An Early Childhood Practitioner's Guide: Developmentally Appropriate Literacy Practices for Preschool-Age Children

SUMMARY

In her discussion of user-friendly and developmentally appropriate literacy strategies for the early childhood teacher, the author provides a short review of best practices in literacy for young children and a list of developmentally appropriate, research-based literacy instruction strategies for the preschool teacher.

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Teaching children

to become literate members of society is a daunting task, often relegated to the elementary school teacher. However, research on teaching children to become literate suggests that this process must begin well before kindergarten. Research suggests that children are primed for learning language and literacy *in utero*. Parents and early childhood teachers are significant contributors in the process of preparing children for the instruction they will receive beginning in kindergarten. We are all familiar with the statement "It takes a village to raise a child." Perhaps it should be amended to say "It takes a village to teach a child to read." Literacy, which includes the acts of reading, writing, speaking and listening as essential skills, requires much time, energy, people and materials to be successful. However, it also calls for the use of appropriate strategies, ones which will optimize the literacy outcome.

Developmentally Appropriate Literacy Practices

Developmentally appropriate practice suggests that the developmental skills and abilities of the child are used as the platform for teaching literacy. The age and ability of the child are considered, then age-appropriate opportunities are provided to the child, with feedback and practice. The child's current ability and practice of emerging skills provides the child with an opportunity to master the skill, increasing his repertoire. The role of the teacher or parent is to astutely assess the child's current and emergent skills, then supply the child with appropriate materials and support. When this occurs, the child masters the skill. A sound knowledge of child development is a necessary tool in this process. Knowing not only what

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the child can do at this moment, but also and more importantly, what will be coming down the pike developmentally, are pivotal to the success. Anticipating the child's next developmental milestone allows the child sufficient practice with currently occurring skills but also provides the framework for new, emerging skills (NAEYC, 1997).

This developmental ladder provides the early childhood educator with a framework for developing and providing appropriate learning opportunities, materials and experiences. The early childhood educator's responsibility is not to teach reading but to develop pre-literacy skills, thereby making the child ready for intense literacy instruction typical of kindergarten and beyond.

What Does the Literacy Research Tell Us?

Findings from the *National Reading Panel Report* (1998) suggest that several key components must be in place to ensure reading success. The panel found significant research that supported the need for parent participation providing children with early language and literacy experiences that foster reading development. The research also suggests that best practice includes phonemic awareness, phonics, and good literature in reading instruction. Finally, the research suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching reading doesn't work. Rather, the skilled teacher must integrate different reading approaches to enhance the effectiveness of instruction for all students.

The panel then evaluated the literacy research and recommended that a balanced literacy approach should include the following components: alphabetics (phonemic awareness instruction and phonics instruction), fluency, and comprehension (vocabulary instruction and text comprehension instruction).

Phonemic awareness instruction involves having children focus and manipulate phonemes, the smallest units of sound, in both syllables and words. In the English language there are approximately 42 to 45 phonemes. Children practice identifying, isolating, deleting, categorizing, blending, segmenting, adding and substituting phonemes in an oral-only lesson. Phonemic awareness instruction is different from phonics in that

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Literacy Activities

- Well-Designed Literacy Centers
- Reading Center
- Writing Center
- Listening Center
- Books in All Centers
- Word Walls
- Read Alouds
- Conversations
- Build Literacy into Every Activity and Lesson
- Repeated Phonemic Awareness Activities
- Alphabetic Principle Experiences
- Group Stories
- Print Conventions
- Big Books
- Label the Environment
- Songs and Fingerplays
- Sign-In Sheet
- Rebus Charts
- Literacy Props
- Guided Reading Activities
- Teach Vocabulary
- Use Props during Read Alouds

The research suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching reading doesn't work. Rather, the skilled teacher must integrate different reading approaches to enhance the effectiveness of instruction for all students.

phonics connects the letter with the sound, while phonemic awareness focuses on the sound only. Children play fun and often silly games with sounds, such as: *What word do you have if you add "s" to the beginning of mile?* Or: *The word is bug. Change the "g" to "n." What is the new word?* Or: *Which word is "b-i-g?"* Children identify word, teacher writes word and students repeat word. Phonemic awareness is the foundation to later phonics instruction. Children cannot successfully learn to spell and read if they don't have a sound phonemic awareness understanding. Phonics involves learning letter-sound relationships necessary to learning how to spell and read. There are many approaches to phonics, both explicit and implicit. Phonics instruction should not begin before kindergarten. The most successful phonics approaches involve a strong phonemic awareness component in addition to the systematic letter-sound relationship instruction.

Fluency, the ability to read orally with speed, accuracy and proper expression, is critical to reading comprehension. Guided, repeated oral reading and independent, silent reading are the two most successful strategies to becoming a fluent reader.

Comprehension, the ability to understand what has been read, requires the reader to intentionally engage in a construction of meaning through problem-solving and critical thinking. Comprehension can only be achieved through the development of a large vocabulary and the understanding that comprehension is an active process that requires an intentional and thoughtful interaction between the reader and the text. The larger the child's vocabulary, the more he comprehends when reading. Both vocabulary and comprehension must be taught both implicitly and explicitly. Text comprehension is when readers actively relate the ideas represented in print to their own knowledge and experiences and construct mental representations in memory. Children are asked to make the following comparisons, text to self, text to text, text to others and text to world, allowing the reader to construct a new understanding of the world and make necessary connections to later recall and better understand the content read.

Best Practice in Preschool Literacy Instruction

Utilizing the National Reading Panel Report information and developmentally appropriate practice in literacy instruction, the following is an early childhood practitioner's guide to simple, effective and research-based literacy strategies for home, day care and preschool settings.

Well-Designed Literacy Centers

Reading, listening, and writing centers should be well stocked, open and available to the children at all times. Teachers should support these centers with small-group and one-on-one time.

Reading Center

Provide the children with both fiction and non-fiction books. Choose books that are of varying levels of difficulty. Rotate the books on a weekly basis and include books related to the thematic study of the week.

Writing Center

Provide a multitude of supplies for the novice to the more sophisticated writer. Post the alphabet, both upper and lowercase letters in Denelian print. Regularly provide the children with story starter pages with a sentence, which may be related to the thematic study of the week. Buy or make journals for each child. Be the stylus for the children, writing their dictations to pictures they created in the art center. Create a mailbox for each child to communicate with all members of the classroom.

Listening Center

Buy or create your own books on tape. Your voice reading a familiar book is wonderful. Have a blank audiotape for each child and allow each to read a book and record it. Create or buy flannel pieces to favorite books and let the children retell the story to each other.

Books in All Centers

Support the theme or concept with both fiction and non-fiction books pertaining to the thematic or conceptual study. For example, in the art area, provide books that show pictures of the theme so children can construct their own artistic expression of the concept.

Word Walls

In the writing area or the circle time area, using large index cards, print the key words associated with the weekly thematic study, including a picture so the children can begin to associate the letters/word with the object. Review them regularly. Make additional copies for the writing center so children can copy the words when journaling.

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Connecting Words and Pictures

Read Alouds

Complete several story read alouds daily, utilizing open-ended questions that get the children involved in not only the story but the literacy process. When introducing the story, talk about the author and illustrator, so children begin to understand the process. When developing open-ended questions consider those that develop text comprehension skills. For instance: What other stories have we read that are like this story? Have you ever felt like the character? What would you do if you were the character?

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Children who begin kindergarten with rudimentary comprehension skills, a significant vocabulary, phonemic awareness and understanding are primed for learning the literacy skills in today's literacy curriculum.

Conversations
Have engaging, genuine and meaningful conversations with children frequently throughout the day. Ask questions to get them critically thinking and to express themselves.

Build Literacy into Every Activity and Lesson
At the water table, have a prediction chart so children can think, speak, write about and listen to what they are studying. A simple sink-and-float activity becomes a study in predicting and charting.

Repeated Phonemic Awareness Activities
Provide children with numerous phonemic awareness activities, fun and silly rhyming activities like "Down by the Bay."

Alphabetic Principle Experiences
Post the alphabet in many places in the classroom, not just the writing center. Use environmental print to allow children to recognize letters they see every day in their environment.

Group Stories
In circle time or small group, create stories the children dictate, illustrating print conventions as the story is written.

Print Conventions
Help children acquire print conventions. Demonstrate the proper way to hold a book, pointing to the words as you read.

Big Books
Read big books, illustrating print conventions.

Label the Environment
Label all objects in the environment so children associate the word with the object.

Songs and Fingerplays
Sing songs and fingerplays and utilize rebus charts to assist in learning the words to the songs and fingerplays.

Sign-In Sheet
Have children sign in and out daily as they arrive and depart, practicing the letters of their names.

Rebus Charts
Make rebus charts (words and pictures) for all activities — cooking, experiments, etc.

Literacy Props
In the dramatic play area, include literacy props to support the theme of the play.

Guided Reading Activities
Select books with repetitive phrases, print the phrases and have the children participate in an interactive read aloud, reading the repeated phrase. Read "The Little Red Hen," and on chart paper write the repeated statement and have the children read the statement as the story is read.

Teach Vocabulary
Intentionally include new vocabulary in books read out loud, and implicitly

and explicitly teach the vocabulary words as the book is read.

Use Props during Read Alouds

Supply children with props they can hold during a read aloud, as the object is discussed in the book, the child has to raise the object, participating in the read aloud.

What Does It All Mean?

The research on early childhood and literacy best practice provides us with a plethora of findings, as well as the application of the research into everyday practice. Literacy is a multi-faceted process that requires much practice and guidance. This guidance comes not only from skilled and well-trained professionals, but also parents — the child's first teacher. The application listed in this article can be implemented by parents at home with some modifications.

Pre-reading experiences, essential to school success, should be pleasurable and fun. When children enjoy the process, they are more likely to learn and it is often much more meaningful. Today, learning has become something children dread, filled with skill and drill, worksheets, and meaningless activities. The activities discussed in this article are not just best practice for the early childhood teacher, they are best practice for the elementary grades as well. When children learn in meaningful ways and construct their own knowledge of the world — or, in this case, literacy — not only do they learn literacy, they will be successful in school endeavors, including today's standardized ELA exams.

The above described literacy activities provide children with meaningful, everyday experiences, in which they learn valuable knowledge of print and pre-reading skills. These prerequisite skills are imperative if children are to really become literate. Children who begin kindergarten with rudimentary comprehension skills, a significant vocabulary, phonemic awareness and understanding are primed for learning the literacy skills in today's literacy curriculum.

When we rush children to learn literacy using canned programs and ignore best practice, many children are "Left Behind." The valuable preschool experience with literacy is invaluable to school success. Appropriate literacy experiences in the preschool years inoculates children, allowing them to take these reading prerequisite skills into the elementary school years, helping them to succeed in becoming a literate individual.

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Using Props

References

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