

3 Ways to Begin to Develop Preschoolers' Literacy Skills

Developmentally appropriate activities focused on foundational reading skills can help young children have fun while they learn.

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There's a great deal of chatter among educators about the need to improve literacy outcomes for children. As we look to revamp literacy in the early grades, it's important to consider the preschool years as part of the conversation. The process of building foundational literacy skills begins before kindergarten. Kindergartners have a résumé made up of all the experiences they had from ages 0 to 5, and that résumé will dictate whether or not reading will be a challenge for them.

How do we build foundational literacy skills in preschool? We turn to the research. Cognitive neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene's research supports [integrating authentic language and literacy skills](#) in children's everyday experiences before kindergarten. Children learn many important skills in preschool that will build literacy skills, but none as critical as the following three: print awareness, phonological awareness, and phonics. In this article, I'll share activities implemented in my classroom when I was a teacher, as well as activities that my teachers have implemented over the years.

1. Support Print Awareness

The first step to focus on in preschool literacy is the understanding of how written language works. Print awareness enables us to recognize letters, words, and sentences in our environment. It also involves the concept that print tells us something, and it provides us knowledge about books and the directionality of reading. We build print awareness by exploring print in our environment (on signs, labels, and logos in everyday life) and in books. We read aloud daily and discuss the parts of the book, the illustrator, the author, and the title page.

Point out letters, words, sentences, and capital letters at the beginning of the sentences, and explain the punctuation marks at the end. Use your finger to track the flow of the words and how your finger moves when you get to the last word and drop down to the next line to read. Show children all the places we see print and the various reasons we use print, such as in maps, menus, directions, store circulars, mail, magazines, calendars, grocery lists, and different types of books.

2. Build Phonological Awareness

The second important part of literacy to consider for preschool students is phonological awareness (PA). This is the ability to recognize and manipulate the sounds in spoken words. Activities to support PA can include games related to sound manipulation, as well as listening to, rhyming, singing,

and [reciting nursery rhymes](#). The focus is to build auditory processing skills, because PA is about sounds.

To build listening skills, have children close their eyes while you make various sounds in the room (e.g., ringing a bell, walking, water running, animal sounds, vehicles, or tools). Create games where children have to match the sounds they hear. With my students, I've made two sets of sound shakers out of small water bottles. I put various objects in each, like pennies, beans, rice, soil, water, sand, and cotton, inside of them. You can mix the bottles up and let your students find the pairs.

Identifying rhyming words is a key part of PA. You can explain to your preschool students that rhyming words have the same sound at the end. To help students build this skill, I've read them nursery rhymes and asked them to put their thumbs up or make a movement (like jump, clap, stomp, tap, etc.) when they hear the rhyming words. Pause before you get to the rhyming word, and ask the children to say it. Or, have your students provide a new rhyming word (a real or nonsense word).

You could also try playing I Spy. You might say, "I spy something that rhymes with 'pair,'" and a student may say "Chair." You could play Bingo using rhyming words and include the picture of the object with the word under it (e.g., sled-bed, truck-duck, wall-ball, wig-pig).

You can also build alliteration skills by helping children develop an ear for hearing words that have the same letter or sound at the beginning in pairs of words that are close together. For example, say word pairs and have children jump, hop, or tap when they hear an alliterative pair (e.g., "silly socks," "flip flop," or "crazy cow"). Recite silly tongue twisters with children like "Kitty caught the kitten in the kitchen" or "Five frantic frogs fled from fifty fierce fishes." Substitute new beginning sounds in familiar alliterative phrases. For example, ask children to say, "Wee Willie Winkie ran through the town" with the "m" instead of the "w" sound: "Mee Millie Minkie ran through the town."

3. Encourage Phonics

At the preschool level, phonics is simply about helping children recognize sound-symbol relationships by matching the letter names (graphemes) to corresponding letter sounds (phonemes). My teachers and I engage children in games where they match letters either upper to upper, lower to lower, or uppercase to lowercase. Make letter cutouts using different types of materials, like sandpaper, felt, or construction paper, and let children explore the letters as you point out the different types of lines that form the letters (i.e., straight, horizontal, vertical, diagonal, curved).

Games where children identify letter names and corresponding sounds can also be fun. Use old keyboards and call out letters so that children can find and press them on the keyboard and then make the corresponding sound. You could also collect water bottle caps or use index cards and write one letter on each top from A to Z (upper- and lowercase). Use the materials to play games with children, like putting the letters in order, asking what letter comes before or after a specific letter. For even more personal engagement, you can allow children to spell their names and match the upper- and lowercase letters.

A final game to try is "pass the letter." Give each child a sheet of construction paper that has one letter on it. Encourage children to keep passing the letters around until the teacher says to stop. Ask the children to find the friend who has the letter that comes before or after the letter they have in hand and

make the corresponding sound of the letter. As children become familiar with letters and sounds, they can begin creating word families. Keep the base of the family together and just change the initial letter, for example using “_at” so that children can create “mat,” “sat,” or “cat.” Just be sure that they name the letter and make the sound to create the new word.

These types of games are fun, interactive, developmentally appropriate, and hands-on. They require us to be intentional about [building foundational preschool literacy skills](#) from the bottom up.