



# Building Language and Literacy

## Essential Experiences for Preschoolers

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Some children already know how to read by the time they enter school, but only a very small number of students (5 percent) fall in this category. Other children (20 to 35 percent) will learn to read very easily, no matter what kind of formal instruction they are given. However, for the vast majority of students (60 percent), learning to read is very challenging; of this large group, 20 to 35 percent will find reading to be the most difficult task they ever encounter in school (Lyon 1998).

Why is learning to read so hard for such large groups of children, and who are the students most at risk of failing to read? At 41 or more research sites in North America, Europe, and Asia, the National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) has followed more than 12,000 individuals with reading difficulties and more than 21,000 normally developing readers for as long as 12 years. Thousands of children have also been involved in NICHD prevention and early intervention projects since 1985. Four

groups of children have been identified as most in need of explicit, systematic instruction to prevent early reading failure:

- Children living in poverty
- Children who are English-language learners
- Children with phonological processing and memory difficulties
- Children with speech and hearing impairments (Lyon 1998)

What, then, should preschool educators include in developmentally appropriate early literacy lessons and activities that will ensure that *every* child succeeds as a reader in kindergarten through grade two? Using the chart "A Skilled Reader" as an organizer, teachers may begin by considering the characteristics of a skilled reader. Skilled readers can identify words quickly and accurately—they are fluent decoders. Equally important, skilled readers are able to understand the meaning of the text—they comprehend the passage (Biemiller 1999). For readers to focus on the meaning of the passage, they need to be able to recognize words rapidly and automatically. Therefore, in the early elementary grades, reading instruction focuses heavily on decoding. It is not surprising, then, that the causal predictors for reading success in

kindergarten through grade two are the levels of a child's concepts of print, alphabetic knowledge, and phonological awareness (Adams 2000).

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### Ideas for a Rich Print Environment

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How can concepts of print be exposed to preschoolers in fun yet purposeful ways? The following activities can provide children with opportunities to develop those concepts:

- Exposure to a wide variety of books, especially in an inviting and comfortable area where children can enjoy an array of stories and informational texts.
- Frequent opportunities for dictating sentences to accompany their illustrations. These language experience stories need to be written exactly as the child dictates them. Children can thus see that print is talk written down.
- Extensive explorations with writing. These experiences can help children to begin to distinguish between drawing and writing. "Their scribbling eventually becomes purposeful and begins to look like English writing" (*Eager to Learn* 2001). The writing center should include

items such as shaving cream (for use on glass and Formica), corn-meal in shoebox lids, play dough, colored chalk, markers, and paper in a variety of sizes and types.

- A dramatic play center stocked with a variety of business, grocery, and restaurant printed supplies, such as appliance instructions, travel brochures, computer key-boards, food packages, and menus.

Alphabetic knowledge is the strongest predictor of reading success in kindergarten through grade two. With this important information in mind, preschool teachers need to provide children with an array of multisensory and enjoyable exposures to the letters. Examples are as follows:

- Singing ABC songs, pointing to the letters while singing the letter names.

- Reading a wide variety of alphabet books.
- Using plastic, magnetic letters for matching, identifying, and sequencing games (Hall and Moats 1999).
- "Cheerleading," using the letters in a child's name. The teacher points to each letter on a card held by a child whose name is on the card, saying, for example, "Give me a J!" (the children echo), "Give me an o!" (the children echo), "Give me an e!" (the children echo). Then the teacher says, "J-o-e!" "J-o-e!" (the children echo). Finally, everyone cheers for the child, "Yeah, Joe!"
- Creating an *Our Names Book*. Each page of this large class book has the capital and lowercase forms of a letter at the top. The teacher prints the names of all the children who have this letter *anywhere* in

their names on each appropriate page, writing the letters high-lighted for each page in a bright color.

### Ideas for a Rich Phonological Environment

Experiences that expose young children to foundational phonological awareness skills need to be carefully planned and presented in a developmental sequence. *Phonological awareness* at the preschool level includes a *basic sensitivity to the sounds of spoken language*. It is not the same as *phonics*, in which children learn about how sounds are represented by letters. Phonics is also an instructional method for teaching reading in the elementary school. *Phonics instruction is not developmentally appropriate at the preschool level.*

Teachers can foster preschoolers' awareness of sounds by offering them multiple opportunities to listen for sounds in their environment (e.g., on listening walks). Children can also learn to identify the first and last environmental sound that they hear, such as paper being torn or a bell being rung (from behind a screen or a place where there are no visual clues). They can eventually listen for the first, next, and last sounds (from behind a barrier or with their eyes closed).

Listening to and identifying nonenvironmental sounds from audiotapes and so forth, then naming the sounds as they are heard in a sequence of up to three sounds is the next step in laying the foundation for phonological awareness (using activities similar to those that focus on environmental sounds).

In his research report Lonigan (2003) notes, "Children from lower SES [socioeconomic status]

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## A Skilled Reader

Identifies words quickly and accurately (decodes)

Understands the meaning of the text (comprehends)

### Exposure in Preschool to:

- Phonological awareness
  - Rhyme
  - Alliteration
  - Counting syllables
  - Counting number of words heard
  - Listening for environmental and nonenvironmental sounds
- Alphabetic knowledge
- Concepts of print

- Vocabulary
- Oral language concepts
- Problem-solving and reasoning skills
- Read-alouds
  - Large group
  - Small group
  - Individual
- Long periods of play
  - Choice
  - Dramatic play
  - Construction
- Conversations
  - Past, future, etc.
  - Explanations

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# Building Language and Literacy

(Continued from previous page)

backgrounds have significantly less well developed phonological sensitivity" and "experience less growth in these skills during the preschool years than their higher SES counterparts." Therefore, it is particularly important for teachers who work with children from economically impoverished backgrounds to provide sequential, explicit instruction in phonological awareness that begins with easier concepts and progresses to more advanced levels. Phonological awareness skills that need to be explicitly developed at the preschool level include:

- Counting/clapping/tapping the number of words heard in a sentence (up to five words)
- Counting/clapping/tapping the number of syllables heard in a word (up to five syllables)
- Listening to rhymes, including nursery rhymes
- Singing, chanting, repeating, and reciting rhymes
- Listening for rhyming patterns in poems and stories
- Recognizing whether *spoken words* rhyme (Picture cards should not include printed words when teachers are working with preschoolers on oral rhyme recognition.)
- Orally supplying a rhyming word; for example, "I have a boat. It can \_\_\_\_\_." (This is the most advanced level for preschool and should not be introduced until children have had many experiences with rhyming.)
- Singing songs, chanting poems, and reading stories that emphasize alliteration (repetition of initial sounds in spoken words)
- Playing "silly sound" games in which the initial sounds of spoken words, including children's names, are changed ("Today your name will be Sunny Suzy!")

Thus, through interactive instruction and engaging activities, preschoolers can have numerous opportunities for exposure to print concepts, alphabetic knowledge, and basic phonological awareness skills.

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However, while these experiences are essential for reading success in kindergarten through grade two, they provide the foundation for only one of the two key elements of skilled reading—rapid and accurate identification of words. To understand fully the meaning of what is being read, children also need extensive development of vocabulary and oral language concepts and many opportunities to learn about the language of books (Shafiq 1999).

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## Ideas for Expanding Vocabulary

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How can vocabulary and oral language concepts be developed with preschoolers? An important way of expanding children's word and concept knowledge is through reading aloud to students. Educators Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2003) have developed *text talk*, a method that has proven to be highly effective in vocabulary instruction with young children. This approach targets three words per read-aloud text and is used *after* the text has been read aloud and discussed so that there is a strong context for introducing word meanings. In a recently published article, the authors used three words

selected from *A Pocket for Corduroy* as an example of text talk. The targeted words were *reluctant*, *drowsy*, and *desperately*. The method used for teaching the meaning of *reluctant* was summarized as follows:

1. "First, the word was contextualized for its role in the story. (*In the story Lisa was reluctant to leave the laundromat without Corduroy.*)
2. "The children were asked to repeat the word so that they could create a phonological representation of the word. (*Say the word with me.*)
3. "Next, the meaning of the word was explained using what we call 'student-friendly' definitions—that is, a definition that characterizes the word and explains its meaning in everyday language. (*Reluctant means you are not sure you want to do something.*)
4. "Examples in contexts other than the one used in the story were provided. (Someone might be *reluctant* to eat a food that they never had before, or someone might be *reluctant* to ride a roller coaster because it looks scary.)
5. "Children interacted with examples of the word's use or provided their own examples. (Tell about something you were *reluctant* to do. Try to use *reluctant* when you tell about it. You could start by saying something like 'I would be *reluctant* to \_\_\_\_\_'.)

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6. "Finally, children used the word again to reinforce its phonological representation. (What's the word we've been talking about?)"

The research on preschool vocabulary and oral language development also includes these recommendations:

- When classifying animals, objects, and so on, always provide examples. ("Birds are animals that have a beak, feathers, and two legs. A chicken is a *bird*; so is a duck.")
- Encourage "curiosity" questions during meals or snack time. ("What do you think this food is made of? Where does it come from?")
- Elaborate on children's words and phrases. ("That's a *boat*." "Yes, it is a very large boat that travels on the ocean. It is called a *ship*.")
- Model the use of vocabulary and sentence structure that is at a more complex level than that of the children. ("I working." "Yes, you are busy pounding those bolts on the workbench with your hammer.") (Hall and Moats 1999; Menyuk 1999)
- Acknowledge and compliment children's *efforts* at using new words.

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### Ideas for Promoting Reasoning Skills

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Other key experiences that prepare young children for comprehending the complex ideas in elementary school texts include activities that nurture the development of problem-solving and reasoning skills. The teacher can foster these skills as follows:

- Share how he/she has solved a problem in his/her life. By orally modeling the appropriate steps to

- be taken when facing a challenge (e.g., the car not starting in the morning), the teacher encourages young children to develop solutions as well (e.g., rebuilding their "towers" when they have fallen).
- Offer children frequent opportunities to explain how they have completed a complex task, such as building a bridge with various types of blocks.
  - Encourage children to verbalize their problem-solving strategies. ("Since there is only one ball, and we both want to play with it, we can play catch.")

Of all the activities that expose preschoolers to key ideas in books, none is more important than reading aloud to them every day. During extensive discussions following read-aloud experiences with the teacher, young children need frequent opportunities to:

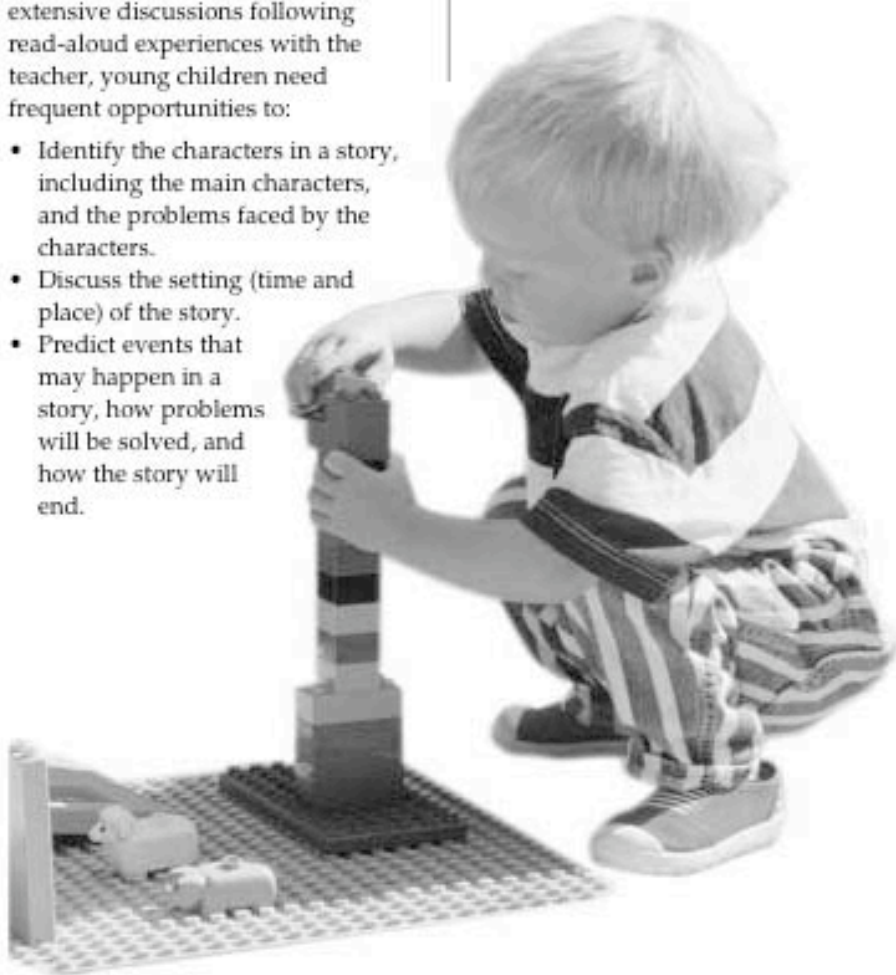
- Identify the characters in a story, including the main characters, and the problems faced by the characters.
- Discuss the setting (time and place) of the story.
- Predict events that may happen in a story, how problems will be solved, and how the story will end.

- Retell and dramatize a story. (Encourage the children to begin with "Once upon a time . . .")
- Attempt to retell some story events in sequential order.

Other key experiences for preschoolers with read-alouds include these:

- Chanting along with the teacher in big book read-alouds that focus on rhyme, rhythm, and repetition of language patterns
- Participating in one-on-one and small-group dialogic reading in which children have opportunities to shift to the role of the storyteller while the teacher asks questions, adds information, and prompts

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# Building Language and Literacy

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them to expand on their descriptions of what they see in a picture book (Whitehurst and Lonigan 2001)

- Learning about the world through informational books, including books about children from different cultures, living and nonliving things, seasons, and so forth

In an article in *American Educator*, the author notes: "From the time they enter preschool, students must experience language stimulation all day long if they are to compensate for their linguistic differences. Teachers must immerse them in the rich language of books" (Moats 2001).

## Ideas for Promoting Comprehension

In addition to daily, engaging experiences with read-alouds, young children need to have long periods of uninterrupted play if they are going to be successful in comprehending written text in elementary school. Choice of play activity is essential, and both construction and dramatic play options need to be available. The development of creativity and imagination is crucial in preparing children for the visual imagery that is so vital to text comprehension in the elementary grades. Teachers need to support the "self-chatter"

inherent in play and encourage dramatic play by providing props whenever possible and being an audience for impromptu dramatizations.

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Adult-child conversations are yet another powerful vehicle for strengthening preschoolers' language development and preparation for successful reading comprehension in later years. During outside play, "circle" time, choice time, and countless other periods during the day, adults can "stretch" children's thinking by:

- Discussing "nonimmediate topics"—past and future events—with children ("What was your favorite part of our trip to the zoo?" "What do you think we will see when we go to the farm?")
- Providing "wait time" when a child is putting his/her thoughts together before communicating

(Offer words as needed, but let the child control the discussion.)

The challenge is to provide a rich language and early literacy experience for every preschooler. What kind of support is needed so that teachers can accomplish this vitally important work? The view of this author is that teachers need a research-based preschool curriculum that has demonstrated results in developing the skills for successful reading in elementary school.

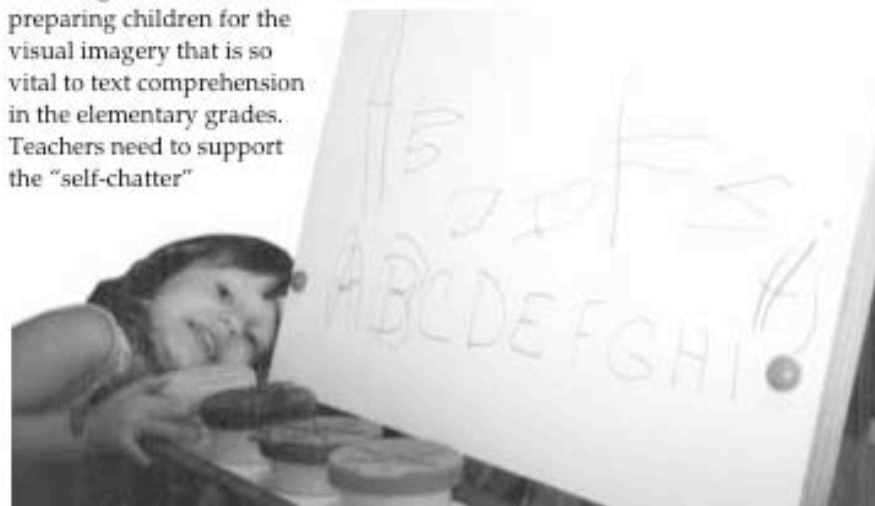
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## The Need for Professional Development

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Although a comprehensive program that exposes young children in a developmentally appropriate way to these foundational experiences is important, the effective teaching of such a curriculum can provide a rich experience for every child. Preschool educators and support staff need professional development linked to the curriculum they are using. Ideally, this training would include strategies to ensure that those most at risk of failing to read will get the instructional assistance needed to ensure their success as readers in elementary school. In addition to introductory institutes, teachers need regularly scheduled follow-up sessions, support from coaches, opportunities to visit model classrooms, and time to reflect on their own instructional practices in safe, collegial settings. Leadership is also essential. Early childhood program leaders need to be sure that state-adopted materials are made available to all sites and that staffing, professional development, and resources are provided for successful curriculum implementation.

Does exposure to foundational concepts in language and early literacy mean that teachers should not



support their children's socio-emotional development, or that the kindergarten curriculum is being pushed down into preschool, or that preschoolers will no longer have "choice time" at centers or opportunities for play? The answer is a resounding no to all three questions. A balance of direct teaching and child-initiated play is essential in preschool programs, and language and early literacy development supports social-emotional development (*Best Research on What Works* 2002).

Child development expert Lyon (2001) aptly states: "Our children require informed and systematic interactions and experiences with adults who will take the time and effort to teach vocabulary and other oral language concepts, phonological concepts, letter knowledge and other print and emergent literacy concepts. We have learned that these interactions and experiences are most productive and that school readiness concepts are best learned when provided in safe environments where the kids feel emotionally secure and where they can develop close relationships with children and adults."

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