

**The International Reading Association
Preschool Literacy Collection**

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*Building a Foundation for Preschool Literacy:
Effective Instruction for Children's Reading
and Writing Development*

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The preschool years, ages 3 and 4, are extremely important for children's social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and language and literacy development. Children's development can be affected by high-quality preschool experiences that can improve later academic and social competence (Barnett, 1995; Morrow, 2004; Neuman & Dickinson, 2001). Preschools make a difference in children's lives; therefore, every 3- and 4-year-old child should have access to free, high-quality, public preschools. High-quality preschools embrace appropriate early literacy experiences delivered by well-prepared, knowledgeable, caring preschool teachers. High-quality preschools can ensure that all children are prepared for school and are developing literacy skills.



The Importance of Preschool

High-quality preschool experiences that successfully foster early language and literacy skills are laying a critical foundation for children's successful future. Children who attend high-quality preschools are less likely to be retained in the primary grades, have higher graduation rates from high school, and have fewer behavior problems (Barnett, 1995; Campbell & Raney, 1995; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Huttenlocher, Vasilyeva, Cymerman, & Levine, 2002; Peisner-Feinberg & Burchinal, 1997). Preschool education is beneficial to all children across all economic backgrounds, although children whose parents have the least formal education and lowest incomes appear to benefit most (Barnett, 1995, 2001; Fuerst & Fuerst, 1993; Schweinhart, Barnes, Weikart, Barnett, & Epstein, 1993). Researchers (Cairney, 2002; Makin, 2003) indicate that early success with literacy learning depends on the degree of congruence between home and school reading and

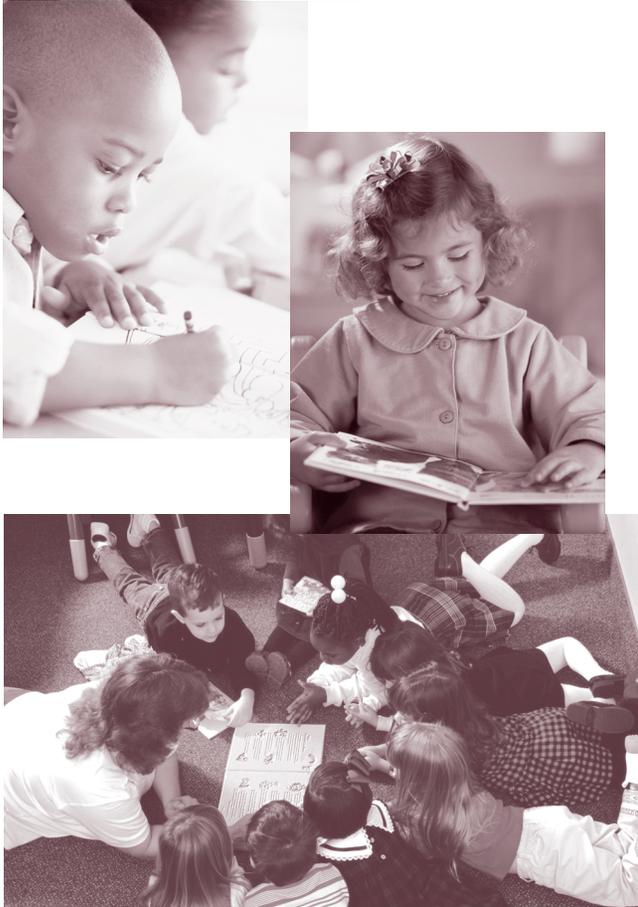
writing activities. And differential early literacy development by gender is affected positively when the school literacy curriculum is aligned with children's reading and writing interests and out-of-school experiences (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997).

Language and Literacy-Based Instruction in Quality Preschools

The National Early Literacy Panel (Strickland & Shanahan, 2004) identified, on the basis of an extensive review of research, those characteristics of children from birth through age 5 that are most closely linked to later achievement in literacy: oral language development, phonological/phonemic awareness, alphabetic knowledge, print knowledge, and invented spelling. Researchers have found that experiences with storybook reading, discussions about books, listening comprehension, and writing are crucial in early literacy development (Bus, Van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Wells, 1985).



Based on the best research evidence, access to appropriate, high-quality early language and literacy experiences will enhance young children's development. The preschool curriculum, therefore, should emphasize a wide range of language and literacy experiences including, but not limited to, story reading, dramatic play, storytelling, and retelling. There are many resources describing how this can be achieved, including the joint position statement of the International Reading Association (IRA) and National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (1998), *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children*, and IRA's Preschool Literacy Collection (Morrow, 2004). These resources describe the rich oral language and early literacy experiences that should be a central part of the preschool curriculum.



Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

Teachers in early childhood programs are better able to provide quality programs in language and literacy when they understand the continuum of reading and writing development (IRA & NAEYC, 1998) and its integration in the preschool curriculum. Teachers of young children should know about the individual needs of children, taking into consideration social, cultural, emotional, physical, cognitive, and language abilities. Teachers also should be sensitive to children from different language and cultural backgrounds.

- Are responsive to students' thinking and are interactive (Wilkinson & Townsend, 2000).
- Incorporate multiple literacy goals into single lessons (Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998).
- Contextualize language and literacy conventions and skills and demonstrate learning goals (Wray, Medwell, Fox, & Poulson, 2001).
- Provide coaching and repeated use of conventions with authentic texts (Taylor et al., 2000).

Preschool teachers' preparation should include strong attention to literacy development. To be on the cutting edge of language and literacy instruction, preschool teachers and directors need to engage in continual professional development (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000; Showers & Joyce, 1996; Shulman, 1998; Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1990; Taylor et al., 2000).

Recommendations

Effective preschool educators

- Recognize the importance of language and literacy experiences in preschool to subsequent school achievement.
- Integrate early literacy experiences into the preschool curriculum.
- Connect physical, emotional, and social goals in the language and literacy curriculum when appropriate.
- Develop appropriate language and literacy standards for preschool.
- Create a language and literacy program that is culturally competent.
- Participate in professional development opportunities to remain up-to-date about evidence-based practice.

Effective early childhood and elementary educators

- Build relationships with preschool, primary, and elementary educators to learn more about language and literacy at the different grade levels.

Effective teacher educators

- Create standards for strong undergraduate and graduate preparation of preschool teachers, emphasizing language and literacy development.
- Encourage interactions between university, college, and community college faculty to discuss strong preparation programs for preschool teachers.
- Develop professional partnerships with preschool personnel.

Effective parents

- Participate in home and school activities that deal with their child's literacy development.
- Are alert to routine activities that can help their children with language and literacy development.

Effective policymakers and community leaders

- Build support for quality preschool programs that provide standards for integrating language and literacy experiences.
- Provide resources to establish quality public preschool.
- Require excellent teacher preparation, which includes an emphasis on language and literacy.
- Identify and provide support for promising preschool programs that can be used as models for others.
- Fund research to enlist teachers and other educators as researchers who will develop additional best-practice programs to address the unique needs of the populations in their schools.



Teachers who enhance the early literacy of children from diverse cultural and language groups use culturally appropriate instruction that is congruent with the children's home and community language and literacies (Heath, 1983; Hohepa & McNaughton, 2002; McNaughton, 2001).

Based on research on the preparation of exemplary teachers in the early childhood years, preschool teachers do best when they have college degrees and early childhood teaching certifications (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). Effective preschool teachers

- Are intentional and draw children's attention to print and print conventions (Makin, 2003).

- Build a continuum of reading and writing development from preschool through the elementary grades to ensure continuity and ongoing attention.
- Participate in professional development opportunities to remain up-to-date about early literacy evidence-based practice.

Effective public school boards

- Provide access to quality preschools for 3- and 4-year-olds.
- Ensure that the preschool curriculum includes an emphasis on language and literacy experiences.
- Ensure that preschool educators receive appropriate preparation, certification, and continual professional development concerning literacy instruction.



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