
Early literacy: The essentials

Part 3. Phonological awareness and the alphabet



Editor's note: This is the third of a four-part series on emergent literacy: Supporting children as they learn to read and write. Part 1 addresses language and conversation skills and is available online at www.childcarequarterly.com/fall05_story1.html. Readers can access Part 2, Sharing books and asking questions, at www.childcarequarterly.com/winter05_story1.html. Part 4 will review tools for supporting emergent reading and writing, and assessment.



Carmella stands to the side of the trike track on the playground and watches Frances, Jamika, Carlos, and Sam whiz by. "Too fast," she says to herself.

She goes to the storage shelf, finds paper and pencil, and writes out tickets for the four cyclists—one with an *S*, one a *J*, one a *C*, and one an *F*.

"You need tickets if you go too fast," she tells Jamika, handing her the *J* ticket.

"OK," says Jamika. The two girls go off to make speed limit signs for the playground.



In recent years, countless researchers and educators (Burns, Griffin, and Snow 1999; Landry 2005; Adams 1990) have agreed that the seeds of literacy are planted long before children enter school. Vocabulary and background knowledge built through meaningful conversations with adults are fundamental to literacy development. But the most powerful indicators of reading and writing success are knowledge about letters and the sounds they represent.

Clearly, these skills do not develop spontaneously. Competent and deliberate instruction shapes, supports, and develops them. For some early care and education professionals, this instruction takes the form of rote memorization and drill. In other words, they expect every child in a class to master the same material in the same way.

More informed teachers develop strategies that meet both age-specific milestones and the unique needs of each child. They recognize that children must have a literacy base—a starting point—from which to construct and develop new skills.

According to Lev Vygotsky (1978), learning occurs in a "zone of proximal development." He described this zone as the distance between what a child already knows and the help needed to move the child to the next level of learning. In teaching literacy, successful teachers use two tools: assessment—knowing which skills a child has mastered—and planning—knowing which skills to address next.

It is pointless, for example, to teach the ABCs to a child who doesn't have the literacy underpinnings of vocabulary, conversation, and background knowledge. By contrast, children who have had rich early-learning experiences typically are able by age 4 to demonstrate their awareness of the sounds of language. They can begin to tackle the symbolic puzzle of the alphabet and the associations between letters and sounds.

For example, 22-month-old Juanita gleefully joins in singing the alphabet song. She sings "*m,n,m,o,t*,"

swaying her body, smiling, and enjoying the social aspects of circle time. At this age, Juanita is too young to connect the written symbol *M*, the sound /m/, and the initial sound in the words *moo* and *mother*. Over the next few years she will broaden her experiences. In response to attentive teachers, she will begin to decode black lines into letters, attach sounds to letter symbols, and combine letters into meaningful words.

Phonological awareness and the alphabet

Spoken language is made up of individual and separate sounds. Children learn to recognize and respond to the sounds of language through phonological awareness activities. These include rhymes, songs, and sound-matching games.

Teachers can discover a child's phonological awareness through routine classroom interactions. Three- and 4-year-olds often respond to poetry—nursery rhymes and songs—by offering alternate rhymes for the traditional ones. They make up silly, nonsense words by substituting one sound for another. They clap to each syllable in their names. They also may notice and identify the similarities of the initial sound in familiar names—like *James*, *Jim*, and *Jennifer*.

A more advanced and complex skill is phonemic awareness—noticing the smallest meaningful segments of words. Phonemic awareness enables a child to identify all of the sounds in a specific word—/m/, /u/, and /d/, for example, in the word



Words to know

Phoneme (pronounced FO neem)—a unit of sound in a language. For example, in the words *rip* and *lip*, the phonemes /r/ and /l/ distinguish one word from the other.

Phonemic awareness—noticing the smallest meaningful segments of words. For example, identifying /h/, /a/, and /t/ in the word *hat*.

Phonological (pronounced FO na LAH ji kul)—having to do with phonemes or speech sounds.

Syllable (pronounced SIL a bul)—a unit of pronunciation. For example, *finger* has two syllables, fin-ger, while *mouse* has one.

mud. In written English, 26 letters and combinations of letters stand for 44 unique sounds. To read, a child must learn that spoken speech can be broken into words, syllables, and phonemes. Without phonemic awareness, the relationship between speech and print is difficult to grasp.

Word sound play

Phonological awareness—understanding how phonemes are sequenced in speech—predicts children's reading success. Typically developing infants and toddlers respond to sounds long before they can associate sounds with letters. Cooing and babbling gradually give way to sounds that reflect the speech and conversation babies hear every day.

Through the preschool years, children need frequent and deliberate opportunities to continue learning the connection between the sounds they hear and the alphabetic print they encounter in the environment. By the end of kindergarten, many children can recognize and name the letters of the alphabet and identify many familiar words at a glance. They also may have mastered some techniques for decoding words they don't recognize.

Because these skills don't happen spontaneously, children need support to develop them. The following activities offer ideas that you can modify and extend for the children in your care.

You tell the story

(all ages)

Help children expand their vocabularies and practice telling stories. Wordless picture books invite children to interpret illustrations and share ideas—in their own words. Examples are Tomie dePaola’s *Pancakes for Breakfast*, Pat Hutchins’ *Changes*, and Mercer Mayer’s *Frog, Where Are You?* These books offer opportunities to share vocabulary, reinforce sequence and narrative, and demonstrate creativity.

Make your own wordless picture books—and encourage children to make some too.

Here’s what you need:

- colorful, realistic pictures
 - paper
 - glue
 - markers
 - construction paper
 - hole punch
 - binding rings
1. Gather pictures from old magazines or catalogs. Look for pictures that create a sequence of events like looking at a seed packet, digging in soil, and arranging flowers.
 2. Cut paper large enough to mount the largest picture.
 3. Glue the picture to the paper, one picture per page.
 4. Cut a cover for the book. Write a title on the cover.
 5. Punch holes along one side of the book.
 6. Use binding rings to hold the pages together.



Vocabulary play

(ages 2 and older)

New vocabulary is challenging to young children. Offering a definition is not always the best way to share new words. Just as you teach new concepts using several methods (sensory, discovery, and asking direct questions), introduce new vocabulary with the same effectiveness.

- Determine what children already know. Ask “What do you know about...?” Steer the conversation from general—“It’s a dog”—to the specific—“Yes, it’s a Shetland sheep dog; it’s a working dog that helps farmers herd their sheep. Do you know another dog that works?”
- Use the senses as you share new concepts and vocabulary. Ask comparison questions like “Which is more sour?” or “What does this muffin remind you of?”
- Rather than rely on simple words like *happy* to describe an emotional state, help children refine and expand to words like *content*, *jubilant*, *satisfied*, *elated*, and *joyous*. Play with movement and facial expression. Share pictures.
- Offer children authentic opportunities to use new vocabulary. Go beyond repeating a word, like *doorknob*. Have a meaningful conversation that invites children to use and show their understanding of the word: “Can you turn the doorknob? What happens when you pull the doorknob?”
- Use the dictionary. “Let’s look it up” models lifelong curiosity. It builds confidence that answers to many questions can be found in books.

Clapping sounds

(ages 3 and older)

Phonological awareness and rhythmic expression come together in games that encourage children to focus on syllables—units of pronunciation in words. Gather children and introduce the activity with their names, one clap per syllable. For example, “Mar-y” two claps; “Paul” one clap; and “Jes-si-ca” three claps. Expand the activity to colors, animals, and emotions.

Challenge older children by naming a category—colors, for example. Think of a color, clap the syllables, and ask the children to identify the color you are thinking of.

Find your name

(ages 3 and older)

Often the first word children spell, write, and recognize is their name. Offer regular activities that foster this fundamental interest.

Here's what you need:

- index cards
- marker

1. Write each child's name on an index card. Print clear upper- and lower-case letters.
2. Gather the children and ask them to cover their eyes.
3. Place the cards around the room.
4. Challenge the children to find the card with their own name on it.

Transition times

(ages 4 and older)

Focus on names and letter sounds during transition times. Smooth transitions with directions like these:

"If your name starts with a *C*, you can wash your hands for snack."

"If your name starts with the same sound as we hear in *bed*, *bath*, and *biscuit*, you can sit down for lunch."

"If your name has a *P* in it, please stand near the door."

Name and do

(ages 4 and older)

Here's what you need:

- chart tablet
- markers



1. Gather a small group of children.
2. Ask one child to stand.
3. Ask the group the child's name.
4. Write the child's name across the top of the tablet.
5. Write the name again vertically along the left side of the tablet. Invite the children to say each letter as you write it.
6. Challenge the group to identify tasks that start with the same sound as each letter. For example:
Paul
P pats his head
a asks for a pencil
u uses his elbow to point
l licks an ice cream cone
7. Ask the standing child to pantomime each action.

Letter recognition and identification

(ages 4 and older)

Here's what you need:

- chart tablet
- colored markers

1. Write a sentence that is complex, colorful, and fanciful. Use the opportunity to expand vocabulary as you focus on letter sounds. For example: "It was nearly noon when the nine, nimble newts encountered their new neighbor."
2. Say: "This sentence has several words that start with the letter *n*—the sound that we hear in *no*, *Nancy*, *noodle*, and *night*. Let's read this again and point to the words that start with *n*."
3. Point to the appropriate words. Or invite children to circle the words with a marker.

Unit words

(ages 4 and older)

Collect and share words that relate to themes of study or activities. For example, a pet shop theme in the dramatic play center could invite new vocabulary like *paw*, *soft*, *breed*, *big*, *groom*, *leash*, *collar*, and *pet food*. Write the words clearly on index cards and make the cards accessible to the children to copy or read.

A popular way to focus on print and vocabulary is word displays—bulletin boards and word walls, for example. Talk about the words as you add them—identify the letters, sounds, and syllables and what each word means. Add words gradually, and let children suggest new word additions. Use upper- and lower-case letters appropriately. Capitalize only proper nouns.

Remember to keep words posted for as long as they have meaning for the group. (Halloween words in April are boring and confusing.) Some words have a long display life—names, numbers, and colors, for example. Some words can stay up because children need to recognize them by sight —*I, am, we, they, go, come, and get*, for example. If you keep a word display, make sure it stays neat and responsive to the interests and skills of the children using it.

Highlight to reinforce

(ages 4 and older)

Familiar, recurring words form the base for a child's sight-recognition vocabulary. Words like *saw, they, went, can, on, and you* add fluency to children's early reading and decoding adventures. Highlight dictations and stories to reinforce recognition.

Here's what you need:

- chart tablet
- colored markers

1. Write several short sentences using the same familiar word. For example: "We went to the playground. We ran around the track. We hopped on one foot. We went back inside."
2. Use a broad marker to highlight the word *We* in each sentence.
3. Ask children to dictate another sentence with the word *We*.



Alliteration shop

(ages 4 and older)

Focus on alliteration (words starting with the same sound) with this sometimes silly activity.

Here's what you need:

- chart tablet
- markers

1. Invite children to imagine a store that sells only things with names that begin with a certain letter, a *T*, for example.
2. Write the letter in the center of the tablet page.
3. Ask children to name things that they might buy at the letter store: *toys, tops, turnips, turtles, tubs, T-shirts, tiles, and tanks*, for example. As the children call out items, write the words on the chart.

Optional: Invite individual children to come to the chart to circle the store letter. Say, "Can you circle three T's?"

Word rhymes

(ages 4 and older)

Here's what you need:

- index cards
- markers
- storage box or basket

1. Write a one-syllable word on each card. For example: *cat, mat, hat, bug, sun, mud, mouse, bed, and moon*.
2. Place the cards in a storage box.
3. Invite children to pick a card and say a word that rhymes with the word on the card. For example: *mat* and *cat*.

Optional: Expand the activity using a chart tablet and marker. Invite children to go through the alphabet for a word, naming as many rhyming words as possible—*bat, fat, hat, nat, pat*, and so on. Write each word as it is said.

Rhyming categories

(ages 4 and older)

Here's what you need:

- chart tablet
- markers

1. Introduce the activity by telling children that they will rhyme words from a category or group—animals, numbers, or body parts, for example.

2. Write a list of body parts—*hair, eye, elbow, knee, ear*, and so forth—along the left side of the tablet. Say each word and ask the children to read the word with you.
3. Then challenge the group to say words that rhyme with each word on your list—*hair-bear; eye-fly; elbow-blow; knee-see; ear-fear*.
4. Transcribe the rhyming words and again invite the children to read the words with you.

References

- Adams, M.J. 1990. *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Burns, M.S., P. Griffin, and C.E. Snow (Eds.). 1999. *Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success*. Washington D.C.: National Academy Press. Available online at www.nap.edu/html/sor/.
- Landry, Susan H. 2005. *Effective Early Childhood Programs: Turning Knowledge into Action*. Houston: University of Texas Health Science Center.
- Neuman, Susan B., Carol Coppel, and Sue Bredekamp. 2000. *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children*. Washington D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Vygotsky, L. 1978. *Mind and Society: The Development of Higher Mental Processes*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.



Where are the letters?

Support developmentally appropriate, literacy-rich activities by giving children lots of access to the alphabet in their environment.

- Hang alphabet displays at eye level where children can examine them. Use standard print—no fancy calligraphy or doodle script. Encourage children to finger-trace letter forms.
- Offer letter guides and alphabet charts for hands-on work. Apply laminated alphabet strips to tabletops. Laminate individual letter guides for the children's journals and the library and writing centers.
- Provide letter-form manipulatives—puzzles, cookie cutters, magnetic letters, and Scrabble® tiles, for example. Encourage children to sculpt letter shapes from play clay and draw letters in sand trays.
- Create a print-rich environment. Label children's cubbies and center equipment. Encourage children to keep written journals and label their own artwork. Maintain charts and schedules in clear, legible print. Provide play-related print like menus, name tags, and rebus charts.

Literacy resources for preschool teachers

- Moomaw, Sally and Brenda Hieronymus. 2001. *More Than Letters: Literacy Activities for Preschool, Kindergarten, and First Grade*. St. Paul, Minn.: Redleaf Press.
- Mueller, Stephanie. 2005. *Everyday Literacy: Environmental Print Activities for Children 3 to 8*. Beltsville, Md.: Gryphon House.
- Rockwell, Robert, D. R. Hoge, and B. Searce. 1999. *Linking Language: Simple Language and Literacy Activities Throughout the Curriculum*. Beltsville, Md.: Gryphon House.
- Schickedanz, Judith A. and Renée Casbergue. 2004. *Writing in Preschool: Learning to Orchestrate Meaning and Marks*. Newark, Del.: International Reading Association.
- Silberg, Jackie. 2005. *Reading Games for Young Children*. Beltsville, Md.: Gryphon House.
- West, Sherrie and Amy Cox. 2004. *Literacy Play: Over 300 Dramatic Play Activities That Teach Pre-Reading Skills*. Beltsville, Md.: Gryphon House.