

Early Literacy Instruction: Preschool

From birth, young children begin developing knowledge and skills that build a foundation for later reading ability. These skills do not develop in isolation, but are intertwined with other developmental domains (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). As young children explore their world, specific interests spark in-depth investigations, and playtime provides meaningful opportunities to practice and become proficient. Preschool teachers must intentionally create environments and utilize instructional strategies to build children's language and conceptual knowledge, while also promoting the development of specific code-focused skills.

How preschool educators teach is as important as what they teach young children. Recent research supports the need for a balanced approach to preschool instruction; providing a combination of teacher-directed and child-initiated activities is best accomplished through differentiation by using grouping strategies (large, small, and individual), and flexible schedules that allow for sustained and in-depth learning through play, and responsive and nurturing teaching techniques (Neuman, 2010).

Early childhood is a critical period for young children's language and literacy development. The primary prevention of reading difficulties is to ensure young children develop strong language skills and engage in meaningful experiences filled with print, literacy play, storybook reading, and writing (National Institute for Literacy, 2009).

The National Early Literacy Panel NELP (2008) conducted a synthesis of scientific research in the early literacy skills of children birth through five. They identified knowledge, skills and abilities that young children need to learn to improve later literacy development. Based on the NELP Report, four areas have emerged as important for young children's early literacy experiences: oral language (which includes vocabulary knowledge), phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and print knowledge (National Institute for Literacy, 2009).o

Promoting Oral Language

Children learn to understand and use language through conversations within meaningful contexts and daily activities (Hart & Risley, 1995). Preschool teachers must design activities that encourage children to talk and interact (Wasik, Bond & Hindman, 2006). A "language-rich classroom," provides multiple opportunities for children to be engaged in conversations and a rich and engaging environment that sparks young children's interests.

Young children's vocabulary knowledge plays an important role in both reading/listening comprehension and decoding. Beginning readers use their word knowledge to decode by matching the phonological representation to a known word (Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2009). For comprehension tasks, vocabulary can be thought of as "little pieces of knowledge" providing the background information necessary to comprehend both oral and written language (Neuman, 2011). A child's vocabulary size at age 3 is one of the strongest predictors of their 3rd grade reading achievement (Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2009).

Systematic and direct vocabulary instruction should include both contextual and definitional information, along with multiple word exposures across settings (Coyne, Simmons & Kame'enui, 2004). Learning new vocabulary begins with word curiosity or "word consciousness" (Graves, 2000). Once a word is noticed, students use the context to create an initial meaning, also called "fast mapping" (Carey & Bartlett, 1978). As children link this new word to additional contexts, their understanding increases and they further refine their definition. (Christ & Wang, 2010).

Storybook reading provides an excellent opportunity for exposure to language and new vocabulary, (Dwyer & Neuman, 2008). Dialogic reading is a term used to describe an interactive story book strategy that pulls the child into "dialogue" with the reader through open-ended questioning. Dialogic reading can be used in one-on-one and small group reading contexts. The following acronym has been developed to describe the process:

- P* Prompt with a question about the story.
- E* Evaluate the response given to the question.
- E* Expand on the response (through paraphrasing and/or adding information).
- R* Repeat the initial question to check understanding of the new information.

In addition to the PEER process, adults are encouraged to ask a range of question (prompts) to keep the dialogue going and provide scaffolding support:

- C* Completion questions.
- R* Recall questions.
- O* Open-ended questions.
- W* "Wh" questions (who, what, where, when, why).
- D* Distancing questions.

For further information the brief from *What Works: A Teacher's Guide for Early Language and Emergent Literacy Instruction*, www.famlit.org/pdf/what-works.pdf provides additional information

Code-Focused Instruction

Code-focused instruction involves the systematic, sequential, explicit, and intentional instruction of phonological awareness skills and alphabet knowledge. While these skills can be taught independently, there is a greater impact when they are taught in conjunction. (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008)..

Phonological Awareness

Understanding that words are made up of smaller sounds is fundamental to learning to read. Phonological awareness is a term that describes an individual's ability to detect and manipulate the sound structure of spoken language (Lonigan, 2006) and is an important and reliable predictor of later reading ability (NELP, 2008).

Quality preschool programs provide opportunities for children to practice recognizing these sounds in increasingly complex ways from whole word, syllables, onset rimes, and phonemes (Vukelich & Christie, 2004). These skills can be easily embedded into meaningful

and playful preschool activities such as singing songs, playing games, or storybook reading. The chart below describes the acquisition of various phonological awareness skills designed and incorporated into specific preschool activities.

	<i>2-3 years</i>	<i>3-4 years</i>	<i>4-5 years</i>
<i>Rhyming</i> <i>Match and produce word endings (rhymes)</i>	<i>Participate in rhyming activities</i>	<i>Match rhyming words</i>	<i>Produce words that rhyme</i>
<i>Alliteration</i> <i>Match and produce words with same initial sounds</i>	<i>none</i>	<i>Recognize words with a common initial sound</i>	<i>Produce words with a common initial sound</i>
<i>Blending</i> <i>Combine syllables and sounds to make words</i>	<i>none</i>	<i>Combine a sequence of isolated syllables to produce words</i>	<i>Combine a sequence of isolated sounds to produce words</i>
<i>Segmenting</i> <i>Pull words apart into syllables and sounds</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>Identify syllables in words</i>	<i>Identify initial sounds in words</i>

(Paulson & Moats, 2010)

Alphabet Knowledge

Young children need to be intentionally taught about letters and letter sounds. However, they also need hands-on exploration of letters and the opportunity to use letters and sounds through meaningful experiences (e.g. environmental print, name labels, writing notes) in their play. Just surrounding children with letters, alphabet books and letter activities isn't enough. To take advantage of a literacy-rich environment, children need instruction about letters and their sounds.

There is evidence to suggest teaching young children letter names does support their ability to use sound cues contained in the letter names (e.g. /b/ in B, /f/ in F) to learn letter sounds (Phillips & Piasta, 2013). There may also be an advantage to teaching both upper and lower-case letters together rather than teaching first upper and then lower-case letters. (Phillips & Piasta, 2013). Research doesn't provide much guidance about the best sequence for teaching the alphabet, however we do know that children tend to learn letters that have the most meaning to them first, so beginning with the letters in children's names provides some advantage (Justice Pence, Bowles, & Wiggins, 2006). Therefore, the "One Letter A Week Method" may not be the best approach to alphabet instruction (Invernizzi, 2003).

When preschool programs go through the alphabet one letter each week, they are not able to get through the alphabet more than one time each school year. This method does not allow opportunities for children to compare and contrast several letters at a time.

Print Awareness

Print awareness provides the meaningful context for literacy learning. Children with print awareness understand that written language is related to oral language and that written language carries meaning. Teachers promote print awareness through talk about print in books, making sure young children understand the organization of print in books, drawing attention to letters and sounds in print, encouraging children to play with letters and print, and supporting children's understanding of the relationship between oral and written language.

Print awareness is a necessary foundational skill that serves as a prerequisite for learning to read. Without print awareness, children will struggle to develop other literacy skills. Research has linked the use of consistent print referencing during shared reading to the development of early literacy for young children who are typically developing and those who are at-risk (Justice & Sofka, 2010).

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