Foundations in Emergent Literacy Instruction

Snapshot Series

Very young children begin to develop language and literacy skills long before they enter formal school. They learn through interactions, conversations, experiences, and relationships with caring adults in their lives. Preschool teachers help children to continue to learn by teaching emergent literacy skills, using effective practices, and supporting all domains of learning and development.

This snapshot series focuses on four key emergent literacy building blocks and highlights evidence-based instructional strategies that support children's development in these areas. To learn more about each building block, click on the picture.

Print Knowledge   **Phonological Awareness**

Vocabulary   **Oral Language**

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This snapshot series is part of a suite of materials designed to support early education leaders and providers to build understanding and implement evidence-based instruction in early language and literacy in preschool settings called, Professional Learning Community: Emergent Literacy. Explore these materials here.

Print Knowledge

The goal of emergent literacy instruction is to teach the building blocks that will, in later grades, provide children the foundation needed to become good readers. Print knowledge is one of the building blocks.

What is Print Knowledge?

Print knowledge includes:

- letter names, ability to recognize and say the names of letters;
- letter sounds, knowing the sound a letter represents; and,
- concepts of print, understanding how print works.

Why is Print Knowledge Important at the Preschool Level?

- Print knowledge is a precursor to skilled reading. Preschool children's print knowledge is linked to later achievement in decoding, spelling, and reading comprehension .

- Print knowledge sets the stage for children to understand the alphabetic principle. The alphabetic principle is connecting written letters with their sounds to read and write.

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What are Effective Instructional Practices for Teaching Print Knowledge at the Preschool Level?

Plan to teach all 26 letter names and sounds. Preschool children may not learn them all, but frequent exposure is important. Start with high-frequency letters (such as letters in their names, common signs), focus on a few new letters per week, and spiral back to previously taught letters regularly to build letter knowledge. Teach concepts of print such as parts of a book, reading left to right, different print symbols, and that words (not pictures) convey meaning of written words.

- Be **systematic** by having a plan for what to teach and by building on prior learning; be **explicit** by making learning goals obvious, **scaffold** instruction by providing supports, and **differentiate** by matching instruction with each child's needs.

- Keep explicit instruction short, do it often, connect to knowledge-building themes, and make it playful.

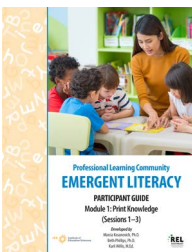Integrate print knowledge instruction throughout the day using these effective practices:

- **Small-Group Explicit Instruction.** In small groups, teach letter names and letter sounds using an instructional routine such as I Do (teacher explains and models the skill or concept) We Do (teacher provides guided practice with scaffolding) You Do (children engage in independent practice and review).

- **Reinforce Learning Through Practice and Play.** Plan whole- or small-group activities to reinforce concepts taught during explicit instruction and prior learning. Use the classroom as an instructional tool by incorporating letter shapes, letter manipulatives, and writing materials into learning centers; plan letter-learning games; use daily routines to reinforce concepts; and, take advantage of teachable moments.

- **Use Print Referencing During Read-Alouds.** Focus children's attention on print by explicitly commenting on, asking questions about, pointing to, and tracking text that is being read aloud.

Kosanovich, M., Phillips, B., & Willis, K. (2020). *Professional Learning Community: Emergent Literacy: Participant Guide – Module 1: Print Knowledge (Sessions 1-3)* (REL 2020-021). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Education Laboratory Southeast. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs.

Phonological Awareness

The goal of emergent literacy instruction is to teach the building blocks that will, in later grades, provide children the foundation needed to become good readers. Phonological awareness is one of the building blocks.

What is Phonological Awareness (PA)?

The understanding that spoken language can be broken down into parts and the ability to manipulate those parts at the word, syllable, onset-rime, and phoneme levels. **Onset** is the part of a word that comes before the vowel and **rime** is the vowel and letters that follow. For example, in *sun*, */s/* is the onset, and */un/* is the rime. **Phoneme** is the smallest unit of sound in spoken words. For example, *cat* has three phonemes */k/ /ă/ /t/*. PA is a heard or spoken skill and does not involve written words.

Why is Phonological Awareness Important at the Preschool Level?

- Difficulties with PA are at the heart of most children's reading challenges and does not come naturally to all children.

- Building children's capacity to hear and manipulate sounds in spoken language supports their ability to understand connections between sounds and letters and written words when they get older.

- Strong PA skills help children decode later when encountering unfamiliar words.

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Professional Learning Community
EMERGENT LITERACY
PARTICIPANT GUIDE
Module 2: Phonological Awareness (Sessions 4–6)

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What are Effective Instructional Practices for Teaching Phonological Awareness at the Preschool Level?

All children benefit from explicit PA instruction. Only exposing children to singing rhyming songs or clapping syllables with the whole class is not sufficient for all children to learn PA. Plan meaningful activities in which children manipulate sounds in spoken words at the appropriate level along the PA developmental continuum. The PA continuum includes **word**, **syllable**, **onset-rime**, and **phoneme**. Understand where individual children are along the continuum so you can focus instruction. Provide multiple, short opportunities for children to practice one specific skill at a time and be sure to review skills previously taught.
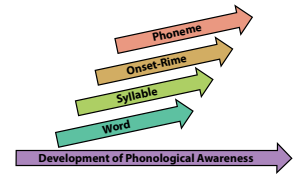
Phoneme
Onset-Rime
Syllable
Word
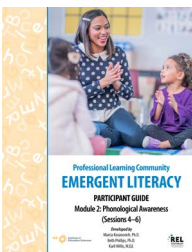Development of Phonological Awareness

- Be **systematic** by having a plan for what to teach and by building on prior learning; be **explicit** by making learning goals obvious, **scaffold** instruction by providing supports, and **differentiate** by matching instruction with each child's needs.

- Keep explicit instruction short, do it often, connect to knowledge-building themes, and make it playful.

Integrate PA instruction throughout the day using these effective practices:

- **Small-Group Explicit Instruction.** Form small, same-ability level groups to focus on specific skills. For example, at the word level, teach children how to delete parts from spoken compound words using the I Do, We Do, You Do routine. I Do (teacher models saying a familiar compound word then leaves the first part off. *Sidewalk*. Then teacher says *sidewalk* without saying *side*. *Walk*.) We Do (Children practice together with other words – *doghouse*, *cupcake*). You Do (children practice independently using two-part picture puzzle pieces – one piece has a picture of a *dog*; the other piece has a picture of a *house*).

I DO
WE DO
YOU DO

- **Provide additional opportunities to practice throughout the day.** For example, lead a matching game with pictures of compound word parts. Each child has a card with a picture of one half of the compound word and they have to find their match (*dog* and *house*, *cup* and *cake*, *side* and *walk*). Take advantage of pointing out examples during read-alouds ("oh, there's a word we were working on today. What is the first part of *cupcake*?")

Kosanovich, M., Phillips, B., & Willis, K. (2020). *Professional Learning Community: Emergent Literacy: Participant Guide – Module 2: Phonological Awareness (Sessions 4-6)* (REL 2020-021). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Education Laboratory Southeast. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs.

Vocabulary

The goal of emergent literacy instruction is to teach the building blocks that will, in later grades, provide children the foundation needed to become good readers. Vocabulary is one of the building blocks.

What is Vocabulary?

Vocabulary is knowing words and word meanings. It includes **expressive vocabulary** (words said or produced) and **receptive vocabulary** (words heard and understood).

Why is Vocabulary Important at the Preschool Level?

- The more words a child knows and understands, the better they can communicate. Language represents knowledge. Children must learn the meanings of many words to use language effectively.
- Vocabulary is important for later reading comprehension; for **decoding** (recognizing words in print) and **language comprehension** (ability to understand the words we read).
- Vocabulary knowledge leads to more vocabulary knowledge.

What are Effective Instructional Practices for Teaching Vocabulary at the Preschool Level?

Effective vocabulary instruction occurs in meaningful contexts with many opportunities for active engagement, rich conversations, and targeted direct instruction. Be intentional about which words to teach. Children are more likely to learn and remember words that are connected and taught within a meaningful topic or theme. Teach new words using a **network of words** (words that are related to each other or associated with a larger topic of interest). Within a network of words, include varied parts of speech, frequently encountered words, and base words and word families.
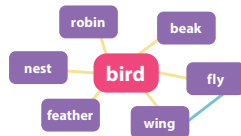
Integrate vocabulary instruction throughout the day using these effective practices:

- **Dialogic Reading (DR)**. Form small groups to enhance vocabulary and oral language skills through repeated, interactive book readings. During DR, use the book as a prop to teach new words, ask open-ended questions and expand child responses, and discuss narrative, concepts, and personal connections.

- **Explicit Instruction for Specific Words**. Intentionally design and deliver instruction for new words that builds on prior learning and moves from simple to complex. For example, create simple, **child-friendly definitions** (*Enormous* means really big); provide **opportunities for children to say the word** ("What is a word that means really big?" (*enormous*) "What does *enormous* mean?" (really big); and engage children in **active responses** ("I'm going to show you a picture. Put your thumb up if you think it is *enormous*. Put your thumb down if you don't think it is *enormous*."). Incorporate activities to reinforce and review previously learned words.
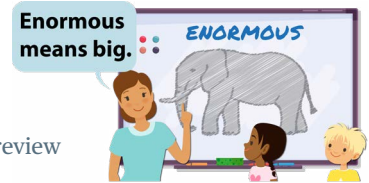
- **Play-based Interactions with Teacher Guidance**. Enhance the learning environment with specific props or activities that relate to your current theme or a meaningful topic and your network of words. Engage with children while allowing them to direct their own play. Ask questions that invite extended responses. Provide meaningful feedback to children's comments by asking more questions, using more sophisticated words, defining words, and making connections. Introduce new vocabulary words. Use wait time effectively after asking a child a question. This allows them to think about the words you said and the words they want to put together to express their ideas.

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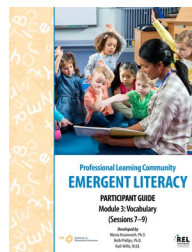
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Kosanovich, M., Phillips, B., & Willis, K. (2020). *Professional Learning Community: Emergent Literacy: Participant Guide - Module 3: Vocabulary (Sessions 7-9)* (REL 2020-021). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Education Laboratory Southeast. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs.

Foundations in Emergent Literacy Instruction

Oral Language

I'm making a cake.

The goal of emergent literacy instruction is to teach the building blocks that will, in later grades, provide children the foundation needed to become good readers. Oral language is one of the building blocks.

What is Oral Language?

Oral language is the system of words and word combinations used to communicate with others through speaking and listening. Oral language is the foundation on which all emergent literacy and later reading is built and supports children's math, science, social, and self-regulation skills.

What are Effective Instructional Practices for Teaching Oral Language at the Preschool Level?

Practice oral language daily!

Frequent, daily language interactions that follow children's interests are the best way to support children's oral language development. Prioritize instruction that encourages children to talk and that helps them practice syntax, conversation, pragmatics, and listening comprehension. **Syntax** refers to the rules used to put words together to make phrases and sentences. **Pragmatics** is how language is used in social situations. Provide **strategic scaffolds** during all language interactions, such as restate, recast, model using words to describe the child's action, ask open-ended questions, ask thought-provoking questions, and encourage children to think aloud.

Integrate oral language instruction throughout the day using these effective practices:

- **Play-based Interactions with Teacher Scaffolding**. For example, use a recast to scaffold the proper use of suffixes. On the playground, a child says, "I jumped highest than you!" The teacher says, "Wow! You jumped high*er* than me!"

- **Brief Language Interactions**. Embed short opportunities for children to practice using language features, such as prepositions, during daily routines. During transition time, a teacher asks, "Do we have snack *before* or *after* recess?" and children respond.

- **Multiturn Conversations**. Ask open-ended and thought-provoking questions, encourage **decontextualized language** (describing or explaining past or future events of things not visible at that moment), engage in active listening, and employ ample wait time.
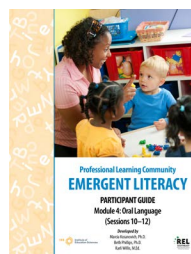
- **Model Language During Conversations**. Provide intentional responses during conversations using strategic scaffolds. For example, a child says, "The baby is crying." The teacher says, "Maybe the baby is crying because she is tired."

Multiturn Conversations
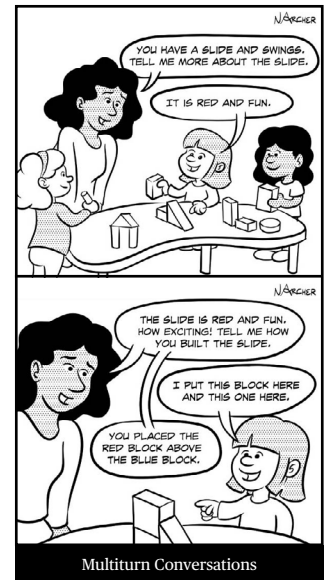
- **Peer-to-Peer Language Interactions**. Help children to share and learn from each other and to foster social skills.

- **Interactive Reading**. Use concrete and abstract comments and questions to facilitate discussion, provide multiple opportunities for children to talk, read familiar books to extend conversation, and increase child participation.

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