



# Making Preschool Inclusion Work

## Strategies for Supporting Children, Teachers, and Programs

### STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT LANGUAGE ARTS AND EMERGING LITERACY SKILLS



Results of research on literacy skills in young children show the strong connection between learning critical emerging literacy skills during, and even before, the preschool years and becoming proficient readers in elementary school. Many children, especially those from low-income backgrounds, do not enter kindergarten with the prerequisite literacy skills necessary to learn how to read (Hawken, Johnston, & McDonnell, 2005).

Children with disabilities may have poor vocabulary development, which will make it more difficult for them to learn to read. Difficulty discerning sounds, words, and phrases has a huge impact on a child's ability to learn phonological awareness. For example, the ability to identify that *f* is the beginning sound in the word *fish* or understand that *cat* and *sat* are words that rhyme helps a child begin to understand how to put sounds together as he or she learns how to read. Not having this phonological awareness seriously hampers a child's ability to learn how to read during her kindergarten year.

The critical elements of emergent literacy are oral language (vocabulary, narrative skills, phonological awareness) and print awareness (McCathren & Allor, 2002). Literacy achievement in the preschool classroom is broken down into three main areas: reading, writing, and listening/speaking (Ong, 2010). Five domain elements are defined in the literacy knowledge and skills domain of the *Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework* (Head Start, 2010):

1. Book appreciation
2. Phonological awareness
3. Alphabet knowledge or print recognition
4. Print concepts and conventions: concepts about print and early decoding; identifying letter-sound relationships
5. Early writing

In slightly modified order these domains are used in the following sections to address both how and what typically developing children must learn and what modifications or accommodations should be considered for children with disabilities.

A multitude of strategies help children with disabilities increase both oral language and print awareness. Teachers using storybooks in a deliberate and planned manner to help emerging literacy skills in young children create enjoyable activities while effectively teaching children with short attention spans, poor vocabulary development, and lower cognitive skills than their typical peers. Previewing a story

with a small group or on a one-to-one basis helps children become familiar with the characters and vocabulary used in the book. Using expansion, an adult builds on a child's one-word utterances about pictures in the story and expands to two words. Offering objects that represent two-dimensional pictures helps a child maintain interest in a story. Answering simple questions or discussing comments with more verbal children promotes maintenance of interest as the story is previewed. Reading aloud after prereading or previewing is done in a larger group with an adult modeling top-down and left-right reading while pointing to printed words in the story. Finally, children begin to recognize that sentences are made up of words and words are made up of sounds as teachers reference these points during story reading. Most important, these emerging literacy skills are built on children's interests and motivation.

### Reading and Book Appreciation

A child begins to show an understanding of book knowledge and story appreciation when he or she

- Demonstrates interest in and looks at books
- Enjoys being read to
- Turns pages
- Recognizes front cover and orients book right side up
- Recognizes pictures
- Understands the beginning and end of books
- Understands that print in books represents language about the pictures
- Eventually understands story structure (beginning, middle, and end)
- Can listen to stories without pictures on every page

***Book Appreciation Accommodations for the Child with Disabilities*** Children with disabilities may need specific accommodations to begin to show an appreciation of books. For children with developmental delays and intellectual disabilities, using photographs of familiar people (e.g., family) and objects (e.g., favorite toys) while pairing them with the person or object can help children begin to make the connection between two-dimensional representations and real people or objects. Teacher-made simple 3–6 page family books (*My Family*: “This is Momma,” “This is Papa,” “Here is my dog”) with laminated photographs for children to read at school and share at home are often more interesting than books with abstract illustrations or too many words.

Finding picture books with clear photos or simple illustrations of animals or people can be challenging (another reason to make personalized books). Using these types of books often and repeating the words and sounds as the book is “read” to a child is often very appealing and engaging for him. Lift-the-flap books or those with sound buttons encourage engagement as children

## Preparing for Kindergarten

physically manipulate the hidden picture or push the button to hear a related sound.

Children with visual impairments may need the addition of braille and/or large print materials to learn important preliteracy skills. They will benefit from a variety of modifications in the preschool setting to enhance their understanding of print and enhance book awareness. For a child with low vision, teachers need to enlarge words, pictures, and symbols; use bright and contrasting colors; arrange lighting to increase the visibility of pictures; and/or create noniconic symbols to mark environmental areas, cubbies, doors, and furniture. Some activities need to be simplified, and others need adult or peer intervention and support in addition to environmental modifications (Day, McDonnell, & Heathfield, 2002). The consultation and support of a teacher for the visually impaired is extremely important, especially for learning preliteracy skills. However, the ECE teacher can also begin to immediately use the following strategies:

- Use words and sounds as anticipatory cues or “symbols.”
- Create books representing a child’s own interests and experiences using tactile cues of actual objects/materials on each page of book and including braille symbols.
- Use recorded stories with interesting sound effects to teach appreciation of story structures.
- Encourage family members to tell or read bedtime stories as part of daily routines.
- Use favorite early childhood books with textures and sounds.

For the child who is deaf-blind, consider using familiar objects or tactile cues as “symbolic” anticipatory cues (e.g., plastic cup to hold as the story about snack time at school is read) and olfactory cues (e.g., smelling shampoo as a story about bath time is read).

The child with a severe motor disability will need to have pictures/photos incorporated into augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) training. Using computerized books, tablet readers, and e-readers as well as adding technology to support turning pages or finding favorite pictures are strategies that will help children learn to enjoy reading stories.

Children with autism may show more interest in books written about themselves. Illustrations and sentences should be kept at child’s level of understanding and themes should be about scenarios that are meaningful to the child.

The nonverbal child can be taught to engage in looking at books and responding to questions and discussions by adapting dialogic reading strategies to allow the child to participate by using directed eye gaze, pointing, or other nonverbal responses (Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003). The key elements of dialogic reading are presented in Figure 9.1. Dialogic reading also includes prompting strategies for developmentally young children. These include encouraging children to label pictures in the story, evaluating the child’s response and suggesting alternatives if clearly incorrect, expanding the child’s utterance, and encouraging the child to repeat the adult’s expansion.

<p><b>P.E.E.R</b></p> <p>Prompt the child to label objects and talk about the story.</p> <p>Evaluate the child's response; suggest alternatives if it is clearly incorrect.</p> <p>Expand, by repeating the child's response and adding information.</p> <p>Repeat, by having the child replicate the adult's expansion.</p> <p><b>C.R.O.W.D</b></p> <p>Completion prompts: "There was an old woman who lived in a ____."</p> <p>Recall prompts: "Can you remember ____?"</p> <p>Open-ended prompts: "Now you tell me something."</p> <p>Wh prompts: "What/where/why are the ____?"</p> <p>Distancing: Reference something outside the story. ("The old woman lives in a shoe, let's talk about places we live.")</p>
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Figure 9.1. Features of dialogic reading for preschool children. (Source: Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003.)

## Phonological Awareness

Children demonstrate the concept of phonological awareness when they have the skills to

- Understand spoken language
- Participate in familiar songs and rhymes
- Follow the beat/rhythm of music and chants
- Understand the concept of *listen* and recognize environmental sounds
- Recognize and produce animal sounds (e.g., moo, baa, oink, meow)
- Understand the concepts of a *word* and a *sound*
- Identify words that sound the same or different
- Segment/count the words in a short sentence
- Segment and blend compound words (e.g., backpack = back+pack and back+pack = backpack)
- Segment multisyllabic words into syllables (by clapping, etc.)
- Count the number of syllables in a multisyllabic word
- Segment and blend two-syllable words
- Complete familiar nursery rhymes
- Demonstrate understanding of the concept of *rhyme* (e.g., creates own rhyme)

### Preparing for Kindergarten

1. Word awareness
2. Compound-word awareness
3. Syllable awareness
4. Rhyme awareness
5. Onset-rime awareness
6. Phoneme awareness

**Figure 9.2.** Developmental continuum of phonological awareness. (Source: Phillips, Clancy-Menchetti, & Lonigan, 2008.)

All children can develop these skills when preschool teachers include ample use of songs, nursery rhymes, books with repeated words, rhymes, and rhythms. When children are encouraged to clap to the beat of songs and rhymes and identify same and different sounding words during the daily routine at school, they become aware of the phonology of language. The development of this capacity is presented in Figure 9.2. Teachers can refer to and use words like *rhyme*, *word*, and *sound* often throughout the day to build awareness in preschoolers.

#### ***Phonological Awareness Accommodations for Children with Disabilities***

For the child with speech and language disabilities, these skills can be very difficult to learn. If a child is having difficulty saying words or repeating sounds, it may be more important to use visuals than to rely on the child's ability to listen and discriminate sounds. As mentioned, for children having difficulty using spoken language to express themselves, very specific adult-directed teaching will be necessary. Speech-language pathologists can provide valuable information to teachers in this area and should be consulted. On a daily basis and in the classroom setting, using music and rhythm to encourage children to join in segmenting words (i.e., clapping out syllables), focusing on the sounds of names of peers or other high-interest words, and playing simple rhyming games with much repetition will set the stage for future growth as listening and speaking skills improve.

#### **Print Concepts, Conventions, and Recognition**

Children learning print concepts will

- Recognize print in everyday life (e.g., numbers, letters, their name, common words, and familiar logos and signs)
- Understand that print conveys meaning
- Understand conventions, such as that print moves from left to right and from top to bottom of a page
- Recognize words as a unit of print and understand that letters are grouped to form words

- Recognize the association between spoken or signed and written words
- Identify and name some letter sounds

**Print Recognition Accommodations for the Child with Disabilities** To help preschoolers with disabilities learn to recognize print as meaningful, the following accommodations are suggested. For children with developmental delays and intellectual disabilities, teach salient environmental prints, such as McDonald's and stop signs. Use most-to-least prompting to teach discrimination of labels for a favorite food or toy. Teach children to recognize their own name labels on personal items (e.g., cubby, jacket, backpack). Start with larger photos and smaller print labels or names then gradually reduce the size of pictures and increase the size of words and names. Cover photos when asking children to identify and "read" the words; let the child see parts of the picture as prompts, if needed. Help the child with visual impairments identify his or her own chair or cubby with a braille label for her name or a specific texture symbol that will represent her name.

Children with autism respond well to visual schedules. Include printed words with pictures in picture schedules but gradually reduce the size of the pictures, making the words the more salient features. Focus on functional uses of print rather than simple automatic letter/word naming (e.g., provide opportunities to choose a favorite toy or snack by pairing a word card for the preferred item with a word card for the nonpreferred item).

## Writing

Writing skills are demonstrated at the kindergarten level by children's knowledge of letters, sounds, and words used to write about people, objects, and experiences. Writing skills are also measured by use of oral and written English using appropriate conventions such as grammar and spelling (Ong, 2010). In the study of Head Start teachers, Hawken et al. (2005) found that, on a daily basis, the majority of teachers in the survey encouraged students to practice printing their names. Less often, children were encouraged to copy or print words or write in personal journals.

**Alphabet Knowledge** Alphabet knowledge includes the names and sounds associated with letters. Children acquiring knowledge of the alphabet will

- Recognize that the letters of the alphabet are a special category of visual graphics that can be individually named
- Recognize that letters of the alphabet have distinct sounds associated with them
- Attend to the beginning letters and sounds in familiar words
- Identify letters and associate correct sounds with letters

**Alphabet Knowledge Accommodations for the Child with Disabilities** To help preschoolers with disabilities learn to recognize letters in the alphabet and, eventually, words as meaningful symbols, the following accommodations

## Preparing for Kindergarten

are suggested. For children with developmental delays and intellectual disabilities, use small whiteboards to reinforce concepts of *word* and individual letters throughout the day. Encourage play with chalk, markers, whiteboard, paper, markers, or other writing media to practice letters. Avoid excessive rote repetition of alphabet; emphasize meaningful words like peers' or family names and favorite restaurant names or activities within the classroom (e.g., names of play areas).

For the child who is blind, spell the child's name frequently, out loud. Use hand-over-hand or hand-under-hand strategies to help him read the braille letters in his or her name; compare his or her name to another child's name printed in braille, focusing on the first letter of both names. Use key words when speaking to the child: *letter, alphabet, name, A, B*, and so on. Help the child explore patterns of braille dots.

For the child with high-functioning autism, print words on a small whiteboard (if he or she is reading) to foreshadow transitions (e.g., "Time to go outside," "Time to eat," etc.). For children not yet reading, use pictures from a daily picture schedule with words to predict "what comes next."

**Early Writing (Name Writing, Invented Spelling)** When are young children "ready" to learn to write? Signs of readiness and emerging early writing skills are noted in the following observations of young children:

- Do children complete puzzles, hold crayons, color within the lines, print their first and last name?
- Do they draw recognizable pictures and use language to describe their illustrations?
- Are they able to print their names and other high-frequency words (e.g., Dolch words) by the end of preschool (fine motor/cognitive skills)?
- Can they recognize their printed name, the names of peers, and at least 20 sight words (commonly used words such as *I, like, the, see, you*, and color words, etc.)?

Children typically draw before they write. Baghban (2007) summarized children's drawing and writing development through age 7. Scribbles are the earliest prewriting skill that lets a child know that he or she can leave a mark on a surface. Typical toddlers react with delight when given tools that can make marks on paper or other surfaces. The cognitive awareness of producing something concrete based on one's actions is apparent when the young child scribbles, then stops to examine his or her work, then continues adding more marks. Children may scribble and label their drawing or may ask adults to tell them what they drew. When children begin to label their own drawings, they indicate a cognitive shift to abstract, representational actions: "I made a car." Typically, children draw people and other objects that are meaningful to them. By about 4 years of age, children are beginning to differentiate between drawings and writing. Drawings are helpful scaffolds as children begin to tell stories or write about their drawings. Children may confuse drawing with writing up to about age 7. For the child with special needs and possible intellectual delays, it is helpful to know the approximate stages of drawing in order to plan appropriate and meaningful goals:

- Children under 3 years old make random scribbles and may not differentiate what surfaces are appropriate for marking on. They begin to show an understanding that marks on paper and other surfaces carry meaning.
- Children ages 3–4 show more controlled scribbling, begin labeling their work or asking for others to tell them what they wrote, and start producing specific letters or objects if asked to do so.
- Children ages 4–6 print their names and show understanding of the alphabet, make different types of controlled marks in multiple directions to complete forms, and begin including letters in lines.
- Children ages 4–7 begin attaching sounds to letters and sounding out words to write.

Children demonstrate writing readiness as they engage in

- Drawing lines, circles, crosses, and simple faces
- Drawing stick figures
- Pretending to write
- Writing their own name
- Copying letters
- Writing familiar names (e.g., “Mom”)
- Using invented spelling

***Writing Accommodations for Children with Disabilities*** Teachers should provide opportunities such as easy, frequent access to art/graphic media and instruments (e.g., paints, brushes, markers, crayons) for all children and especially children with special needs on a daily basis at school. They can help children learn to intentionally use various media to make marks on surfaces and notice the effects (colors, texture, smell, etc.). Adults can draw objects for children to help them gain an understanding that real things can be represented with lines and shapes. Inviting children’s requests (“What shall I draw?”) and helping children draw faces, balls, Xs, and then encouraging them to label the drawings are all opportunities for developing early writing and communication skills.

For some children with disabilities, learning how to draw recognizable pictures may not evolve without guided practice from a teacher. A child may need to learn how to represent people by first being taught how to draw a circle then being verbally prompted to add eyes, nose, and mouth. As the child learns to represent faces, more body parts can be encouraged: hair, ears, tummy, arms, legs, hands, and fingers.

Children with motor disabilities will benefit from occupational or physical therapist consultation and possibly the use of equipment to help them hold writing instruments (e.g., using VELCRO® straps, hand grips, substituting easier drawing materials like markers instead of crayons that need more pressure to make marks). They may also need access to comfortable writing surfaces (e.g., slant boards).



## Preparing for Kindergarten

Asking children to identify their work by making marks or letters for their names, attempting to draw pictures in journals, or adding their writing to group literacy activities with typical peers reinforces the importance of writing to communicate something about themselves, be it via ownership (“this is *my* work”) or by communicating the beginning of a story (“my papa”). Over time, and when expected to on a regular daily basis, children with special needs will learn the importance and skill of writing.

### LISTENING AND SPEAKING

Listening and speaking skills are measured by a child’s ability to understand and follow directions, speak in complete sentences, and be able to use the English language to discuss information and experiences. Teaching preschoolers to use language to communicate their experiences with others, in addition to getting basic wants and needs met, includes the following:

- Language use and conventions: children use language to converse with others and to communicate wants, needs, and thoughts
- Learning and using a growing vocabulary: children learn to communicate, read, and understand what they are reading in subsequent years
- Understanding grammar: children comprehend what they hear in stories and put their thoughts and responses into sentences to begin to clearly express those thoughts (Ong, 2010)

English language learners simultaneously learning vocabulary and grammar in two languages may engage in a period of quiet observation in the classroom as the non-English speaking child observes and listens before beginning to use some English words mixed in with his or her first language before progressing to using grammatical morphemes and demonstrating a mastery of syntactic rules (Cook, Klein, & Chen, 2011). Vocabulary development will continue as the child uses and hears more language.

As teachers plan and prepare for daily lessons, awareness of speaking clearly, modeling accepted language styles and conventions, and teaching vocabulary can be embedded throughout all activities and across routines. Building both functional vocabulary and using specific vocabulary to teach children reading skills are extremely important. The prekindergartener needs to hear and understand literacy-related vocabulary including the names of letters, sounds that letters make, intentional use of words like *sentence*, *words*, *period*, *uppercase*, *lowercase*, *sounds*, and so on. Children entering kindergarten will be more prepared to engage in language arts curricula when they are familiar with this type of vocabulary.

The following vignette illustrates how a teacher might deliver an introductory lesson about the color blue. He models clear, concise language in sentences and talks about what he is writing. He employs functional and specific vocabulary and actions to highlight key words, which help both the typically developing preschoolers and the child with autism.