ways of achieving this include involving them in completing the class register, writing shopping lists together, reading instructions or recipes and tracking the print with your finger when reading books.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BOOKS

Books form the foundation of a print-rich environment in the early years and beyond. However, this is more than just an aesthetically pleasing book corner. Of course we



Books should be shared with the children beyond just story time

want to entice children to read and engage with books, but it is the print and experiences that are valuable. As educators, we have a responsibility to expose children to a wide range of diverse, interesting books which foster a love of reading. Through books, children learn that print carries meaning so they become empowered to read themselves.

Books should be a feature throughout the setting rather than just in one specific area, from the construction area and maths space to the role play and outdoors. Through these practices, children develop positive associations with books, seeing them as something that holds value. We can do this as adults by giving children opportunities to see us read and engage with text, both in books and the environment.

Sharing books with children can be a precious time of the day. However, this shouldn't just be limited to story time. Let's embrace books as a playful, interesting way to develop ideas and be curious about the world as we interact with print. Books can help us form strong connections with children as they are keen to find out what the words say, and we have the power to bring them to life. Because of this, reading stories should be an interactive,

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shared experience. We can achieve this through our words and actions as we read – our body language, tone of voice, intonation and facial expressions can all portray our feelings. If we are engaging and excited to be reading to children, they will pick up on this, and the moment holds more meaning.

As we are reading, we can track the words with our fingers so that children can see how the words flow from left to right. We can point out particular text, such as words in bold, a different colour or in a different font. It is also good to draw children's attention to elements of the book such as the author and illustrator's names, the title, page numbers and blurb. By adopting these simple practices, we are

inspiring talk about words and print rather than expecting children to absorb these through osmosis. This is a much more effective and interactive process than plastering the walls with laminated words.

THE ADULT'S ROLE

Aside from facilitating a print-rich environment, the role of the adult lies in engaging and motivating children to notice and engage with print. Adults can work with children to produce their own text in a meaningful context. Perhaps you could encourage a child or group of children to make up a story. Transcribing their words teaches children that their ideas are valued and also that print carries meaning. This can be displayed for children to come back to. Seeing adults writing can encourage children to have a go themselves, sometimes inspired by the text in the environment.

Adults can use print in creative ways to link to children's interests. A fascination with a book could lead to the character 'writing' a letter to the children. This is exciting and builds on children's existing interests, motivating them to know what has been written. Children could be tasked with writing signs and labels linking to the environment – a bear's cave, an outdoor café or a superhero HQ are just some ideas.

The impact of this means that children feel empowered to engage with print. They are able to make links to their interests, see their own written words in the environment and therefore they gain ownership over their play space.

We should strive to draw children's attention to meaningful environmental print both in the setting and when out and about. The local environment can inspire children to be observant and

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interpret meaning from what they see – road signs, labels in shops, advertising boards, posters and food packaging are just some ideas. As adults, we help children to make sense of the world, communicating and sharing their ideas about print and the meaning.

It is imperative that adults are highly skilled and knowledgeable. Educators should have opportunities for ongoing professional development and regular supervisions to enhance their skills.

PRINT-RICH OR LANGUAGE-RICH?

There is some debate as to whether a language-rich environment is more valuable than print-rich. The revised EYFS places greater emphasis on communication and language development. Children need to hear and say words before they can read them. This makes us question the value of laminated words and signs – children probably don't even notice them as they carry no meaning for them. Of greater benefit are books, key vocabulary to promote discussion and sustained shared thinking through play.

Effective settings will combine a print-rich environment with a language-rich setting, embedding quality experiences into everyday practice and provision. Adults will be effective role models, talking, reading and writing with children to inspire them to do the same independently in their play.

The key is in finding a balance to have the most impact. Children need to learn that print has a purpose – we read it, which inspires talk. With rich, meaningful experiences, we can help build the foundations for future literacy and communication skills beyond the early years. ■

A print-rich environment should reflect children's interests and have meaning for them

