

## Literacy

Becoming literate doesn't just happen. Teachers thoughtfully and purposefully interact with children and plan experiences that support emerging literacy. A print-rich environment that allows children to practice literacy skills in real-life experiences, combined with explicit teaching of key concepts, is the foundation of literacy learning in preschool. As children's excitement about their newfound ability to read and write increases, teachers create multiple opportunities for continued literacy learning.

### Components of Literacy

Over the past few years, researchers and practitioners (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) have studied how children learn to read, write, and understand written language. They have identified what concepts children need to become competent and confident readers and writers and the kinds of experiences that help them make progress. Based on this research, we describe seven components of literacy for preschool children ages 3–5:

- increased vocabulary and language
- phonological awareness
- knowledge of print
- letters and words
- comprehension
- understanding books and other texts
- literacy as a source of enjoyment

#### Increased Vocabulary and Language

When children are exposed to rich vocabulary, they learn the words they will need to read and write. In addition, research has shown that children who have large vocabularies and lots of experience using language are more successful in school (Hart & Risley, 1995). A *Creative Curriculum* classroom provides many opportunities for children to develop vocabulary and use language. These include

- informal conversations—talking with peers and adults throughout the day
- songs, rhymes, fingerplays, or movement activities
- firsthand experiences—hearing new words to describe what they are doing
- read alouds—listening to books and talking about new words in the story

### **Preschool children demonstrate increased vocabulary and language when they**

- point to one of the trucks and say, "That's a frontloader."
- share at group time: "I'm going fishing with my dad tomorrow and we're going to bring fishing poles and a big net and catch 100 fish."
- describe a scary dream as a "nightmare" after the teacher reads *There's a Nightmare in My Closet*.

If you have children whose primary language is not English, you should know that a strong base in a first language promotes school achievement in a second language (Snow et al., 1998). Children who are learning English as a second language are more likely to become readers and writers of English if they understand the vocabulary and concepts in their primary language first. These children need special attention to increase their vocabulary and language abilities. The long-term goal is for children to be able to understand, speak, read, and write in both the primary language and English. Therefore, you want to support children's first language as you help them acquire oral proficiency in English.

### **Phonological Awareness**

Phonological awareness is hearing and understanding the different sounds of spoken language. It includes the different ways oral language can be broken down into individual parts, for instance, separate sounds and syllables. A key finding in recent research has been the importance of developing phonological awareness during the preschool years.

The skills that make up phonological awareness lie on a continuum of complexity. The simplest level of phonological awareness includes skills such as playing with rhymes, noticing how words begin with the same sounds, or clapping out individual words or syllables of a song, rhyme, or chant. Playing with sounds in speech paves the way to phonemic awareness—the most advanced level of phonological awareness. Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the individual sounds—phonemes—in spoken words (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Phonemic awareness typically is addressed in kindergarten and first grade.

It is common to confuse phonological awareness with phonics, but they are not the same. Phonics is connecting a printed symbol with a sound, unlike phonological awareness, which is hearing sounds. Phonics activities become appropriate for preschool children only if they understand that speech is made up of a sequence of sounds. The preschool teacher's role in promoting phonological awareness is to draw children's attention to the separate sounds of spoken language through playful songs, games, and rhymes.

Children learning English as a second language are also developing phonological awareness through the activities you do. They may not reproduce sounds exactly as they are made in English, however. These children are still learning to hear and discriminate the sounds of English and need you to acknowledge (rather than correct) the sounds they are trying to make while you continue to model correct English pronunciation.

**Preschool children demonstrate phonological awareness when they**

- join in saying rhymes, poems, and rhyming songs
- make up nonsense words or silly names (e.g., "Silly Willy," "funny bunny")
- clap along with each word or syllable of a song or rhyme (e.g., clapping twice while saying the name Kel-ly)
- notice that several words or names begin with the same sound (e.g., Jonelle, Juwan, Jonetta)



**Knowledge of Print**

This component of literacy involves connecting print with meaning. Children acquire a knowledge of print by seeing it in the environment and using it in their play. By drawing children's attention to the features of print, you help children to develop print concepts such as the following:

- Print carries a message.
- Each spoken word can be written down and read.
- Print follows conventions (e.g., left to right, capital/lowercase letters, punctuation).
- Books have common characteristics (e.g., front, back, author, illustrator).

**Preschool children demonstrate knowledge of print concepts when they**

- point to a printed label and say, "Cars go here."
- make a grocery list in the Dramatic Play Area, writing the words from left to right and top to bottom
- read a big book to a group of stuffed animals, pointing at the words and turning the pages from front to back

## ■ Letters and Words

This component of literacy is more than being able to recite the ABC song. Really knowing about letters involves understanding that a letter is a symbol representing one or more of the sounds in the English language; that these symbols can be grouped together to form words; and that these words have meaning.

The most important letters to children are the ones in their names, particularly the first letter. For example, Setsuko points to the “S” on a stop sign and says, “That’s my letter!” Many children do not begin experimenting with spelling until they are 5 or 6 years old. You know a child has an understanding of beginning and ending sounds when he writes “PG” above his drawing of a pig. Some people call this stage “invented spelling,” “temporary spelling,” “developmental spelling,” or “phonetic spelling.” Research has shown that early forms of spelling indicate that children are making important sound-symbol connections. Other stages will follow.

### **Preschool children demonstrate their understanding of letters and words when they**

- use magnetic letters or other alphabet materials to form their name
- attempt to write a phone message in the dramatic play area
- say, “That says ‘w,’”-pointing to the first letter of each word in “wishy-washy, wishy-washy”

## ■ Comprehension

Comprehension is understanding the meaning of spoken and written languages. Children with comprehension skills may ask questions or make comments on the topic of a story you are reading, or act it out in their play.

How you read to children is very important to the development of comprehension skills. Pausing at the end of a sentence to let children join in, asking open-ended questions, and helping children make connections to prior experiences are all effective teaching strategies for developing comprehension skills. In the Library chapter we outline specific strategies for reading aloud to individuals and groups of children.

**Preschool children demonstrate comprehension skills when they**

- retell the story of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* using felt pieces of fruit on the flannel board
- explain, "They ran away from the kids 'cause they were scared," after hearing the teacher read *Goggles*
- talk about their own experiences after hearing the teacher read *Ira Sleeps Over*
- re-enact *Caps for Sale*



**Understanding Books and Other Texts**

Understanding books and other texts involves knowing how to read and write signs, menus, letters, shopping lists, newspapers, invitations, messages, journals, and books. Books take many forms—narrative storybooks, predictable books (books with rhyme, repetition, and predictable language patterns), informational books, number books, alphabet books, poetry books. You can help children learn about different forms of literature by making sure you keep a variety of books in your classroom and calling children's attention to their specific characteristics. Storybooks especially offer particularly important learning opportunities. Children can learn many things:

- A story has a beginning, middle, and end.
- There are different characters in a story.
- The story has a setting where it takes place.
- There is a sequence of events in a story.
- A conversation might be taking place.

Understanding books and other text also involves learning how to handle books in ways such as holding the book right side up, turning the pages front to back, and knowing specific words related to books such as author and illustrator.

**Preschool children demonstrate their understanding of concepts about books and other texts when they**

- retell the story of *The Three Little Pigs*: "The second pig built his house of wood, but the wolf huffed and puffed and blew it down. So the third pig made his house out of bricks."
- place a sign that reads "Do not move!" on a design made with pattern blocks
- refer to a book about castles while building one with blocks
- ask for a book on butterflies so they can find out the name of the one they found
- draw a picture, write some letters on it, and say, "It's a letter for Grandma."

 **Literacy as a Source of Enjoyment**

Motivation is also an aspect of literacy and one that is particularly important. Children read because they are motivated to learn something new that interests them, uncover the plot of a story, or discover something that makes them laugh. The more they read, the better readers they become, and the more motivated they are.

In the Library chapter, you can find many ideas and strategies for making that area inviting and attractive. In addition, you will find many ways to instill a love of reading in your classroom.

**Preschool children demonstrate their enjoyment of literacy experiences when they**

- ask the teacher to read a favorite book
- join in the refrain "Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see?" as the teacher reads the book
- scribble across the top of the page after finishing a picture and then read the story to the teacher
- listen to a story and ask questions about it
- use books to get answers to their questions