

LEARNING TO READ IN THE RESTAURANT

Whether you're eating out or bringing fast food home, did you know you could use your trip to a restaurant to help your young child develop skills he can use later when he's learning to read? Here's how:

First, look for the restaurant's logo. If it's the golden arches, chances are good even your littlest child already knows the restaurant's name as you drive up. Help her *look for the letters, too*—point them out and *tell her their names* as you park your car or go through the drive-through line.

At the drive-up order menu, check for photos or drawings of the food offered. Point those out to your child as you ask what he wants *and* point out the *words* next to the illustrations: does he see his favorite hamburger? Point out the word *hamburger* next to it and the **h** it starts with. Can he also notice that his little sister's *happy* meal starts with that same **h**?

You get the idea. But please don't turn this into a strict lesson. If your child doesn't seem to want to pay attention to letters or logos, just forget about it for now. After all, it *is* mealtime and she *is* probably hungry or you wouldn't be there in the first place! You can simply *point out letters in words that matter to her* and you'll be helping her get familiar with the alphabet in an easy, friendly way.

If you're not doing drive-through or fast food this lunch or dinner time, and you've got some waiting time at a restaurant table, you can use it, too, to play with reading skills. Some restaurants give children crayons and paper to keep them happy. You can use those to write your child's name or the words for his favorite dessert—he might be interested in seeing what *chocolate ice cream* looks like when you write it! Maybe he'll try to write his name himself or trace over the letters you wrote first.

Did you know that just by rearranging the silverware—putting the fork *on top* of the plate, for example, or moving the spoon from the *right side* to the *left*—can help your child pay attention to where things are in relation to other things? Teachers will help your child later notice other *spatial relationships*. This will be important when your child begins to read—when she'll start on the *left* side of the page and at its *top*, and then move *from top to bottom, left to right*. You can start playing with spatial relationships right now while you're waiting for your sandwiches!

Also, there are many letters that are very much alike. Think about little **b p d q g**. They're really basically just sticks and circles. What tells them apart is which side of the "stick" their little circle is on and whether their stick goes up or down. Playing with the spoons and forks and plates while you wait for dinner can be easy practice now for paying attention to how things are related to one another spatially.

And all this practice can help make perfect later, when your child is learning to read!