

Jane Register Deacle. Are Alphabet Books Appropriate For Preschool Children to Use to Learn the Alphabet? A Content Analysis of Age Appropriateness of Ten Alphabet Books Published from 1991-2000. A Master's paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. April, 2002. 61 pages. Advisor: Brian W. Sturm

This paper used cognitive development research, reading research, letter recognition studies, information from children's literature, and interviews with caregivers, teachers and children's librarians as they related to preschool children to develop criteria for evaluating alphabet books for preschool. Ten alphabet books written for preschool children from 1991-2000 were evaluated to determine if preschool children could use them to learn the alphabet.

Headings:

Alphabet books

Children's reading - Educational aspects

English language - Alphabet - Juvenile literature

Are Alphabet Books Appropriate For Preschool Children to  
Use to Learn the Alphabet?  
A Content Analysis of Age Appropriateness of Ten Alphabet  
Books Published from 1991-2000

by  
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## Introduction

You can find it on shelves in the children's section of every public library, in preschool classrooms, and in the homes of preschool-age children. A package, called a book, containing 26 seeds, called letters of the alphabet. Give these seeds to a preschool-age child to sow and she will harvest a bounty of tools for learning to read. A more common name for this package of seeds is the alphabet book.

*A Dictionary of Reading and Related Terms* defines the alphabet book as "a picture book which presents in sequence the letters of the alphabet, A to Z" (Harris & Hodges, 1981). Chaney (1993) adds that alphabet books present consistent organization patterns, illustrations, are usually short, have a uniform format, and usually focus on a specific theme or concept.

In an effort to stimulate cognitive development, caregivers and teachers today use alphabet books with preschool-age children. As children reach the preschool stage of development, they are ready to begin mapping letter sounds (phonemes) they have been learning since birth to the letter shapes (graphemes) used to represent

them. Alphabet books contain the graphemes needed to begin a preschooler on the road to reading.

But, are alphabet books appropriate for preschool children to use to learn the alphabet? To answer this question, I evaluated alphabet books written for preschoolers during the last decade of the twentieth century. I used criteria that took into account the cognitive stages of development as defined by Piaget and Erikson, alphabet book criteria created by children's literature experts, findings from reading development research, and input from preschool caregivers, educators, and librarians. I want the criteria to be used as a standard in the selection of alphabet books for preschoolers. Standardized criteria will allow consistent selection and evaluation of preschool alphabet books regardless of who makes the selection.

### **Literature Review**

To create valid alphabet book criteria, I needed to be familiar with the history of alphabet books; the characteristics of preschool-age children; the connection between knowing the alphabet and learning to read; any prior criteria used in alphabet book selection; and what caregivers, educators, and librarians look for when

choosing an alphabet book for preschoolers. The following section presents a synthesis of this information.

### ***A Brief History***

Children's literature experts recognize the alphabet book as one of the first book forms written just for children (Huck, Hepler, Hickman, and Kiefer, 2001; Norton & Norton, 1999; Sutherland, 1997). It began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in England as a hornbook, a wooden paddle with a piece of printed parchment glued on top and then covered by a thin piece of clear flat horn. On the parchment was printed the alphabet, along with the Lord's Prayer, the Benediction, and Roman numerals (Guttek, 2000). In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the alphabet was added to a devotional book printed for children's daily use. Move to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the United States and I found the alphabet continues to appear in religious and instructional books due to Puritan influence (Huck et al., 2001). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, books like *Mother Goose's A Apple Pie* and Edward Lear's *An Edward Lear Alphabet Book* added amusement to the religious and instructional focus of the alphabet book (Sutherland, 1997). Today, alphabet books range from simple teaching tools to elaborate works of art.



### ***The Preschool Child***

Piaget (1976, p. 5) defined four stages of cognitive development: *pre-language sensori-motor* from birth to 2 years; *pre-operational* from 2 to 7 years; *concrete operations* from 7 to 12 years; and *prepositional operations* from 12 years through adolescence. The *pre-operational* stage encompasses the toddler and preschool-age groups and provides the cognitive thinking basis for this paper.

The *pre-operational* stage is a busy one for a child and is important in connecting the *sensory-motor* and the *concrete operations* stages. The *pre-operational*, or *representational*, stage is when children begin to use symbols in language and play. During this time, a toddler or preschooler conceptualizes or represents events mentally using words and motions to convey them (Gallagher, 1981).

Beard (1969) extends Piaget's definitions with her interpretations and divides the *pre-operational* stage into two sub-stages: *pre-conceptual* and *intuitive*. This model has the *pre-conceptual* sub-stage beginning at 1 ½ or 2 years and ending at about 4 ½ years, and the *intuitive* sub-stage covering the years from 5 to 7.

During the *pre-conceptual* sub-stage, the child is credited with the ability to represent one thing with another. This enables the child to draw pictures, use

language, and begin to write and read. Based on his observations of children in this sub-stage, Piaget proposes that objects can be represented by an image. During this period of development, the interaction of parents and older children with the toddler is important to development (Beard, 1969).

During the *intuitive* sub-stage, the child begins to imitate reality and become aware of rules that she interprets as absolute; in other words, children begin to shift activities from themselves to the larger world (Beard, 1969). Children can take this acceptance of rules and apply it to the process of mapping phonemes to graphemes.

Huck et al. (2001) sees the preschool child as a unique individual whose development is affected by life experiences as well as neural maturation. The list of characteristics and the implications that she offers echoes Piaget's pre-operational stage of development. I have listed, in Table 1, five of the ten characteristics and their implications for the use and selection of books for the 3-5 year old child.

**TABLE 1*****The Preschool Stage*** (Huck et al., 2001, p. 45-47)

Characteristics	Implications
Rapid development of language.	Interest in words. Enjoys reading stories from books without words.
Very active, short attention span.	Requires books that can be completed in one sitting. Enjoys participation such as naming, pointing, finding, and identifying hidden pictures.
Child is center of own world. Interest, behavior, and thinking are egocentric.	Likes characters that are easy to identify with.
Building concepts through many firsthand experiences.	Books extend and reinforce child's developing concepts.
Seeks warmth and security in relationships with family and others.	Likes to hear stories that provide reassurance. Bedtime stories and other read-aloud rituals provide positive literature experiences.

Huck et al. (2001) stress that these stages should be treated as progressions unique to each child, not a strict age-based timetable. As can be seen from Table 1, the preschooler that Huck et al., envision is interested in words, can be still for only a short period of time, enjoys participating with another person during the book sharing process, and likes books containing characters with whom she can identify.

Erikson (1985) proposed eight conflicts that must be resolved during a person's lifetime. He suggests certain age periods for each conflict to occur, but stresses that

even though the conflicts occur in sequence, they may recur during other conflict periods. Erikson's eight conflicts and a suggested age period when they are most likely to be encountered are: *Basic Trust vs. Mistrust* from birth to infancy; *Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt* during the toddler years; *Initiative vs. Guilt* during the preschool years; *Industry vs. Inferiority* during the early school years; *Identity vs. Role Confusion* during puberty and adolescence; *Intimacy vs. Isolation* during young adulthood; *Generativity vs. Stagnation* during adulthood; and *Ego Integrity vs. Despair* during older adulthood. The positive resolution of each conflict results in an essential strength, or basic virtue.

The results of a positive resolution of the preschool crisis, *Initiative vs. Guilt*, is the basic virtue, *purpose*. During this stage preschool children possess excess energy, the ability to overlook failure, and tackle the unknown. Preschool children bring with them the qualities of "undertaking, planning, and 'attacking' a task for the sake of being on the move" (Erikson, 1985, p.255). Erikson ends his discussion of this conflict by pointing out that there is no other time when a child is ready to learn as avidly and quickly as during the *Initiative vs. Guilt* stage.

Concepts from Piaget's *pre-operational* stage of cognitive theory show the readiness of preschool children to learn the letters of the alphabet. Learning the symbols comprising the alphabet while socializing with a caregiver providing guidance is appropriate for the child's cognitive development at the preschool age. This suggests that the time is right for alphabet learning to occur with help from another person. Because preschool children are ready to learn, as Erikson asserts, this is a perfect time to introduce them to the graphic form of the alphabet.

### ***Alphabet Books and Reading Success***

Babies babble, toddlers talk and preschoolers proudly sing and recite age-old songs and rhymes. One of these songs, *The Alphabet Song*, is familiar to most preschoolers. But how do children put a face with these letter names? The alphabet book allows children to map alphabet names to letter shapes.

McGee and Richgels (1989, p.223) suggest, "there are many kinds of alphabet books that are appropriate for preschoolers...teachers can collect several versions of alphabet books and encourage children to compare how a letter is presented in different versions." They go on to say that, "children learn to recognize, name, and write alphabet letters as they engage in meaningful reading and

writing activities with their parents, teachers, and other children....learning to name and recognize alphabet letters seems to be a function of the meanings that children find in the world of print" (p. 224).

Smolkin and Yaden (1992) conducted a study of six preschool children ranging in ages from 3 years 6 months to 4 years 8 months. This qualitative study examined the children's reactions to two alphabet books they shared with their parents. The study discovered that reading alphabet books with their parents helped children to learn graphic form. The children discovered that letter orientation makes a difference. For example 'M', 'N', and 'W' caused some problems during the first reading, but continued utilization of the books and discussions with parents helped children differentiate the letters. Another finding in the study showed children beginning to associate letters with a name or word starting with a letter, for example 'M' is for *Mark* or 'K' begins *kangaroo*.

Chall (1996) critically analyzed 17 correlational studies occurring during the 20-year period from 1938 to 1958. The purpose of these studies was to determine the relationship of alphabet knowledge to reading achievement. Participants ranged in age from kindergarten through college. After analyzing these studies Chall proposed that

children probably “need to know the alphabet (and to have a knowledge of letter-sound relationships) in order to learn to read” (p.158). She went on to state that it appears to be important for children to have the opportunity to “pay attention” (p. 158) to letters. Sounding or naming the letters allows this attention to happen and has a positive correspondence with early reading success.

Chall (1996) continues by suggesting that children’s ability to identify letters is equivalent to engaging in the practice of symbolic representation. This is not unlike Piaget’s *pre-operational* stage when children, ages 2 to 7 years old, begin to use symbols in language and play.

Working with caregivers and education providers, children can use the alphabet book to learn and differentiate graphemes and phonemes. The team relationship allows children to become aware of different presentations of alphabet letters, and they can use this discovery to move on to more advanced alphabet books. Gaining knowledge of the graphemes and phonemes while using an alphabet book can provide a firm foundation for word recognition and promote future reading success.

### ***Letter Recognition***

What problems do preschool children encounter when trying to recognize graphemes associated with the alphabet?

Gibson (1970; 1971; Gibson & Levin, 1975) points out that children must take various combinations of lines that are vertical, horizontal, diagonal, curved, open, closed or intersecting and recognize graphemes. Each grapheme has distinct features, and different combinations of the lines create each unique symbol. When learning to recognize each grapheme, a preschooler must pay attention to letter orientation and feature analysis of 52 distinctive letters.

In an analysis of their research Smolkin and Yaden (1992) reported preschool children built information about graphic systems while reading alphabet books with a parent. Building knowledge of the importance of letter orientation, and distinguishing letters using feature analysis are discussed below.

The discovery of the importance of letter orientation occurred when a preschooler was reading an alphabet book with her parents. While learning the letters, 'M' and 'W', she was initially confused to find 'M' in the middle and 'W' at the end of the book. Through repeated use of the book, she began to realize that the straight lines, diagonals, and orientation of the letters on the page make letters like 'M' an 'M' and 'W' a 'W'.

Feature analysis consists of looking at a letter and deciding what makes it different from other letters. A



mother and her preschooler were looking at an alphabet book when the mother noted the three lines across the letter 'E'. When they turned to the 'F' page the mother showed the child there were only two lines across this letter. In another example the father showed the child that a 'Q' was not an 'O' by indicating the diagonal line at the bottom right. These parents did not use the terms straight, horizontal, diagonal, or curve with the children but pointed out the differences by showing them to the child.

Masonheimer's (1981) study involving 139 children ages 2 through 5 showed children were learning upper case letters before lower case letters. The errors in upper case letter recognition seem to center around rotation confusion between the two sets of letters: 'N' & 'Z' and 'M' & 'W'. Confusion errors in lower case letters occur in the letter rotation or reversal of four sets of letters. Lower case errors appear to center around letter forms reversal, 'b' & 'd' and 'p' & 'q'; axis rotation, 'p' & 'b', 'x' & 't', 'p' & 'd', and 'b' & 'q'; and a combination of reversal and rotation, 'p' & 'b' and 'd' & 'q'. Children as old as 5 years do not clearly comprehend that if a grapheme is rotated in space it does not remain the same grapheme. Many words used in beginning reading use the letters 'b', 'd', 'p', & 't', so it is important for

the preschooler to focus on positioning and distinguishing features of graphemes.

Alphabet learners are faced with learning upper case and lower case letters. They live in a three dimensional world where objects do not change just because they are flipped over or turned upside down. To avoid confusion for the preschooler, the letters in an alphabet book should be presented in correct rotational format and with easy to recognize features.

***Children's Literature Experts Define Criteria for Alphabet Books***

What criteria should be used to choose an alphabet book that will take into account the cognitive stage and letter recognition ability of the preschooler? Huck et al. (2001), Norton and Norton (1999), and Sutherland (1997) author textbooks that are widely used in educating elementary school teachers and children's librarians. In their textbooks they define criteria for choosing good alphabet books.

Huck et al. (2001) recognize that alphabet books run the gamut from teaching children the alphabet, imparting information about a specific topic, to showcasing artwork. They define eight items in their criteria for an acceptable alphabet book. A list of their criteria appears in Table 2:

**TABLE 2*****Criteria for Alphabet Book*** (Huck et al., 2001, p. 141)

---

The objects or animals should be presented clearly.

---

For very young children, only one or two objects should be pictured on a page.

---

Common objects or animals that are easily identifiable are best for the young child.

---

ABC books should avoid the use of objects that might be known by several names.

---

The author/illustrator's purpose for the book should be clear.

---

The illustrations should be consistent with the text and reflect the mood of the book.

---

The organizing principle of the presentation should be clear.

---

The intended age level should be considered in both pictures and text.

---

Norton and Norton (1999) note that literature is "important in stimulating cognitive development by encouraging the oral exchange of ideas and the development of the thought process" (p. 19). They go on to point out the effectiveness of children's literature in developing basic thinking skills such as observing, organizing, classifying, comparing, and hypothesizing. They point out that each of the preceding attributes exists in alphabet books that are appropriate for use by preschool children. Norton and Norton define five criteria they think are necessary for a suitable alphabet book. Table 3 lists their criteria:

**TABLE 3*****Criteria for Alphabet Book*** (Norton & Norton, 1999, p. 222)

---

The objects pictured in alphabet books should be easy for children to identify.

---

If young children use the book independently, the pages should not be cluttered with numerous objects that can confuse letter/sound identification.

---

The objects pictured in alphabet books should not have more than one commonly used name.

---

Child's age and educational objectives need to be considered.

---

If letter sound identification is a major concern, the letters and corresponding illustrations should be easily identifiable.

---

Sutherland (1997) views alphabet books not only as a tool to use for teaching the alphabet but also to identify animals and common objects; to present concepts, words, and facts; and to provide graphic and spatial awareness. A list of her criteria appears in Table 4.

**Table 4*****Criteria for Alphabet Book*** (Sutherland, 1997, p. 80)

---

Since alphabet books provide graphic experience, are used for identifying objects, and often include information and concepts as well as the letters A-Z, a primary requisite in choosing them is clarity.

---

Objects should be easily identifiable.

---

Illustrations, whether drawings or photographs, should be consistent with the theme of the book if a specific theme is presented.

---

The typeface should be clean, rather than ornamented to the point of making the letter of the alphabet difficult to identify.

---

The use of an uncommon word as key word is inadvisable in alphabet books intended for young children, it may pique the curiosity of some but is liable to frustrate many children who cannot name the object.

---

The illustration should match the key word.

---

The word itself should use the starting letter in its most commonly pronounced way.

---

Smolkin and Yaden (1992) criticize the alphabet book criteria defined by Sutherland (1997) and Huck et al. (2001). They believe some of the criteria would eliminate alphabet books that allow children and their parents to discuss letter sounds and word meanings. Specific criteria questioned are: (1) animals or objects should be easy for the child to identify and (2) avoid the use of animals or objects that are known by several names, such as rabbit and bunny. "Rather than promote criteria which lack an empirical base, it would seem more sensible to consider the actual uses and constructions of alphabet books by emergent readers" (p. 440).

Good alphabet book criteria defined by Huck et al. (2001), Norton and Norton (1999), and Sutherland (1997) are not age specific but the criteria provide an excellent starting place to create criteria specific to alphabet books that preschoolers can use to learn the alphabet.

### **Methodology**

#### ***Creating Criteria to Evaluate Alphabet Books for Preschoolers***

##### The Preschool Child

From the characteristics of Piaget's *pre-operational* stage of cognitive theory, the description of a preschool child by Huck et al., and Erikson's *Initiative vs. Guilt*

stage, I chose characteristics that I thought were relevant to preschoolers learning the alphabet. A list of these characteristics is in Table 5.

**TABLE 5**

***Characteristics of the Preschool Child According to Piaget, Huck, & Erikson***

Interested in words
Ready to use symbols in language
Able to represent an object with an image
Begins to draw, use language, read & write
Interacts with other people
Becomes aware of rules
Possesses excess energy
Willing to tackle the unknown

Alphabet Books and Reading Success

I incorporated the methods suggested by McGee and Richgels, Smolkin and Yaden, and Chall to form a list relevant to pre-reading research and alphabet learning. This list appears in Table 6.

**TABLE 6**

***Alphabet Books Can Help Pre-Reading Children:***

Learn to recognize, name, and write letters
Learn to recognize graphic form
Learn that letter orientation is important
Associate letters with names/words beginning with letter
Pay attention to letters by sounding and naming them
Practice symbolic representation
Differentiate names and sounds
Bond with person reading book with them

Letter Presentation

Combining the pertinent results of research conducted by Gibson, Smolkin and Yaden, and Masonheimer gives me the two points listed below in Table 7.

**TABLE 7*****Letters in Alphabet Books Need***


---

To be in correct rotational format.

---

To have easy to recognize features.

---

Alphabet Book Criteria Suggested by Children's Literature Experts

I merged the criteria suggested by Huck et al.; Norton and Norton; and Sutherland to form a criteria list consisting of 12 items. The list appears in Table 8.

**TABLE 8*****Merged Criteria of Children's Literature Experts***


---

The objects or animals should be presented clearly.

---

For very young children, only one or two objects should be pictured on a page.

---

Common objects or animals that are easily identifiable are best for the young child.

---

ABC books should avoid the use of objects that might be known by several names.

---

The author/illustrator's purpose for the book should be clear.

---

The illustrations should be consistent with the text and reflect the mood of the book.

---

The organizing principle of the presentation should be clear.

---

The intended age level should be considered in both pictures and text.

---

If letter sound identification is a major concern, the letters and corresponding illustrations should be easily identifiable.

---

Illustrations, whether drawings or photographs, should be consistent with the theme of the book if a specific theme is presented.

---

The typeface should be clean, rather than ornamented to the point of making the letter of the alphabet difficult to identify.

---

The word itself should use the starting letter in its most commonly pronounced way.

---

## Interviews

I wanted to know what primary caregivers, education providers, and public librarians who work with preschool children look for when choosing alphabet books for this age group. The goal was to generate a list of preferences from this group specific to alphabet books.

I asked six people, who were patrons of the Wake Forest Public Library and/or staff of the Wake County Public Libraries to participate. Table 9 provides a brief description of the participants.

**TABLE 9**

### ***Gender and Ethnicity of Participants***

<b>Title or Profession</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
Library Manager & Former Children's Librarian	Female	Caucasian
Children's Librarian	Female	Caucasian
Mother of 4-year-old	Female	Caucasian
Preschool teacher of 3 & 4 year-olds	Female	Caucasian
Mother of 3-year-old & former Transitional Kindergarten Teacher*	Female	Caucasian
Mother of 4-year-old and former Kindergarten Teacher	Female	Caucasian

\*Transitional Kindergarten is a program for children 4 & 5 years of age who have completed a 4-year-old preschool program but are not socially or educationally ready for a formal kindergarten program.

I conducted interviews from January 22, 2002 through February 11, 2002 in the homes or workplaces of the participants. I took notes as I interviewed each participant and also tape-recorded the session. Each participant was asked to bring a copy of her favorite



alphabet book that was appropriate to use with a preschooler. The purpose of this was two-fold: first to get the participant thinking about alphabet books she would use with a preschooler and second to use the discussion of the book as an icebreaker and put the participant at ease. After the participant discussed her favorite alphabet book, we discussed alphabet books in general. The same questions were used as the basis of discussion for each interview. Questions can be found in Appendix 1.

After the interviews, which lasted 20 to 30 minutes, I transcribed them. After all the interviews were transcribed I read each interview and looked for and marked passages that contained language of preference for choosing an alphabet book. This gave me six lists that I merged into one list containing 45 items. I designated this list *Caregiver/Educator/Librarian Alphabet Book Preferences*. This list can be found in Table 10. The number in parentheses at the end of a preference indicates how many participants preferred this element; if no number is shown then only one participant mentioned it.

**TABLE 10****Caregiver/Educator/Librarian Alphabet Book Preferences**

<b>Overall Book Design</b>	
Letter Placement (2)	
Letters on left (2)	
One letter per page (2)	
Picture/object on right (2)	
2-3 letters per page (2)	
Letter is unique to page (just Aa, Bb, Cc, etc.)	
Letter in middle of page	
Top of page	
Two page spread (2)	
White background (2)	
Uncluttered pages (2)	
Tells a story (2)	
Bright colors	
Eye is easily drawn to the alphabet letter or object	
Familiar Character (e.g., Curious George, Clifford, Berenstain Bears)	
Letters on 2-page spread make a picture	
Not a lot of borders	
Order of letters - Top to bottom	
Order of letters - Left to right	
<b>Text</b>	
Big print	
Minimal or no text	
Simple text	
<b>Illustrations</b>	
Simple and not busy (3)	
Very clear pictures or photographs (3)	
One picture per page/letter (2)	
Appears with letter	
Attractive or pleasant to look at	
Clear what the pictures are representing	
Colorful	
Common/Everyday Objects	
Does not have multiple names	
Easily identifiable or obvious by child	
Name of illustration begins with letter with which it is paired	
Not hugely colorful	
On right side of page	
Realistic Cute Catchy Drawings	
Vivid, bright colors	
<b>Letters</b>	
Upper Case and Lower Case Letters (5)	
Clear letter representation (3)	
Big letters	
Letters - Easy to read font i.e., classic kindergarten or block	
Letters in correct manuscript form	

***Criteria for Content Analysis***

I studied the information gathered from research of the preschool child; pre-reading needs, letter recognition requirements, criteria defined by children's literature experts, and alphabet book preferences of caregivers, educators, and children's librarians. I incorporated this information to create the list of criteria I used in the content analysis portion of my research. The criteria list that reflects input from these areas is in Table 11.

TABLE 11

**Criteria to Evaluate Alphabet Books for Preschool Use**

No.	Criteria	Yes	No
	<b>Overall Book Design</b>		
1	Uncluttered pages		
2	Sense is made of the page by moving the eye left to right as one does when reading.		
3	Illustrations match the keyword		
4	One or two letters per page		
5	One or two illustrations per page		
	<b>Text</b>		
6	Large clear letters		
7	Minimal or no text		
8	Keyword begins with letter		
9	Keyword uses letter in most commonly pronounced way (e.g., 'c' for cat not 'c' for chicken)		
10	Uses words familiar to preschooler		
	<b>Illustrations</b>		
11	Simple, clear, and realistic photographs or drawings		
12	Common everyday, easily identifiable objects (e.g., for 'a', a picture of an apple not an anteater)		
13	Should be known by only one name (a bunny is also called a rabbit and can cause confusion)		
	<b>Letters</b>		
14	Large, clear, easy to identify and in correct manuscript form (e.g., block letters)		
15	Correct rotational format <i>*(letters have not been flipped left or right, or upside down)</i>		
16	Upper case and Lower case		
17	Clean typeface - not embellished or altered, making recognition difficult		

*\*explanation added after code reliability check*

I applied the criteria to 10 alphabet books I had chosen to find the answer to the question: "Are alphabet books appropriate for preschool children to use to learn the alphabet?"

### ***Choosing Books to Evaluate***

I decided to use alphabet books that had been written in the last decade of the twentieth century and that could be found in the Wake County Public Library system. To locate titles of alphabet books published during the years 1991 through 2000 and recommended for preschool-age children, I used the sixth and seventh editions of *Best Books for Children Preschool through Grade 6*. Gillespie (2002) used the following criteria for books to appear in the seventh edition:

- All books in the sixth edition were checked and if out of print were not used.
- Reviewing periodicals from April 1998 until March 2001 were used - this encompassed the time between the sixth and seventh edition.
- Periodicals used were
  - *Booklist*
  - *Bulletin for the Center of Children's Books*
  - *Horn Book*
  - *Horn Book Guide*
  - *School Library Journal*
- Most books received at least two recommendations.

Criteria for inclusion in the sixth edition were essentially the same.

The sixth and seventh editions of *Best Books for Children Preschool through Grade 6* list 131 and 151 books respectively in the Alphabet Book section. Thirty-five of these books were listed as being appropriate for preschool or preschool-kindergarten age children. Fourteen of these books were not available in the Wake County Public Libraries.

Three of the remaining 21 books were omitted from the list; Walton's *So Many Bunnies* was also a counting book, Press's *Alphabet Art: With A to Z Animal Fingerplays* was an activity book of ideas for teachers and caregivers to use in teaching children the alphabet, and Livingston's *B is for Baby: An Alphabet of Verses* was chiefly a book of rhymes for and about babies.

1996 had no book in the preschool or preschool-kindergarten categories, but I was able to locate two titles in the preschool-first grade category. I added these to my pool of book choices.

From the remaining list of books I eliminated those that had more than 32 pages. I chose short books based on the observations of Huck et al. and Erikson that preschool children are very active, have short attention spans and can only sit still for a short time.

The years 1995, 1996, 1997, 1999 and 2000 had multiple titles. To select one book for each year I numbered each group of books and randomly drew numbers from a hat to choose a title. This resulted in a group of 10 books published from 1991 through 2000. I used these 10 books to conduct my content analysis using the criteria from Table 10.

I used the book *Beastly Jamboree*, which was left over from the duplicates, to check coding reliability with another coder. Using her input I added an explanation to the letter rotation section. Next, I coded the set of 10 books and two days later coded them again to check for discrepancies. Some of the decisions were different but this was usually due to seeing something I had missed previously, e.g., three letters on a page when I had only noted two before.

### **Results**

I will discuss in chronological order each of the books evaluated. Each book will be discussed separately, elaborating on the areas where the book did not meet expectations and providing illustrative examples. A checklist showing the results of the content analysis appears in Table 12.

TABLE 12

*Evaluation results of 10  
alphabet books published  
for preschool use from  
1991-2000.*

The Monster Book of ABC Sounds  
Goodnight to Annie  
Arlene Alda's ABC  
Black and White Rabbit's ABC  
Jeremy Kooloo  
The Letters are Lost  
Flora McDonnell's ABC  
Alphababies  
Not Enough Beds  
Firefighters A to Z

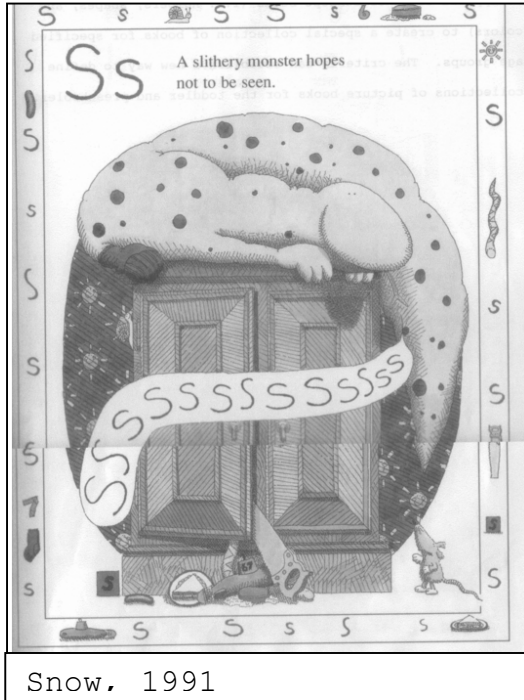
Criteria											
<b>Overall Book Design</b>											
1	Uncluttered pages		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Encourages left to right eye movement	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
3	Illustrations match keyword	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		
4	One/two letters/page	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
5	One/two illustrations/page		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
<b>Text</b>											
6	Large clear letters	✓	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
7	Minimal or no text		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
8	Keyword begins with letter	✓	✓	n/a		✓		✓	✓		
9	Keyword uses letter in most commonly pronounced			n/a		✓		✓	✓		
10	Words familiar to preschooler			n/a	✓		✓		✓		
<b>Illustrations</b>											
11	Simple, clear & realistic		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
12	Common everyday, easily identifiable objects							✓	✓		
13	Should be known by only one name										
<b>Letters</b>											
14	Large, clear, etc.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
15	Correct rotation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
16	Upper and Lower case	✓			✓			✓			
17	Clean typeface	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
<b>Total criteria met</b>		<b>9</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9*</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>% of criteria met</b>		<b>53</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>53</b>

Books appear in chronological order from left to right.

**Legend**

- ✓ - Criterion present  
n/a - not applicable  
\*out of 13



*The Monster Book of ABC*

Snow, 1991

*Sounds* had very busy pages and it was easy for the upper and lower case letters that appeared in the upper left of each page to be overlooked. Each page contained a central story picture framed by a border that contained individual pictures that began

with the letter. Text appeared in two places on each page, first at the top next to the alphabet letters, this text told the story of the picture below, and then in the picture where the keyword sound appeared. The drawings were cartoon style representations of the story. The only relation the picture had to the letters was the appearance of the keyword sound in a dialogue balloon. I think preschoolers would find this a fun storybook but the alphabet letters get lost in the process.

Overall *Goodnight to Annie* would be a good book to use for teaching the alphabet even though it features only upper case letters. The letters are part of the text appearing at the beginning of a short descriptive sentence. A larger sized upper case letter is featured in the

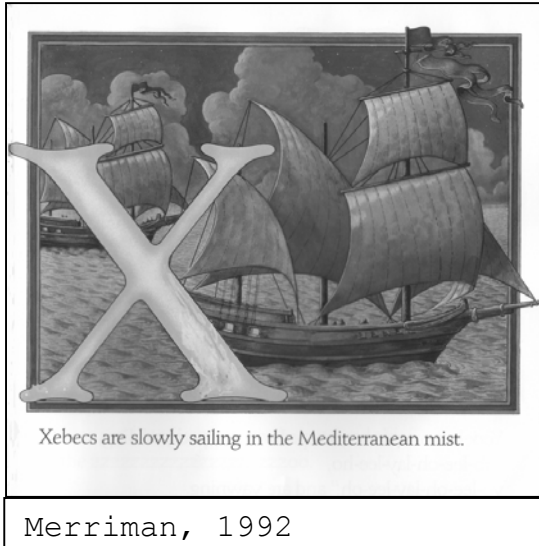
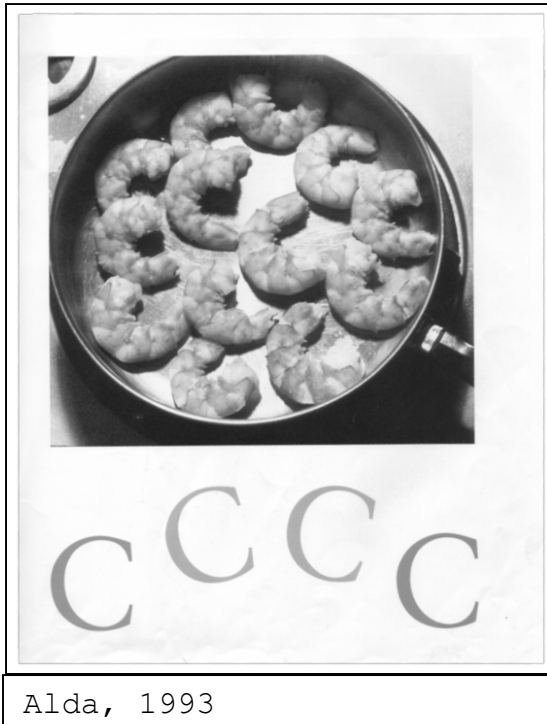


illustration. Illustrations are colorful, detailed drawings and it is obvious what object is the keyword. But, I do not consider the illustrations of *Oysters*, *Kittiwakes*, or *Xebec* common everyday objects.

Preschoolers seeing these illustrations might confuse them with rocks, birds and sailing ships respectively. The letter 'X' does not use a keyword that begins with a sound commonly associated with it (i.e., the word *Xebec* begins with the sound associated with 'Z' not 'X'). In general this book would be good for a preschooler to use with a mentor to learn the uppercase letters.

*Arlene Alda's ABC* is the only wordless book in the group. She pairs a photograph of a real world object with each letter (e.g., the headlight of a car for the letter 'O'). Each letter has its own page but there is no consistent format that encourages you to move your eye from left to right as you would when you read a book. If you begin your visit on a page by looking at the letter you will need to move your eye to the left, down, up, or to the right to see the photograph. Pairing letters with

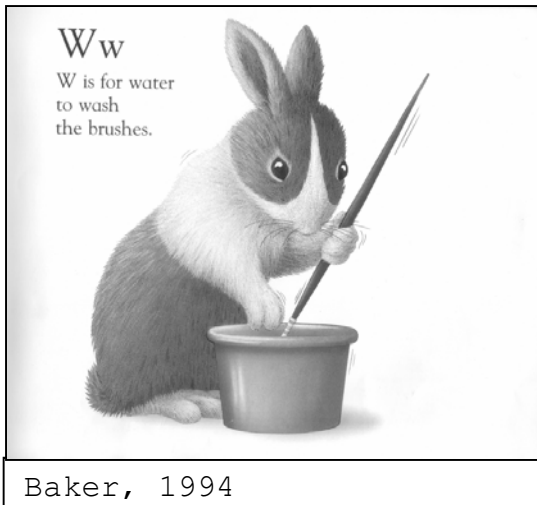


Alda, 1993

"everyday" objects that resemble them is an interesting idea, but it can be confusing to a preschooler who is trying to learn graphemes and phonemes. For example, the 'C' page features shrimp that open to the right like a 'C' but also open up like a 'U', causing the reader

to wonder just how do you write a 'C'. Another problem that could happen is that the preschooler might think that 'C' is for shrimp and makes the 'sh' sound. I think this book is a little too abstract for a preschooler who is just learning to map graphemes with letter names and phonemes.

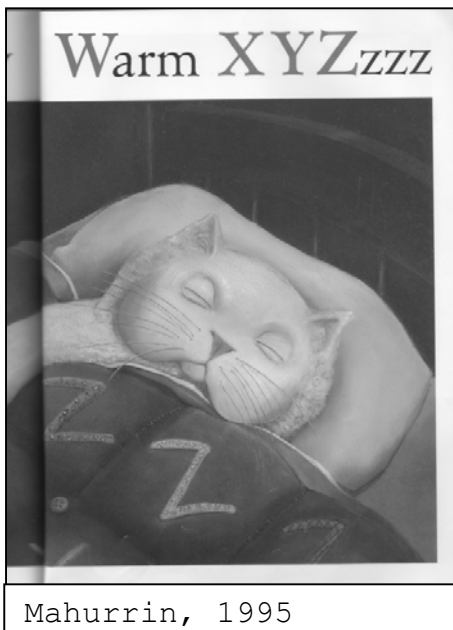
*Black and White Rabbit's ABC* had a few problems but overall it is a good book to use to learn the alphabet. Most letters receive their own page with just a few sharing a page. There are a few problems with the letters 'W' and 'X'. The text for 'W' says, "W is for water to wash the brushes", but the picture shows a cup and a black and white rabbit holding a paintbrush over it. You cannot see any water and I think this is confusing. Turning to the 'X' page you see a black and white rabbit drawing 'x's' on his



Baker, 1994

painting, and the text says "X is for the kisses that Rabbit draws on his painting." Well, kisses does not start with 'X' and the two letters look enough alike that they can be confused. The only other

problem I had with this book was the use of concepts like, *jumping, kicking, and hopping* for letters 'j', 'k', and 'h' respectively. These concepts did not transfer well to drawing and it is hard to tell what black and white rabbit is doing when these concepts are introduced.



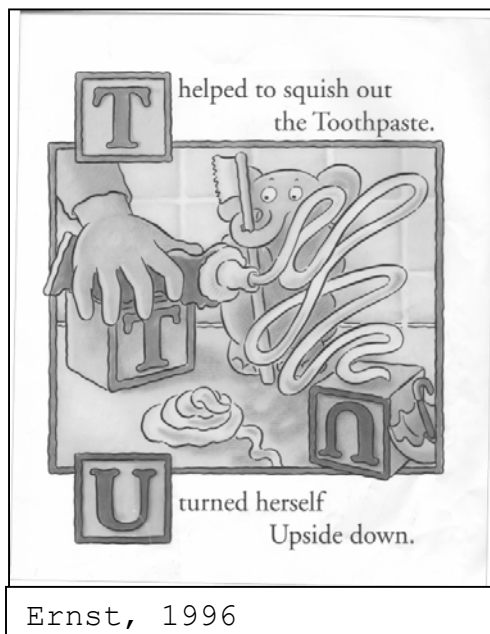
Mahurrin, 1995

Twenty-six letters of the alphabet are used to tell a story about *Jeremy Kooloo*. The story begins with "A Big Cat", and continues in alphabetical order until you reach "Zzzz." The last two pages of the book shows our big cat Jeremy Kooloo, "Under Very Warm XYZzzz." The "XYZzzz" is actually

a quilt with the letters of the alphabet appliquéd on it. A preschooler might think that "XYZzzz" is another name for quilt or blanket. The last two pages of the book show the

quilt top spread out with the alphabet repeating many times across it. In fact, this book, that has featured the alphabet letter in upper case format, suddenly introduces lower case letters as part of the quilt. This is an interesting approach to introducing the alphabet but the preschooler is not always presented with an object with which to identify the letter or its sound.

*The Letters Are Lost* features 25 alphabet blocks and the strange places they have wandered. The front of the block showing the letter is featured at the lower left

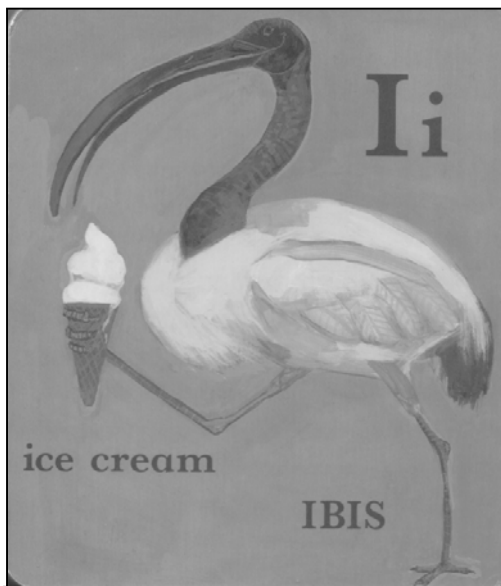


corner of each page followed by a short sentence telling the reader where the letter was found.

Above the text is a hand drawn illustration showing the alphabet block in its new location. But when you get to the 'T, U,' page you find two letters on the page, the 'T' is at the top left and

the 'U' is at the bottom left. This break in the pattern could cause the reader to miss the 'T' altogether, I know that I did. Also, on this page the 'U' in the illustration is turned upside down and could be mistaken for a 'n', a problem noted by Masonheimer (1981) in letter recognition

studies. The 'X/Y' page pairs these letters, which appear on one block, with the word, *xylophone*. This leaves the letter 'Y' without a word to map to. A preschooler might think 'X/Y' is one letter. The last page of the book shows all of the letters outlining the border of the two pages. Your eye begins at the upper left corner of the left page and moves around the two pages in clockwise order. This means you read alphabet letters from left to right, top to bottom, right to left, and bottom to top. This does not help the preschooler become accustomed to moving his eyes from the left to the right to read. I would not use this book to teach alphabet letter recognition to preschoolers.



McDonnell, 1997

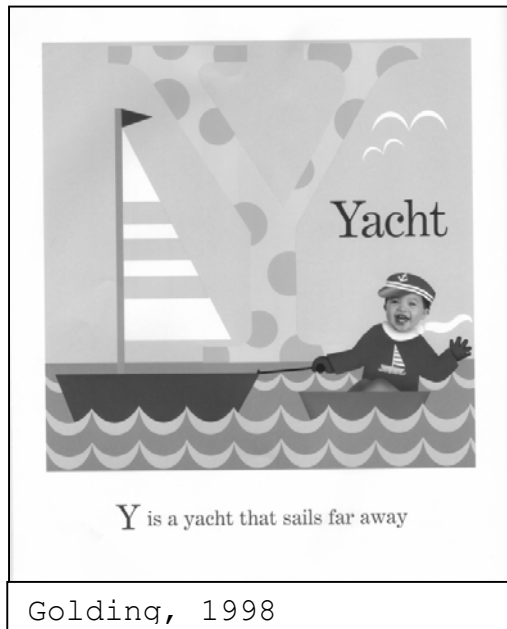
*Flora McDonnell's ABC*

features each letter in upper and lower case format on one and sometimes two page spreads. Each page contains a picture and name for the upper case letter and a picture and name for the lower case letters. But the layout of each page is

different: the letters, words, and illustrations appear in different areas on each page. Several of the words and illustrations are not common everyday objects that are

familiar to preschoolers. Examples of these would be *IBIS*, *newts*, *orangutan*, *x-ray fish*, and *yak*. Some of the illustrations can be interpreted as other objects, e.g., bunny or rabbit is another name for *hare*, and bird is another name for *IBIS* or *quail*. Some of the word pronunciations use blends of letters e.g., *whales* for 'w'. But, I think this book, with its large upper and lower case letters featured with one illustration each, could be used for learning alphabet graphemes.

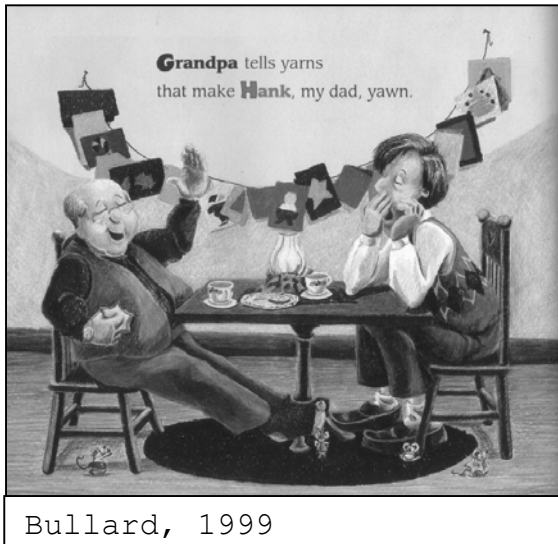
*Alphababies* features babies with each letter of the alphabet in a style similar to Anne Geddes. Only upper case letters are featured but each receives its own page.



Each letter appears at the bottom left of the page as the beginning of the text sentence (i.e., "*N is for ...*"). The illustration that is above the text contains a large copy of the letter, the keyword, and the picture that illustrates the keyword. You could actually use

this book without the text sentence. One word that might not be familiar to the preschooler is *yacht*. The picture for the word *yacht* also resembles a sailboat or boat, and

the picture for *night* shows a baby in a bed against a black starry background and could make the preschooler think of the words bed or stars. The problems with this book were relatively minor, and I would recommend it for a preschooler to use to learn the alphabet.



*Not Enough Beds* is a Christmas story using a letter of the alphabet for each visiting relative's first name. Since the letters are paired with names of people who are characters in a book and are only seen

in a book, a preschooler is unable to map the letter to a concrete object. Children quite often associate a letter with names of friends, siblings, or self (Smolkin & Yaden, 1992), but these people are real and experiential unlike the *people* in the book. In this book the featured alphabet letter is only present as part of the text; it is not shown separately or larger than the normal text. If you use a book to learn the alphabet it would be useful to have the letters larger than the normal text. I would not use this book with preschoolers trying to learn the alphabet.





Demarest, 2000

The last book of the group is *Firefighters A to Z*. This book might intrigue preschool boys because of its subject matter and action. But as an alphabet teaching tool it is lacking in many categories. The overall book design is good but the illustration for fire only shows smoke, this might

cause the preschooler to associate 'f' with smoke. The drawings are action packed but they are blurry, not clean and crisp. Most of the letters are paired with words that do not use blends, but 'c' maps to "chief" which uses the 'ch' sound rather than the 'c' sound. The letter 'x' is represented by the word *extinguished* leading the preschooler to think that *extinguished* begins with 'x'. This book also introduces some concepts that are hard to portray in a picture, e.g., *jumping*, *go*, and *quick*. Several words can be represented by different names, the boots in "*b is for boots*" could be thought to represent the *rubber boots* that are pictured on the front title page or *shoes*; and the *engine* in "*e is for engine*" could be given the name *fire truck*.

The series of bar graphs in Table 13 presents an overall view of each category showing what percent of books met each criterion. Following the graphs is discussion of each category.

**Table 13**

**Analysis of Books by Category**

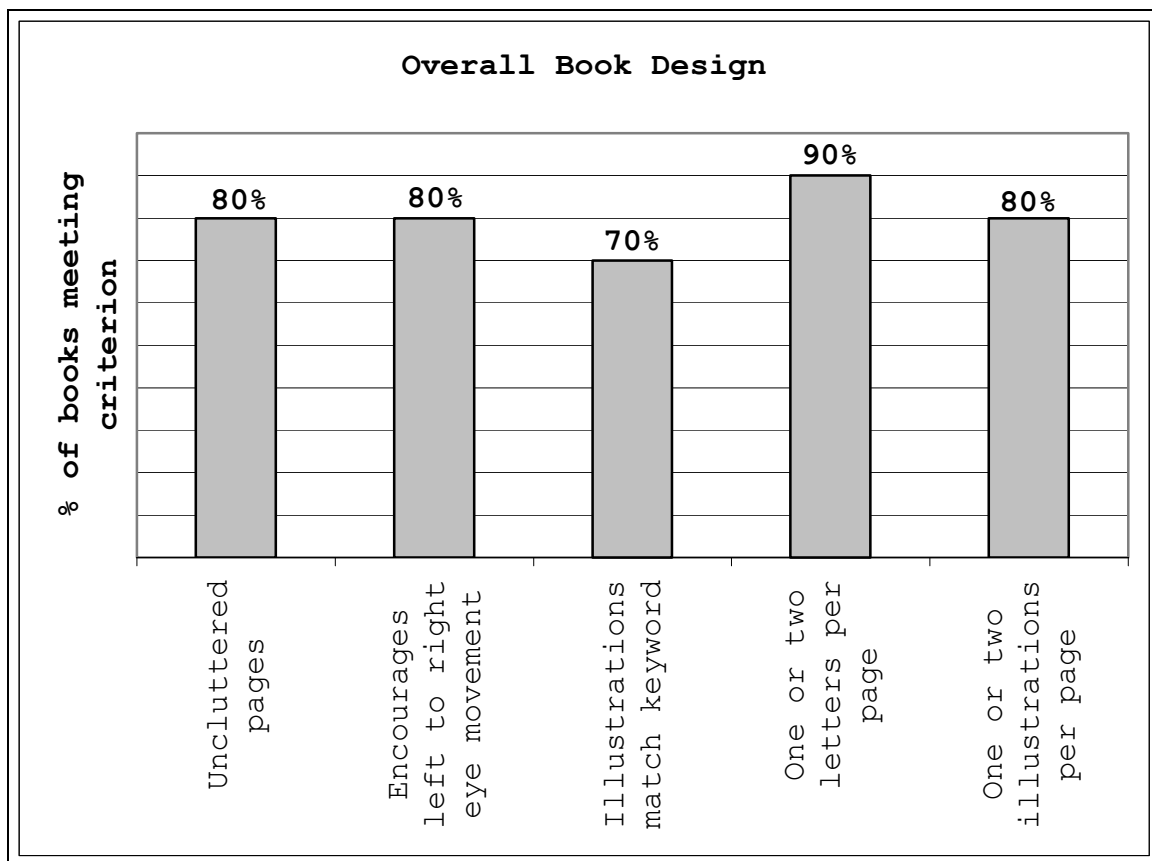


Table 13 (continued)

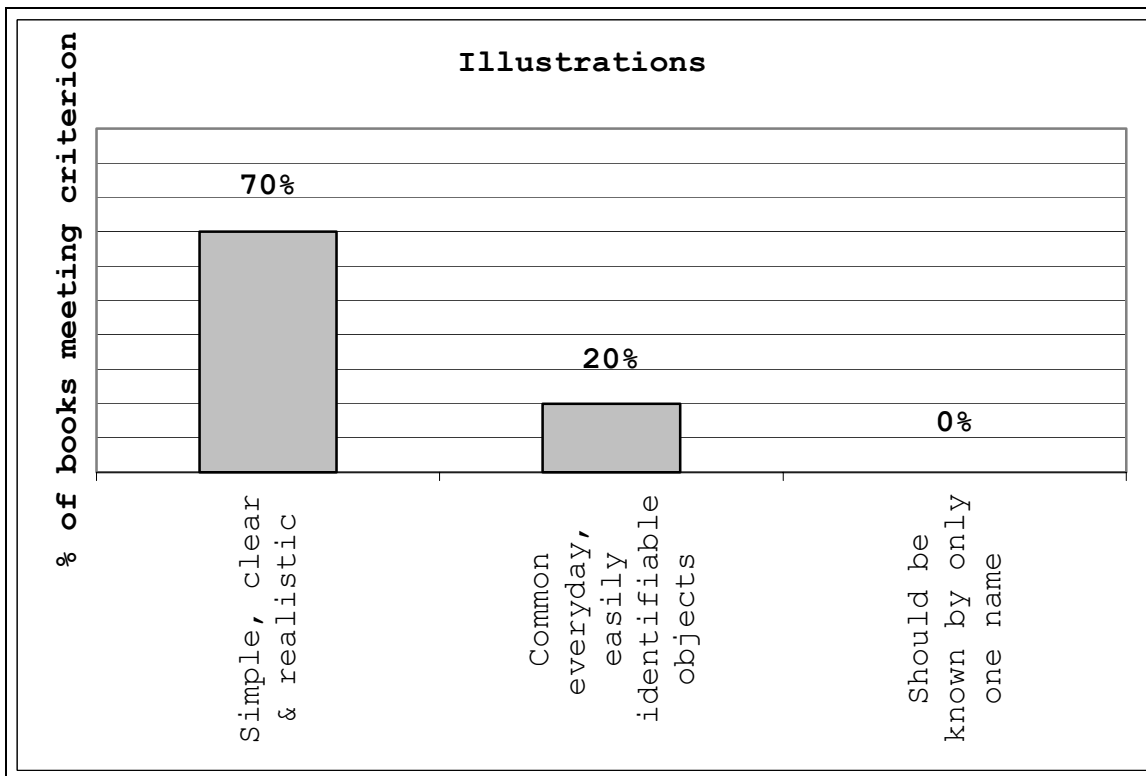
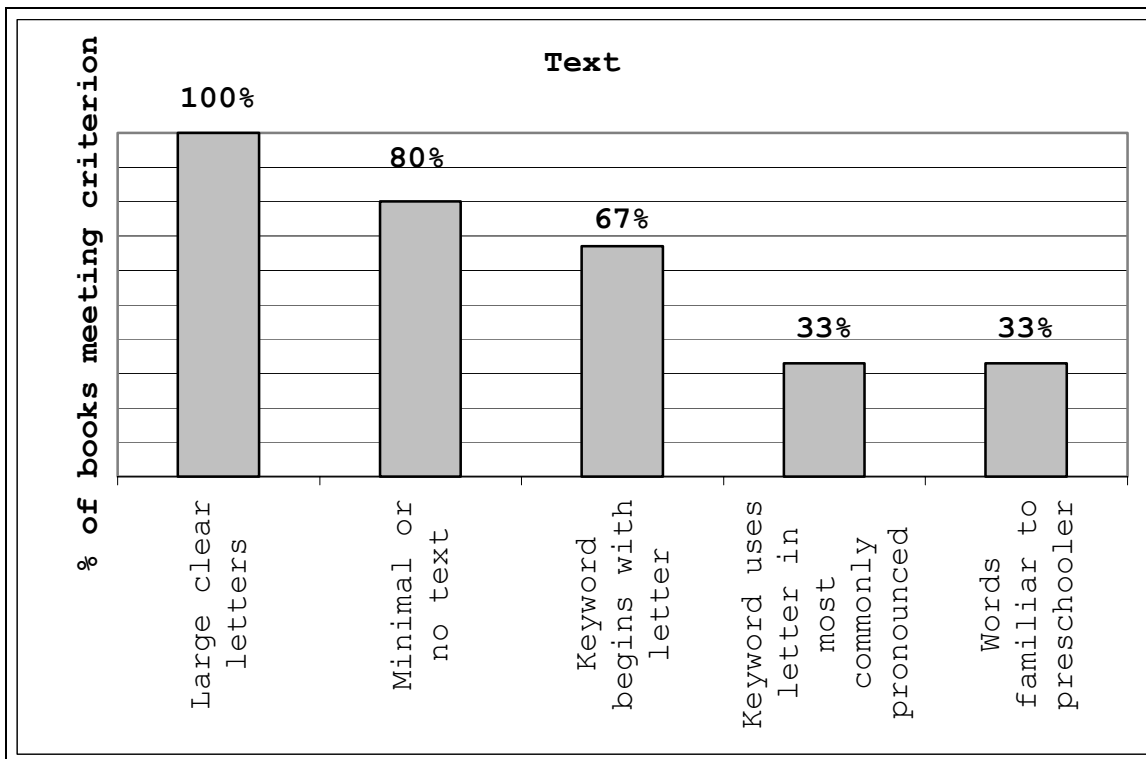
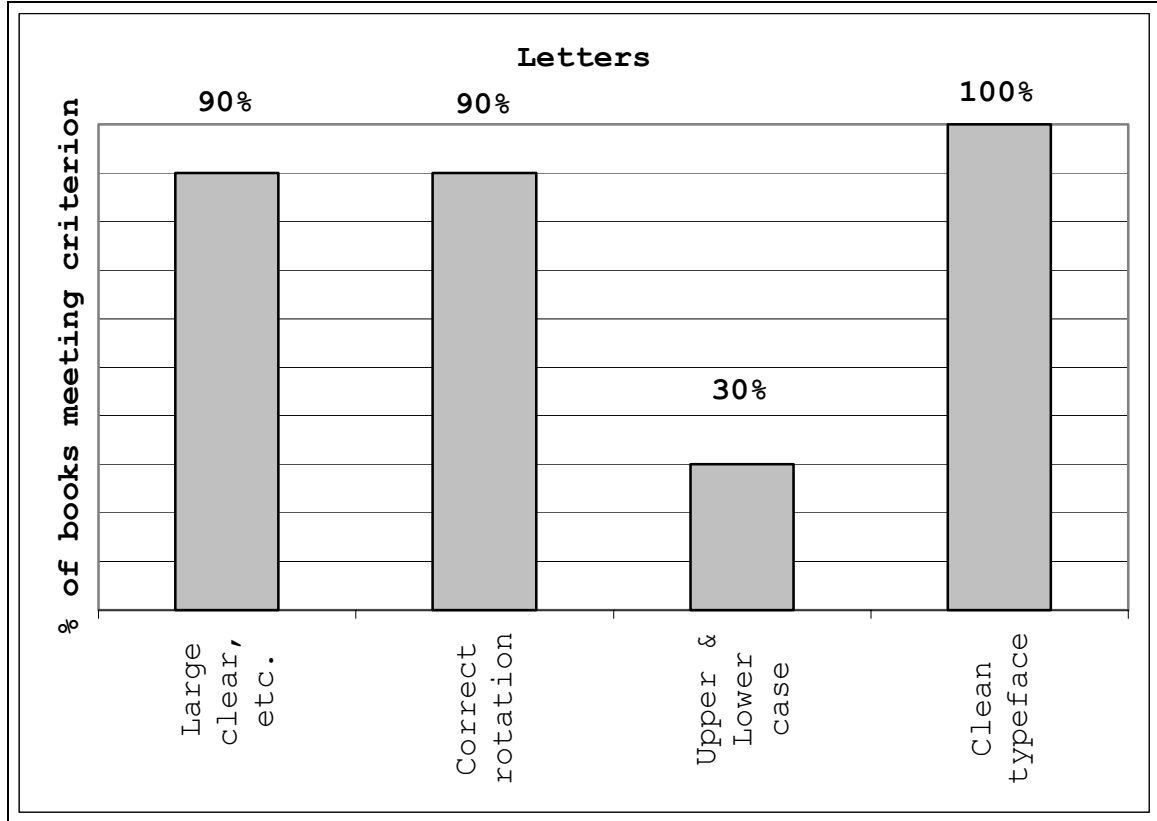


Table 13 (continued)



The books that I evaluated were strongest in the *Overall Book Design* category, where each criterion received at least a 70% rate of compliance. Most of the problems in this category were minor. I think the major problem here was the 2 books that did not have *uncluttered pages*. Most of the problems in this category occurred once or twice in a book but in these books every page was cluttered.

In the *Letter* category all the books scored 90% or better with the exception of the criterion that required

*upper case and lower case letters.* I will develop this topic further in the discussion area of the paper.

The *Text* and *Illustrations* categories were definitely weak with compliance rates ranging from 33% to 100%. The *Text* category did score 100% in the *large, clear letter* criterion. But the last two criteria in this category finished with compliance rates of 33% each.

The problems in the criterion: *keyword uses letter in most commonly pronounced way*, were generally due to the use of letter blends e.g. 'ch' for 'c', 'oi' for 'o', and 'wh' for 'w'. Trying to use words *familiar to preschooler* and matching certain alphabet letters appears to be a challenge, especially with the letters 'x' and 'y'.

The *Illustrations* category is the weakest of the four categories. The highest score achieved was 70% for the criterion *simple, clear, and realistic photographs or drawings*. The remaining criteria only managed a 33% and 0% compliance score respectively.

The criterion *common everyday, easily identifiable objects* was not met because books used abstract concepts like *hopping, quick*, etc.; sounds like *flip, flop*; names of people; or pictures from nature to represent a letter. Trying to find objects that are *known by only one name*

failed completely because each book had at least one item that kept it from meeting the criterion.

I think only four of the evaluated books are good choices for preschool children to use to learn the alphabet: *Goodnight to Annie*, *Black and White Rabbit's ABC*, *Flora McDonnell's ABC*, and *Alphababies*. These four books met 12 or more of the 17 conditions listed in the criteria.

### **Discussion**

I began this study to answer the question, "Are alphabet books appropriate tools for preschool children to use to learn the alphabet?" To find the answer I evaluated 10 alphabet books for preschoolers using criteria I had developed. My evaluation criteria are a first effort; this is the first time it has been used on a very small sample of books. I think I still need to improve on the following criteria: in the *Overall Book Design* section the criterion *uncluttered pages*; in the *Text* section the criteria, *keyword uses letter in most commonly pronounced way* and *uses words familiar to preschooler*; in the *Illustrations* section the criteria, *common everyday, easily identifiable objects* and *should be known by only one name*; and in the *Letters* section the criterion, *upper case and lower case*.

### **Overall Book Design**

The criterion in this category that I think is weak is *uncluttered pages*. I accepted pages that had a large letter paired with an object and a word and a small letter paired with an object and a word for a total of six items on a page. But I also accepted pages that contained a letter, a sentence, and a picture that contained the keyword and other objects. Upon reflection, I think someone else might not accept such a large range. I think this is an important criterion because the preschooler should not be overwhelmed when trying to map graphemes to phonemes. I need to find a way to make the interpretation of this component more uniform.

### **Text**

The weak criteria in the *Text* area are: *large clear letters, keyword uses letter in most commonly pronounced way, and uses words familiar to preschooler.*

When I looked at the text and chose letters as being large and clear it occurred to me that the acceptable size of the letters would vary according to the size of the book. Text letters in my books measured from 1/4" to 3/4" high on pages measuring from 7 5/8" to 12 3/8" high. Even with this great variation in size all text was easy to

read. Including a letter size ratio to the size of the page may be a way to clarify this criterion.

How do you decide *the most commonly pronounced way for a letter*? If you do not allow blends such as "wh" and "sh" does this also eliminate "gl" and "fl"? When constructing this criterion how many disqualifiers do you list? Do you want the preschooler to learn the letter name or the phonetic sound, and if you choose the sound, what sound is the right one? I am still at a loss as to how to adequately define *commonly pronounced*.

In the category *uses words familiar to a preschooler*, how do I decide what those words are? Depending upon geographical location, ethnicity, family demographics, and sex, different words will be familiar to different children. When I was looking at the oysters in *Goodnight Annie* it occurred to me that children near the ocean would recognize the picture but children living in the mountains might think it is a picture of stones or rocks. And if a preschool child is using an alphabet book with someone else (Erikson, Huck et al., and Smolkin & Yaden) is this really a necessary criterion?

### ***Illustrations***

What is considered a *common, everyday, easily identifiable object*? In three of the books, concepts like



jumping, hopping, etc., were used as keywords, and in another book sounds were used. These concepts were common and everyday but their picture did not translate well to paper. Does this mean that concepts like these should not be used?

None of the books I evaluated was able to meet the criterion *should be known by only one name*. This criterion has me truly puzzled. On the one hand I agree with Smolkin and Yaden (1992) that if a child is reading the book with a parent then these illustrations will open the door to discussion and the opportunity for further bonding. But, on the other hand, preschool children are trying to map 26 letter sounds to 52 graphemes that can be represented in different fonts and colors, and can only be turned one way to be the correct letter. Having to remember all these can be overwhelming and then when you add different names for the illustration - when is enough enough? The children are learning about letters not about different names for objects.

### **Letters**

Should the letters used for alphabet letter recognition be in *upper and lower case* format? Studies indicate that children have less confusion learning upper case letters (Gibson 1970, 1971, 1975), but I think it is

important to expose children to lower case letters as soon as possible in the letter learning process. If children are able to recognize lower case as well as upper case letters they are better prepared for reading.

My criteria need refining because some of it is subjective, superfluous, or flawed. But this is a first step in an area that has been neglected. Using what I have learned to answer the question, "Are alphabet books appropriate for preschool children to use to learn the alphabet?" my answer would be, "It depends on what you want preschool children to learn."

### **Conclusion**

Preschool children are active and inquisitive children who are ready to map letter shapes to the letter sounds they have been making since they were toddlers. Knowledge of the alphabet is an invaluable tool for children who are learning to read. Preschool children do not realize that letter orientation on the printed page is important for correct naming of a letter. Poorly defined criteria have been used for over 20 years to evaluate alphabet books.

After evaluating alphabet books written from 1991-2000 I have come to the conclusion that these books do not meet the needs of a preschool child. What would I do to improve the alphabet book for preschool use?

I would keep the *Overall Design* of the books I evaluated. I would keep the page formatting simple and make sure the keyword matches the illustration. The pages would not have a lot of objects on them, the layout would encourage the reader to move her eye from left to right, there would be one upper and lower case letter per one or two page spread, and one illustration per page. The illustration could be a single object, a photograph or a clearly drawn illustration. The purpose of the page should be for children to see the letter shape in large clear type and not be distracted with multiple objects and fancy borders.

The *Letter* section of the book is important. The book should contain upper and lower case letters. This will allow the child to become familiar with both graphemes that map to the phoneme that is being illustrated. All letters would be presented in correct rotational format.

I would want the font in the *Text* section to be large and legible. I would like the book to be able to be read as a wordless book but I would like the text included so the book can grow with the child. The keywords should match the illustrations so the child would not have to guess what you are trying to represent. The keywords should be easy everyday simple words that preschool

children are likely to encounter. While looking through the 10 books I was able to come up with a list of words that begin with a simple sound of the letter and not a blend of letters. Some suggested words are: apple, bee, cat, dog, egg, fish, giraffe, horse, ice cream, jack-in-the-box, king, leaves, moon, newspaper, octopus, popcorn, queen, rainbow, sun, tooth, umbrella, violin, water, x-ray, yo-yo, and zebra. These are words that preschool children encounter when reading picture books, looking at television, and participating in day-to-day activities.

The *Illustration* section of the book has to be the most appealing but it also has to avoid confusing preschool children. Illustrations should be sharp, crisp and clear. Illustrations that are blurry will cause the reader to worry about trying to decipher the illustration when her main concern should be naming the grapheme and object illustrated.

It is okay for objects to be known by more than one name as long as the object is not repeated in the book under a different name. I think it is virtually impossible to find an item that does not fit into more than one category (e.g., tiger or lion could fit into animal and cat categories). This section will require effort and care on the part of the person producing the book.

I think a better alphabet book can be made. For this to occur writers, illustrators, and publishers need to create standards based on objectives and criteria developed specifically for preschool children.

### **Future Research**

I foresee several areas of research emanating from my current study. It is obvious that this study has produced more questions than it has answered. There are many ways to approach how preschool children use an alphabet book. Do preschool children use the alphabet book:

- to map the letter name they learned in *The Alphabet Song* to the graphemes in the book?
- to map letter names to graphemes and then the graphemes to phonetic sounds?
- to map letter name to graphemes and then the graphemes to objects that begin with the grapheme?
- as an opportunity to bond with a mentor?

Depending on the answer my criteria can be refined for preschool children and new criteria developed for toddlers, and early, middle and late elementary school aged children.

More studies like those by Smolkin and Yaden need to be conducted to show exactly how the preschool child uses the alphabet book. During my research I read Susan

Steinfirst's dissertation "The Origins and Development of the ABC Book in English from the Middle Ages Through the Nineteenth Century" (1976). In this dissertation she pointed out the need to "determine how the child perceives the alphabet cognitively" (p. 355). She suggested using experiments conducted by Piaget as a model. I did not locate research in this area during my study and I think it would prove useful in developing usable criteria for an alphabet book.

I think alphabet books can and should be used by preschool children to learn the alphabet. I have made an attempt to develop criteria for the preschool child. This first attempt is a beginning to further exploration and research of this topic. With further effort perhaps authors and illustrators can refine their techniques to make these books the wonderful tools they have the potential to be.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

I want to begin our interview by thanking you for taking your time to discuss with me your favorite alphabet book for toddlers or preschoolers. It is my hope that information gathered from the interview will help to create a strong toddler or preschool alphabet collection that can be utilized by caregivers and educators in helping this age group learn about the alphabet.

1. What alphabet book did you bring?
2. Why did you choose this book?
  - a. Characteristics that made you choose it.
  - b. Example of something you liked about the book.
  - c. Example of something you did not like about the book.
  - d. Other
  - e. Other
3. Why do you like the book?
4. What do you look for when choosing an alphabet book for -  
Toddler - Preschooler (circle one)
  - a. Illustrator
  - b. Author

- c. Subject Material
  - d. Book Layout (how many letters/objects per page)
  - e. Illustrations
  - f. Characters
  - g. Page Layout (where your put letter on page)
  - h. Social interaction to read with child
    - 01. Stimulate thinking
    - 02. Stimulate conversation
    - 03. Letter recognition
    - 04. Letter order
    - 05. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
    - 06. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
    - 07. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  - i. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  - j. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  - k. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Other notes and comments.