

Frequently Asked Pre-Kindergarten Literacy Questions



Pre-Kindergarten literacy coaches collaborate with teachers to enhance their early literacy practices in the classrooms. Teachers often pose questions about proposed changes during coaching sessions. These resources and responses are offered as support in discussions with individual teachers. These can also be used one at a time in a “Literacy Tip of the Week” format for a listserv of pre-kindergarten teachers. It is NOT recommended for use in total as a handout.

What does it mean to be *intentional* about literacy in my classroom?

Intentional teachers use their knowledge of child development and literacy learning to supply materials, provide well-timed information, guide discussions, make thoughtful comments, ask meaningful questions, and pose calibrated challenges that advance children's learning. Intentional teachers apply best practices...in a balanced offering of child-guided and adult-guided experiences.

- Epstein, A. 2007. *The Intentional Teacher*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

To plan effectively, teachers need to be familiar with the early learning standards in language and literacy adopted by professional organizations...

These objectives include:

- Oral language comprehension
- Vocabulary
- Alphabet Knowledge
- Phonological Awareness
- Print knowledge

- Roskos, K, Tabors, P. & Lenhart, L. 2004.
Oral Language and Early Literacy in Preschool. Newark, DE: IRA.

What this can mean in my classroom: I should plan purposefully with literacy goals in mind for things like: which poems, finger plays or songs we will sing and have them ready for the day; which literacy transitions will be used; which children I will target for conversation during lunch; which books will be read and practice how to best read aloud for comprehension; plan for use of new vocabulary naturally and intentionally.

I have always prided myself in having a developmentally appropriate classroom. I am confused about whether these literacy strategies are developmentally appropriate. I feel I am being too academic.

NAEYC has been the leader in defining developmentally appropriate practice. Learning to Read and Write, the 1998 NAEYC position paper in partnership with the International Reading Association (IRA), guides us in answering that question.

*Neuman, S., Copple, C. & Bredekamp, S. 1998
Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children,
Washington, DC: NAEYC.*

“This research-based statement notes that for children to learn to become skilled readers, they need to develop a rich language and conceptual knowledge base, a broad and deep vocabulary, and verbal reasoning abilities to understand messages conveyed through print. At the same time, it recognizes that children must also develop code-related skills: an understanding that spoken words are composed of smaller elements of speech (phonological awareness), the idea that letters represent sounds (the alphabetic system), and the knowledge that there are systematic correspondences between sound and spellings.”

Neuman, S. & Roskos, K. 2005. Young Children. July 2005. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

What this can mean in my classroom: I can use intentional literacy strategies and still be developmentally appropriate. Preserving child-initiated play, while embedding and facilitating playful literacy learning is compatible. The learning of literacy foundation skills should take place through meaningful experiences and content-rich instruction.

I think worksheets give me a good way to know what the children know and what they need to learn!

Research suggests that preschool-age children learn more and are more motivated when they are in emotionally supportive, “child-centered” classrooms, as compared with classrooms that emphasize drills, worksheets, seatwork, and “basic skills.

*Stipek, D.J., R. Feiler, P. Byler, R. Ryan, S. Milburn, & J.M. Salmon, 1998.
“Good Beginnings: what difference does the program make in preparing young children for school?”
Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology 19:41-66.*



In many preschool programs and kindergartens, young children are engaged in filling out worksheets, reading from flash cards or reciting numbers in rote fashion. The fact that young children can do those things... is not sufficient justification for requiring them to do so. Young children usually willingly do most things adults ask of them. But their willingness is not a reliable indicator of the value of an activity. The developmental question is not what can children do? Rather it is what should children do that best serves their learning and development in the long run?

What Should Young Children Be Learning? Katz, Lilian G.

What this can mean in my classroom: *I can toss the worksheets in the recycle bin and begin interacting with the children in centers to create meaningful play that teaches concepts. I can observe and record what I see the children learning to inform my planning.*

I've always been told that the alphabet does not have a place in a pre-kindergarten class. Why the change?

This question has become a DAP urban myth...To clear up such misunderstandings, which were making many early childhood teachers feel they should avoid literacy teaching, NAEYC developed a joint position paper with the International Reading Association...based on decades of research...The statement specifically addresses the question of the alphabet's place in a developmentally appropriate classroom. It states that letters should be where children can see them, touch them, and manipulate them in their work and play. Because learning the alphabet is such a strong predictor of reading, DAP classrooms will certainly have an alphabet on the wall at eye level.

*Copple, C & Bredekamp, S. 2006.
Basics of Developmentally Appropriate Practice.*

What this can mean in my classroom: *It is how I teach the alphabet that is important. It will be beneficial to the children if I post, at their eye level, a simple alphabet that clearly shows the children the correct alphabet. I can include alphabet puzzles, sponge alphabets for the water table or art, and magnetic letters for play. Children can be encouraged to learn their ABC's by learning the letters in their own names.*

I feel that I have planned well when I introduce the alphabet with a focus on one letter each week. Why are you asking me to consider a change in approach?

Focus on letters and words as part of meaningful activities. The alphabet is a system of symbols. Taken alone, each letter is of limited value. Teaching the alphabet through 'letter of the week' activities confuses some children about

the purpose of letters in relation to written words. Such contrived activities are not the best use of classroom time.

*Heroman, C. and Jones, C. (2004)
Literacy: The Creative Curriculum Approach. Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies, Inc.*

Most children learn the letters of their names before they learn any others. Simply training children to memorize letters without providing learning in a larger literacy context has proven unsuccessful as a predictor of beginning reading success.

*Strickland, D.S., Schickedanz, J.A. (2004).
Learning About Print in Preschool.*

What this can mean in my classroom: I can use a more meaningful context to introduce the alphabet. I can count the number of letters in the first names of the students in my room and see that they will learn a number of letters. I need to look and see how many places children can see or use their names. I can add things like, a Rolodex in the writing center, turn taking lists at centers, helper charts, names for graphs, and sign in sheets to assure children are using names in an intentional, meaningful way.

What is the difference between phonological awareness and phonics? What should I teach in preschool?

Phonological awareness is the ability to hear and work with the sounds of spoken language. Some words rhyme. Sentences are made up of separate words. Words have parts called syllables.

Phonemic awareness is an understanding that spoken words are made up of separate, small sounds. The word *big* has three phonemes, /b/, /i/, and /g/.

Phonics is a letter-sound association. Research shows that how easily children learn to read can depend on how much phonological and phonemic awareness they have.”

*A Child Becomes a Reader: Proven Ideas from Research for Parents.
National Institute for Literacy (2002).*

What this can mean in my classroom: I should create a playful environment in which children have fun playing with words and word sounds. I can label what I am doing (like rhyming) so children catch the intentionality. Ex. “That was fun! – fun, bun, sun, lun, mun! I like to rhyme!”

The administrators at my school are concerned that my classroom is noisy. How can I help them see children's talking as positive?

Children will begin to understand and use a growing vocabulary; comprehend and use language for multiple social and cognitive purposes; and communicate messages with expression, tone and inflection appropriate to the situation.

Foundations: Early Learning Standards for NC Preschoolers and Strategies for Guiding their Success, widely held expectations for receptive and expressive language on pp.36-37.

Children who do not hear a lot of talk and who are not encouraged to talk themselves often have problems learning to read.

A Child Becomes a Reader: Proven Ideas from Research for Parents

What this can mean in my classroom: *I can share this information with my administrator. I can encourage children to talk to each other and talk to the adults in the room. As in any caring community, we will all learn to use appropriate tone and volume, but encourage conversations so that children can continue to develop sentence structures, order and assimilate thoughts, and increase vocabulary.*

Why should I write what the children say and display this dictation in my class? The children can't read!

When children see adult's model writing, they see firsthand where to start writing on a page, how print is ordered from left to right, and how to return to the left side of the page after reading a line of writing. They listen to the teacher talk about using an uppercase (capital) letter to begin a sentence or a name and that a period tells the reader to stop.

Heroman, C. and Jones, C. (2004) Literacy: The Creative Curriculum Approach. Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies, Inc.

Children learn about print from a variety of sources, and, in the process, they come to realize that although print differs from speech, it carries messages just like speech.

Morrow, L.M. & Smith, J.K. 1990. Reading Research Quarterly.

What this can mean in my classroom: *I understand that the reason I do dictation is to help connect children's understanding of the relationship between the spoken and written word. When I do dictation, I am modeling concepts of print (e.g. left to right, top to bottom, capital and lowercase letters). The reason I display the dictation is to remind children of the dictation experience and to remind them that words are meaningful and that words can be written down.*

I've opened a writing center and my children are still not writing!

Preschool children like to write, will write a lot, and will learn a lot about writing, but only if there is an environment that supports this type of activity.

Schickedanz, J. A. & Casbergue, R. M. 2004. Writing in Preschool, Newark, DE: IRA.

In the writing center, teachers can also provide models of different types of writing including invitations, greeting cards, post cards, letters, and thank you notes for the children to use as a source for writing.

Vukelich, C. & Christie, J. Building a Foundation for Preschool Literacy.

What this can mean in my classroom: I can check to see if I have a variety of interesting items in the writing center: color papers, different sizes of paper, greeting cards, envelopes; fun writing instruments; big pens, vibrating pencils, pens with fake feathers, golf course short pencils, markers, and colored pencils. I can introduce new materials at morning meeting. I can go there to facilitate play and model writing in a meaningful way such as making a "to do" list.

Why should I put up a turn taking list when all the children can do is scribble their name?

The development of children's writing is from ages 2 ½ to about 5 evolves from random marking...to deliberate marking and letter formation...Progress is variable and writing attempts may contain scribbles, mock letters, and actual letters. All of these are meaningful to this child and represent their process of experimentation and growth.

Schickedanz, J. A. & Casbergue, R. M. 2004. Writing in Preschool, Newark, DE: IRA.

What this can mean in my classroom: I can respect scribbling as a developmental stage of writing and continue to provide writing opportunities for children. I need to pay attention to who is writing so I can make the turn taking list meaningful by calling on the child whose name is there when a place comes open at that activity.

My children aren't interested in books or other literacy activities!"

When adults observe and interact with children and provide stimulating opportunities for language and literacy learning, children begin to experience literacy as a source of enjoyment. They are motivated to engage in language and literacy experiences.

Heroman, C. and Jones, C. (2004)

Literacy: The Creative Curriculum Approach. Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies, Inc.

What this can mean in my classroom: I should show excitement and enjoyment about literacy activities as I engage with children so they will catch the fun! The facilitative teacher scaffolds learning, becomes a conversation partner encouraging extended discourse, and models writing and other literacy activities. I should practice read alouds so that this time is engaging.

What is this I'm hearing about nonfiction books for preschoolers?

Reading nonfiction for reference provides another tool for developing comprehension and world knowledge."

Duke, N. 2007. "Using Nonfiction Reference Materials." Young Children. 62 (30:12-16).

A 50/50 balance of fiction and informational text is recommended in classrooms.

Kletzien, S. & and Dreher, M. 2004. Informational Texts in K-3 Classrooms. Newark, DE: IRA.

What this can mean in my classroom: *I should enrich my classroom with fiction and nonfiction books. I should be aware of the children who are more interested in nonfiction books and support this interest. For example, I should put books about insects or trucks or other informational books as resources in discovery and blocks. I can look for magazines like Your Big Backyard to help children know that books are a source of information.*

How can I help the ELL (English Language Learners) gain English?

"English language learners have to distinguish phonemes in English that may not be a part of their native languages. This may mean a child has difficulty hearing and/or pronouncing the sounds of English. English language learners may need more repetition of the songs, rhymes, and fingerplays you use in your classroom. Repetition gives them opportunities to develop greater understanding of the meaning of words as well as the sounds."

Heroman, C. and Jones, C. 2004.

Literacy: The Creative Curriculum Approach. Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies, Inc.

What this can mean in my classroom: *I should do the same songs and fingerplays over and over rather than introducing too many different ones so that the ELL children can gain more understanding. I should repeatedly read favorite stories for further understanding and encourage retelling of stories.*

My ELL children are so quiet. How can I draw them out?

Children go through a non-verbal stage. Follow their lead. Here are stages for second language development:

1. Home language use
2. Non-verbal: This is a period when children actively begin trying to "crack the code" of the second language
3. New language usage: Telegraphic – use of a few content words without function words or morphological markers and Formulaic –

- use of unanalyzed chunks of words or routine phrases that are repetition of what the child hears
4. Productive language use

*Roskos, K, Tabors, P. & Lenhart, L. 2004.
Oral Language and Early Literacy in Preschool. Newark, DE: IRA*

Songs and rhyming as a group make it easier for ELL children to participate and 'go public.'

*Roskos, K, Tabors, P. & Lenhart, L. 2004.
Oral Language and Early Literacy in Preschool. Newark, DE: IRA.*

What this can mean in my classroom: *I should be aware of the stages of new language acquisition. Even when ELL children are appearing to be non-verbal, they are listening and learning. I should continue to talk with them and provide a variety of group singing and finger plays daily. They will begin using new words when they are ready.*

My families want homework!

Whereas play protects children's emotional development, a loss of free time in combination with a hurried lifestyle can be a source of stress, anxiety and may even contribute to depression for many children. The most valuable and useful character traits that will prepare children for success come not from extracurricular or academic commitments, but from a firm grounding in parental love, role modeling and guidance. The benefits of "true toys", such as blocks and dolls, in which children use their imagination fully, over passive toys that require limited imagination.

*The Importance of Playing Promoting Healthy Child Development
and Maintaining Strong Parent Bonds,
American Academy of Pediatrics. www.aap.org 2006.*

Strategies for Partnering with Parents:

- Encourage parents to talk with their children
- Encourage families to play with words
- Help parents help their children to learn about books and print
- Encourage parents to talk with their children while reading a story
- Encourage parents to teach children about letters and words
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*Vukelich, C. & Christie, J. 2004.
Building a Foundation for Preschool Literacy. Newark, DE: IRA.*

What this can mean in my classroom: *I can encourage families to read to their children. I can assure families that their reading aloud of books as a source of enjoyment is a powerful motivator for their children. I can encourage families to play and talk with their children as their homework because these strategies build the skills necessary for school success. I can use Foundations: Early Learning Standards for NC Preschoolers and Strategies for Guiding their Success and share some of the specific "Strategies for Families" ideas in the area of literacy.*

My families are expecting their children to learn to read while they are in my preschool class!

Literacy development begins early in life, before children enter preschool and certainly before they can conventionally read and write. For example, young preschoolers who pretend to read favorite storybooks or use scribble writing to write a telephone message in their play are engaging in literate activities that are a part of a continuum of literacy development. These emergent reading and writing activities are as valid as more conventional reading and activities that are also a part of the literacy continuum.

*McGee, L.M. & Richgels, D. J. 2003.
Designing Early Literacy Programs. New York, NY: Guilford Press.*

What this can mean in my classroom: *I can help families see that reading is a continuum. Children are learning the foundations of reading skills that will assure success in conventional reading when the early strategies have been mastered.*