

and language by focusing on things that are meaningful to the children and their families. No single component of any curriculum will have more impact on a preschooler's development than language.

Preschool is also an exciting time for written language development and for promoting interest in reading. If the social and physical environments in preschool and the home support the development of reading and written language, children will want to hear stories from books and to use books to find out more about things of interest. They will also be inclined to create marks that approximate letters and to learn how to write their own names. They will enjoy playing with the sounds of language, as well. All of these experiences are foundations for the conventional reading and writing that come later.

Guiding Principles

► **Language and literacy work together**

Language and literacy support each other. Children with well-developed oral language are likely to succeed in reading comprehension in later grade levels than children with less well-developed oral language.¹⁵ Children with strong oral vocabularies are likely to make more progress in developing phonological awareness.¹⁶ In addition, language and literacy learning often occur together in the same context. For example, talking with a child about what happened the day before supports both language development and **narrative** skills.¹⁷ Helping children find their names on the helper chart and explaining how the helper chart system works support both literacy and language.

► **Children say or sign what they hear or see**

A rich language environment is key for preschool children's language learning as well as for their development as readers and writers. The more language children hear, the more their language grows.^{18, 19, 20} Children say, sign, or use touch screens to express what they hear or see. When teachers use conventional language, they provide a model from which children learn how to use language themselves. The same is true for reading and writing. The more adults read and write with children and show children how they use reading and writing in their own lives, the more children grow in their understanding of what it means to be a reader and writer. Adults also have many opportunities to answer children's questions about how print works.

► **Children learn everywhere**

Adults can act as detectives to find language and literacy opportunities everywhere and then use them as teachable moments. For example, when a child relates a personal experience and leaves out information critical for a listener's understanding, asking a question that prompts the child to provide this information helps develop narrative skills (e.g., "Where were you when the wind blew your hat off?").²¹ Caregiving situations can provide strong physical support for word meanings and help children learn new vocabulary (e.g., "Rub the *palms* of your hands together, like this, to work up a *lather*").²² Teachers may refer to the label on the soup can a child tips into the play pan in the house area to cook soup (e.g., "I see we're having tomato soup for lunch") to support print skills. Finding these everyday moments also



enriches children's appreciation for the many uses that language and literacy serve.

► **Children learn best from experiences that are interesting, useful, and fun**

The world and preschool are interesting and satisfying places for children when they offer experiences that engage and delight children and satisfy their desire to know.^{23, 24} When children learn that language can be fun (e.g., singing silly songs and reciting poems with surprising endings) and also gets things done, they will be motivated to use their language. When children hear the words in songs (e.g., "When You're Happy and You Know It") that indicate movements to make or when language learning is embedded into routines (e.g., "If you have a *pocket* in your *shirt* or *blouse*, please go to the sink to wash your hands"), they see a reason for attending to language and for using it. When they find out that books are full of interesting characters and information (e.g., an ant is an animal!), they will want to hear more books.

► **Celebrate and support the individual**

Children differ in temperament and also in their language and literacy experiences. The child who is timid, the child for whom English is not the home language, or the child who uses sign language or an alternative communication system may be reluctant to communicate. Some children hear more books read aloud than do other children, and some are encouraged to share their thoughts about the story while others are encouraged to just listen or to recite portions of the text.²⁵ Children's access to pen, pencil, and paper in the early years also varies. Knowing that individual children have different starting points, a teacher accepts and delights in each



child's path to language and literacy and expands each child's experiences. Children with disabilities or communication differences benefit from teachers who understand their differences in language and communication and make allowances for them in the daily routine.

► **Connect school and home**

Building connections with the child's family members gives parents an opportunity to get more involved in their children's learning. When parents are provided with certain materials and are helped to learn strategies supporting their children's language and literacy development, children's learning benefits.²⁶ Reaching out to families also gives teachers opportunities to learn about the strengths that each child brings to school and about important individual differences. For example, teachers should ask family members to provide information regarding a child who uses (or is learning to use) an alternative communication system. It is also important to consult with specialists. This knowledge helps teachers

to build on and extend the experiences that children have at home.

► **Create a culturally sensitive environment**

Around the world, children in some cultures are encouraged to speak up while children in other cultures are encouraged to remain silent. Teachers need to be respectful of home expectations for language at the same time that they support children to speak up at school.²⁷ In a preschool classroom that is too silent, children will not experience enough language to learn to use it or to gain knowledge and skills for literacy. Children must be surrounded by language to acquire the vocabulary and sentence structures they need to read and write and think.^{28, 29, 30, 31} This means that preschool teachers must talk and also encourage children to use language for negotiating with other children, asking for what they want, and expressing their emotions.

► **Encourage children to take a turn**

Children learn language and learn about reading and writing through social interaction, especially when there is a lot of “back and forth” in a conversation.³² Strike a balance between surrounding children with language and letting them talk too.³³



Research suggests that children “talk” very little in the preschool classroom,³⁴ even though doing so would promote their language development. Children should be asked open-ended questions that require more than one word to answer (e.g., “What are all the foods you like to eat for breakfast?” rather than “What did you eat this morning?”). Then teachers can follow up with additional questions, for example, asking about what the child’s family does in the morning. Questions should not test or quiz but serve as prompts that encourage children to generate language. Children will also learn as teachers model for them how to engage in back-and-forth exchange with other children. When teachers ask for children’s opinions and ideas, children’s confidence soars. Additionally, when teachers encourage children to make choices, for example, about which of two literacy activities they wish to engage in, children will be more invested in the activity.

► **Make thoughts more explicit to children by thinking out loud**

Teachers may share their thinking in a demonstration of how to write a letter to a child who has asked for help. They describe their actions (e.g., “To write the letter K, you start with a long vertical line like this, and then you draw a short diagonal line like this, and then another short diagonal line from here down to here.”). Teachers may also share their thoughts during routine tasks, such as cleaning out the clogged spout of a glue bottle (e.g., “I’m going to open up this paper clip and place it in the bottle’s spout. If I can get the dried piece out of the spout, the glue will come out again. See the hole? I’m going to stick the end of the paper clip right in there . . .”).



Hearing the teacher describe his or her actions increases children's language and literacy learning.^{35, 36} Learning can benefit from explicit thinking out loud in routine contexts, just as in planned instructional contexts.³⁷

► **Support curiosity and confidence**

Children should not be afraid to ask "Why?" and "How come?" Children ask questions in environments that are cognitively interesting and challenging. They are more confident and learn more in environments that are emotionally supportive.^{38, 39, 40} Asking questions, such as "I wonder what would happen if . . ." and using comments, such as "Tell me about. . . .," engage children in wondering and thinking and in sharing their thoughts. These prompts also let children know that adults think children's ideas are important.

► **Create literacy-rich environments**

Interesting materials, organized attractively to create specific areas in the indoor and outdoor learning environments, prompt children to talk, explore, build, draw, paint, move, inquire, and enact roles in pretend play. Literacy materials and props, embedded throughout the learning environment, make using language and engaging in reading and writing a routine part of each preschool day.

► **Observe children**

By observing children's engagement with language and literacy, teachers find ways to enter their world to support and extend their learning. These observations become a guide for intentional classroom practice. As teachers implement planned activities, their observations of children's responses provide vital information that helps teachers meet children's specific needs.

Environments and Materials

How the learning environment is arranged affects how children learn to talk, read, and write. An environment that fosters language development, two-way communication, and literacy skills provides rich curriculum content. The daily schedule accommodates a variety of groupings (e.g., large group, small group, and individual), and the learning materials fascinate children. Children learn more when adults model language and literacy as well as provide playful, purposeful instruction. Play spaces with literacy props (e.g., signs, lists) allow children to congregate and to make choices that foster rich language and literacy experiences.

► **The daily schedule for adult-child and child-child interactions**

Program leaders need to create opportunities within the day for adult-child and child-child interaction. Consistency in the daily schedule, routines, and locations of interest areas helps all children, especially those with cognitive or social behavior challenges or with visual disabilities, because it reduces uncertainty. The most beautiful room is only as good as the interaction that takes place inside it. Conversation with adults and with peers, exposure to print, and writing and drawing materials are key to fostering language and literacy.

► **Large-group space**

Sitting together for group songs, games, and discussions and facing a wall with attractive and uncluttered displays allow children a clear view of teachers and peers. They can attend