Young children are able to “read” many forms of writing without even realizing they are reading. They call attention to print in their environment and interpret signs, symbols, and pictures in storybooks before they are able to name individual letters or identify specific words. Children learn about the world around them by experiencing a print-rich environment in which print carries a purposeful message. Some parents may nod their heads knowingly because they have seen their young children point to and appear to read the signs for their favorite store or restaurant. For example, the mother of a child in our classroom described how, on pulling into a gas station, her child pointed to the letters on the station’s sign and said, “That says gas.”

Interpreting signs and symbols is a process that lies on the continuum of emergent reading; it is one of the beginning stages of understanding the alphabetic principle — realizing that printed text conveys meaning. Acquisition of the alphabetic principle also includes recognizing letters, connecting letters to letter sounds, and then learning that a word is a consistent set of letters and sounds (Hohmann, 2005).
As noted in the previous chapter, when teachers and children read the message board together, they are engaged in a shared reading experience that leads to conversation and an exchange of ideas. The message board provides reading and writing experiences that grow naturally out of the need to communicate information to one another about the classroom. Teachers create messages on the message board using pictures, symbols, letters, words, and numerals. Then, through the daily experience of reading the message board, children begin to understand how these symbols, pictures, and words convey meaning. Since children in the classroom are at different developmental levels, it is important that teachers create messages that appeal to children at all levels. This chapter will explain how teachers can use the message board to foster communication in their classrooms by creating messages that appeal to children at different prereading stages.

Creating a Common Language

Teachers who use the High/Scope Curriculum recognize that interpreting signs and symbols is an important developmental step in the process of learning to read, and they create classroom environments that include words and symbols for objects and ideas that are meaningful and useful to children. For example, teachers label containers and shelves with picture representations and the names of toys and other items so that children can locate these materials easily and return them to the same place. Classroom-area signs in the different interest areas of the room (e.g., art area, house area, block area) help children learn to recognize and refer to these areas at planning and recall time and throughout work time. Teachers also create charts that use words and symbols to identify the parts of the classroom’s daily routine (e.g., work time, small-group time, outside time). Children refer to these charts to help them remember...
A Matter of Interpretation

Trying different ways to present messages is a learning process for teachers. With experience, they figure out how much information is necessary to get the message across. For example, the High/Scope Foundation is located in a large Victorian house, which is fondly referred to as the "Big House" by children in the High/Scope Demonstration Preschool. When creating a message about the Big House, teachers found that it was not necessary to draw every archetypal window of the building in order for children to recognize it. The general size, shape, and one or two distinguishing characteristics, such as the arch over the door and the wide front steps, give children the overall impression.

Children do not always interpret messages the way a teacher has intended. Teachers should learn to accept this fact and be sure to respond positively to all interpretations as they try to figure out why children might have interpreted messages in a particular way. For example, when the High/Scope Demonstration Preschool class intended to take a walk down to the local ice cream parlor, the teacher drew what she thought was an obvious representation of the winding sidewalk they would follow. When it was time to read that message (right), one child responded with glee, exclaiming "Yeah, we’re going to the water park!" Sure enough, the winding sidewalk did resemble a curving water slide.

Teachers can ask children why they interpret a drawing or symbol a certain way by asking, for example, “Why do you think it says that?” After looking at the drawing from the child’s perspective, teachers may figure out the extent and type of detail children need to decipher the meaning intended.

When children make comments such as “It doesn’t look like that,” teachers can ask thought-provoking questions like “What would make it look more like...?” or "How..."