

Tips to Amp Up Learning & Make Spelling Fun

— by Heidi Smith Luedtke, Ph.D.



Helping kids learn spelling words can be b-o-r-i-n-g for everyone. Some parents coach kids to read the words over and over. Others ask kids to write their words ten times each. These strategies may make the grade if your child is a quick study, but they don't help him notice patterns or make connections with other knowledge. And that kind of deeper learning turns spelling sessions into higher-level brain training.

Studies show multi-sensory techniques that use sight, hearing, touch, and movement simultaneously lead to more efficient and effective learning. Try these smart strategies to amp up learning and make spelling fun.

1. Make word puzzles.

Write words on index cards and cut them up in segments. Kids can practice spelling by putting words back together. Breaking words up into syllables reminds kids how to sound out words

and emphasizes components they can use to decode the word's meaning.

2. Play Scrabble. Get out the board game and ask your child to create a scrabble setup using only the words from the spelling list. Making the words is an active, tactile, and visual learning process that keeps kids engaged. Add math practice by calculating which word scores the most points.



3. Categorize. Make a chart with columns for each kind of word in the spelling list, and let learners put each one in its place. You might have columns for words with "er" or "ir" or for "objects," "actions" and "adjectives." Our brains like to store information in categories, so this task helps kids remember words better.

4. Alphabetize. Instead of writing the list in the same order repeatedly, re-organize it each time. First, copy the list as provided. Then, write words in alphabetical order. On the next round, write them in order from shortest to longest. Capturing information in several ways forces kids to really think about each word instead of copying mindlessly.

5. Make up mnemonics.

Some words are so hard to spell that the only way to remember them is to make up a memory aid. You're probably familiar with rhymes such as "'i' before 'e,' except after 'c,'" or when sounding like "'a' in neighbor and weigh." Encourage kids to make up their own silly sayings or simple songs to remember tricky spellings. The best memory aids are the ones kids create for themselves.

Spelling Anxiety? Dispel Worries with These Fun Reads:

Miss Pell Would Never Misspell and Other Painless Tricks for Memorizing How to Spell and Use Wily Words, by Brian Cleary (Millbrook Press, 2009)

Cheese Please, Chimpanzees: Fun with Spelling, by Tracy Traynor (Millet, 2008) *E-mergency*, by Tom Lichtenheld (Chronicle Books, 2011)

Word Wizard, by Cathryn Falwell (Sandpiper, 2006)

Miss Alaineus: A Vocabulary Disaster, by Debra Frasier (Sandpiper, 2007)

Silent Letters Loud and Clear, by Robin Pulver (Holiday House, 2010) *How Much Can a Bare Bear Bear? What are Homonyms and Homophones?*, by Brian Cleary (First Avenue Editions, 2007)

6. Feel it out. Fill a tray with sand and have your child write out her words with her fingertip. Or – for some good clean fun – let her finger paint spelling words on the bathtub walls using shaving cream. Tactile sensations form an additional memory trace learners can use during recall. Kids can retrace movements on the desktop during the spelling test.

7. Highlight the hard parts. Prompt kids to write words with colored markers and bold strokes, putting additional emphasis on troublesome letters or syllables. For instance, your child might write mOnkey to remind herself that the first vowel in this word is “o,” not “u.” Vivid visual features stand out in our memories. Adding ears and a mouth to turn the “O” into a monkey face would make this even more effective.

8. Talk it up. Challenge your child to read his word list and emphasize difficult aspects by mispronouncing them. The word “separate” sounds like sep-AY-rate when you exaggerate the middle syllable, which is often misspelled. Verbalizations provide auditory cues kids can use to recall correct spellings.

9. Write five phrases. Use each word to create five alternate phrases. Writing “block of ice” and “around the block” connects the word block to other things your child already knows. Putting words into context also gets kids to think about the sound and meaning of the words, rather than copying letters.

10. Make up a story. See how many words from the list can be combined into a single sentence or paragraph. Writing “The wood duck stood on a stool to prove he could shoot the fool” is a lot more challenging than listing words in isolation. Creative tasks make practice more engaging and more memorable.



11. Draw a doodle. Let little artists create custom doodles that bring words to life on the page. Turn individual letters into symbols – like a snake in place of the “s” or a boomerang in place of a “v” – or draw the word’s meaning in the spaces around the letters themselves.

12. Get physical. Have a spelling practice dance party and act out words using your entire body, like a cheerleader might spell out v-i-c-t-o-r-y. Muscle movements form their own memory traces in this ultimate active-learning strategy.

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