

## “Let’s Get Physical With Zoo-phonics”

Children learn when they are having fun and when their large muscles, as well as their small muscles, are involved in the experience.

They learn by touching and by doing. Zoo-phonics provides young children the opportunity to use their eyes, ears, mouths, large and small muscles as vehicles to access information. Zoo-phonics encourages a child’s natural tendency to wiggle and channels it for learning.

We, as educators, have always encouraged play in socialization, and manipulatives in math and science - real hands-on learning! But, when it comes to reading, spelling and writing, we have only provided abstract symbols - symbols that represent sounds. How nebulous can this be to 3, 4, 5, and 6 year old children?



Realizing this, the authors of Zoo-phonics (both working in the classroom at the time) saw that children need a concrete method to access information, to tuck it into memory, and to retrieve it for future use. Zoo-phonics was born.

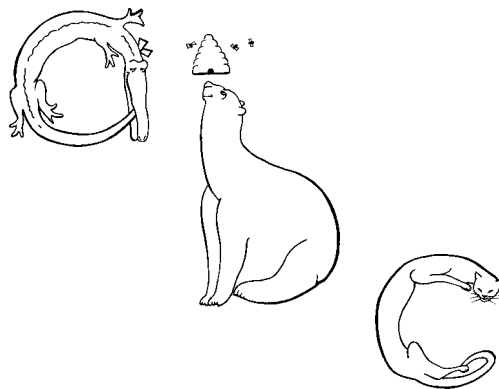
Educators and researchers are becoming more aware of how important mnemonics and kinesthetics are to learning. However, there is a dangerous trend, in many schools today. Because reading scores have been so abysmally low across the nation, language arts programs have been expanded which, in turn, have required extra time to teach. Physical education classes and recesses have been reduced or deleted from the curriculum in many districts across the United States.

This will, in time, cause a serious backlash. Our children will be less than fit and healthy. What will be the psychological and emotional effects? Children need to move. They need structured and unstructured play. They need playful interaction with their peers and teachers.

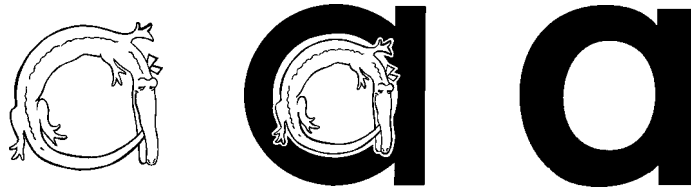
Zoo-phonics builds physical movement into every aspect of the program. Not only do the children learn the alphabet through physical movement, they decode as they read through their bodies; they build words through their bodies. They “step out” sentences with their bodies. They toss balls, beanbags, ping pong balls, jump on trampolines, and have relay races.

There are some real specifics about the Zoo-methodology that have caused its high success with toddlers, preschoolers, Kindergartners, 1<sup>st</sup> graders, special education students, and English language learners. Here are its secrets:

1. Animals are drawn in the shapes of the letters. Instead of looking at an abstract symbol, they see a familiar animal.
2. The alliterative animal names teach the sounds of the letters (@llie @lligator, bubba bear, catina cat, etc.). You don’t have to go inside the word to locate the sounds, they are the first sounds the child hears!
3. A body movement, called a Signal, is taught which mimics something that the animal might do: wash its face, make deer ears, swing its truck. This body movement is the glue that “sticks” the sounds to the symbols.



4. Those same animals are then placed on top of the letters, so the animals are learned in association with the letters, so when a child sees an “a” in text somewhere (a cereal box, a book, a road sign) s/he might shout out, “There’s allie alligator, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”



5. Lowercase letters and letter sounds are taught first. Capital letters are only used in text 5% of the time. Letter names are seldom used in reading. If you teach lowercase letters and their sounds first, you can get the child into the reading/spelling process right away! (Capital letters are taught according to their purpose: to begin a sentence and a proper name.)
6. Zoo-phonics teaches the alphabet as a whole entity. It doesn’t break up the alphabet into “once a week letter learning.” In three days to two weeks, toddlers, pre-schoolers and primary students will have the sounds and shapes of the alphabet *mastered and ready to be utilized!*
7. Because it is playful, colorful, musical, and fun, children stay on task longer. They choose to play Zoo-phonics at center’s time and independently.
8. Parents can be easily trained to support teachers’ and students’ efforts in the classroom. Materials can be inexpensively shared for home use. Home support maximizes student learning and may help the parents’ literacy as well.
9. Because Zoo-phonics is based on animals, all academic subjects can be incorporated. You can show your children where all the animals live with a world globe or map. Discuss cultures and appreciate diversity. Learn about the eating/preying habits of the animals. Are they nocturnal? Diurnal? Omnivorous, herbivorous, carnevorous?
10. Zoo-phonics uses a combination of decodable text as well as wonderful literature to expand vocabulary and reading skills.

The Animal/Letters and Body Movements make the alphabet, reading, spelling, and writing come alive! Children manipulate the alphabet with their eyes, ears, and mouth, and bodies. They can’t help but remember!

The National Reading Panel says this about the importance of mastering the alphabet: “Teaching children to manipulate phonemes using letters produced bigger effects than teaching without the letters.” This means that phonemic awareness will be far more effective if children have a complete handle of the 26 letters of the alphabet - the shapes and the sounds they make.<sup>1</sup>

Because the children physically move - one letter at a time through the word - they learn quickly where those letters are placed. They learn which letters work together to form the sounds in words. When it is time for paper/pencil activities, spelling is a snap! They have been moving their bodies and the *Large Animal/Letter Cards* around for ages. They’ve become experts.

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<sup>1</sup> The National Reading Panel’s Report, “Teaching Children to Read.” (April 2000)

Thomas Armstrong, Ph.D., says in his book, *In Their Own Way*, “It may be ridiculous to say this, but children take their bodies with them wherever they go...As more parents and teachers begin to recognize the importance of the body in learning, we’re likely to see a sharp decline in the number of so called disabled learners.”<sup>2</sup>

Jean Piaget reinforced this when he pointed out that “the highest forms of logical intelligence can be traced back to the origins in the body.”<sup>3</sup>

Arnold Gesell said, “Mind manifests itself in everything the body does.”<sup>4</sup>

*Remember, when the body moves, the brain remembers!*

Let’s take a look at some of the activities that is incorporated into the daily Zoo-curriculum:

- 1. Move like the Animals and Learn the Alphabet.** Using the *Large Animal Picture Cards*, learn the Shapes, Sounds and Signals of the alphabet. On this foundation, everything else in the language arts realm will be established.
- 2. Play the song, “We Are Zoo-phonics Kids.”** Signal (move) as the Animal/Letters are called out, “a – z.” Students develop a sense of alphabetical order, rhythm and rhyme, as well as sound/symbol relationships.
- 3. One Sound, One Signal, a – z.** Your students will develop *automaticity* as they quickly move through the alphabet, Signaling and giving the Sounds of each letter. This will prepare them for sound blending in a very short time.
- 4. Toss a Beanbag or a Beanie Animal.** Toss a beanbag or beanie animal around the room as the class Signals and Sounds the alphabet in sequence. Each child is required to know which Animal/Letter comes next in the sequence. They are to catch the beanbag or beanie animal, and then Signal and Sound. They are then to toss it to the next child, who will help continue this exercise through the alphabet. This develops excellent listening skills as well as eye/hand coordination and sound/symbol relationships. It is an excellent phonemic awareness activity, as well.
- 5. Do Zoorobics!** On the “Music that Teaches” CD, there is an actual aerobic routine, using the Animal Body Signals. You can warm-up and stretch, speed-up (get that heart and oxygen pumping) and cool down and a stretch at the same time as you reinforce the alphabet!
- 6. Beach Ball Toss.** With a marker, print the lowercase letters randomly all over the beach ball. The children are to choose a letter, and silently Signal it out for others to guess. The first to guess now gets his or her chance to catch the ball, chose a letter or word, Signal, and toss the ball. This is an excellent eye/hand coordination activity as well as developing sound/symbol relationships. For younger children, under-inflate the beach ball, so their small hands catch it more easily. For older children, you can write the letters on ping pong balls, as well. They must use fine muscle control for this activity.
- 7. Play Red Light, Green Light.** Follow the rules to this old and classic game. Hold the *Large Pictures Cards* for all the children to see. Call out one (out of order) and turn your back. Yell, “Green Light!” The students are to run up to the teacher, Signaling and Sounding the letters as they run. The teacher then calls out, “Red Light!” and turns around. Anyone caught moving has to go to the back of the line. The goal is for one child to reach the teacher first, and now become the teacher. This is an excellent “listening and following directions” activity.

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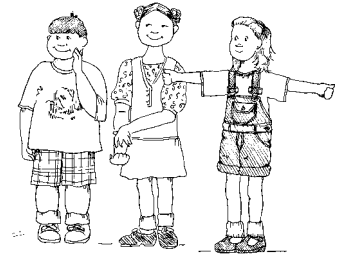
<sup>2</sup> Dr. Thomas Armstrong, *In Their Own Way*, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, N.Y. 1987

<sup>3</sup> IBID

<sup>4</sup> IBID

- 8. Zoophonia, May I?** This game is played like “Mother, May I?” This time, students ask to take “so many” animal steps. Example, “Zoophonia, may I take five Gordo Gorilla steps?” Zoophonia may say yes or no and substitute step amounts. Each child must act like the Animal s/he represents. Gordo is large and lumbering, so fewer steps are allowed. Inny Inchworm is tiny, so many tiny steps are allowed. They Signal and Sound each time. It is a great counting game, as fellow students count the steps as the “stepping” child is Signaling/Sounding and moving forward.
- 9. Speaking of Math..... Let’s try Zoo-math.** As you recite these rhyming couplets, Signal the stated number. It ties math and language arts together. “Allie’s smile is like the sun, open and close, and count to one.” “Bubba Bear hears bees, do you? Reach to the hive and count to two.” “Catina Cat sips her tea. Clean her whiskers and count to three.” Recite the rhymes and count to 26!
- 10. Sing and Jump to the “Jump Rope Rap!”** From the “Music That Teaches” CD, play the “Jump Rope Rap.” This is based on rhyming couplets. Have the children, one at a time, jump into a jump rope as the rhymes are recited, Signaling all the while. Once the couplet is over, the next child jumps in and recites and Signals the next animal’s couplet. Example: “Allie Alligator’s jaws are snappy, and when she grins, she makes you happy.” Students can jump in place or on a mini-trampoline, also. This is an excellent rhyming (phonemic awareness) activity. You can also teach parts of speech with these rhymes.
- 11. Play a Game of Zoophonia Says.** Children will have to listen really carefully as Zoophonia gives directions. “Zoophonia says, Signal Nigel Nightowl. Zoophonia says, Signal Zeke Zebra. Signal Missy Mouse. Oh oh! Zoophonia didn’t give permission to Signal Missy Mouse.”
- 12. Signal Out a Song!** Signal and sing a favorite song. Signal the first initial in all short vowel and consonant words. Try “Happy Birthday To You.” You can Signal out the first letter in each word. Try a favorite nursery rhyme. Simply drop your arms if you come to a phoneme you haven’t presented yet (long vowels, schwas, etc.) In time, your children will be able to Signal all the beginning letters. Next, try the blends when you hear them, and so on!
- 13. a - b - c order.** Randomly hand out all the *Large Animal Picture Cards* to your students. Have them get into a – b – c order as quickly as they can. Then, once they are in order, have them put their Cards on the floor in front of them, and the Signal each out like a wave as it moves down the line! Sing “Come Meet Us at the Zoo” a cappella to see if your students are in the right order. The song itself aids memory. Try this once a week to see if they can pick up some speed! Time them and keep their records of improvement.
- 14. Have An Alphabet Hunt.** Hide the *Merged Animal/Letters* around the school. Let just a part of the letter peek out so it can be seen (the younger the child, the more of the letter to be seen). Have your children walk around the campus hunting for their Animal friends. They can work in teams of two. Once they find an Animal/Letter, they are to Signal and Sound, and then continue to search. When all letters have been found, have your students get in alphabetical order. (Sing the “a – b – Song” or the “Come Meet Us at the Zoo” song.) A walk is great exercise. It’s good for teachers and aides too! Give everyone a treat for their hard work.
- 15. Clap out Sounds! Clap out Syllables!** Put a list of words on the chalkboard. Call out a word, pointing to it. Clap out each sound they hear in the word. Now, clap out how many parts or syllables it has. (“cat” has three sounds, but only one syllable.) Children will see the difference between sounds and syllables. This awareness will aid them in future reading and spelling endeavors.
- 16. Teach the Capital Letters!** Now that your students know the shapes and sounds of the lowercase letters of the alphabet and can put them order and read and spell simple words, it is time to work on sentence structure. This is the time to focus on developing capital letters and letter name skills. Zoo-phonics has many materials to develop these skills. Remember, capital letters are ONLY used for beginning a sentence and a proper name!

**17. Step Out Sentences!** Using the simple sentences in the *Zoo-phonics Level A Reading Series*, “step out” the sentence. Start with the Capital Letter, then begin to Body Spell each word in the sentence. Children must move one step to the right as each word is completed. Don’t forget to Signal out the punctuation, also! Use fun sound effects. Stepping Out Sentences teaches children to put spaces between words when writing. Your students will learn that every sentence has to begin with a capital letter and every sentence ends with punctuation. You can teach nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, proper nouns, pronouns, subject and predicate through this activity.



These are but a few of the ways we get children up and moving, all the while developing serious academic skills. We know that when a child is having interactive fun with a concept and each other, memory is enhanced. When all modalities are used, memory is enhanced. When it is a joyful experience, memory is enhanced.

Here is one more piece to the puzzle: “It seems self-evident that techniques to develop children’s phonemic awareness in classrooms should be as relevant and exciting as possible, so that the instruction engages children’s interest and attention in a way that promotes optimal learning....It seems that teachers will be most effective when they are enthusiastic in their teaching and enjoy what they are doing in the classroom.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The National Reading Panel’s Report, “Teaching Children to Read.” (April 2000)