
Introduction

Historical Overview: Changing Beliefs about Preschool Literacy

Prior to the 1970s, kindergarten and prekindergarten programs rarely included literacy skills. Most practitioners based their decisions in this area on the belief—supported by the work of the Gesell Institute of Child Development—that literacy development was a product of maturation. Following their observations of children, researchers at Gesell declared that children were not ready to begin the study of reading until as late as age eight (<http://school.familyeducation.com/home-school/reading/38692.html>). This meant that the purpose of early childhood programs was to allow children to follow their own interests through involvement in various centers: blocks, housekeeping, dress up, art, puzzles, games, music, nature, and so on. In fact, any activity that was seen as related to reading was negatively referred to as “prereading” or “reading readiness.” Group activities included reading stories, singing, and some basic movement development. Focusing on social development was the accepted standard.

Starting in the early 1970s, and most probably based on the work of Benjamin Bloom and the soon-to-follow Head Start programs, the idea of “getting them early” pushed the literacy focus to curriculum programs in kindergarten. Many schools’ districts purchased reading programs that included a kindergarten component, usually considered the “readiness phase,” endeavoring to get children ready for the first-grade program.

This created a serious debate among educators. Early childhood professional organizations challenged the inclusion of such programs, especially the use of workbooks. Kindergarten teachers, long trained in the social development approach to instruction, felt that their professional judgments were being called into question. On the other hand,

curriculum directors, wanting to satisfy the demands of first-grade teachers and involved families, pressed on with reading program adoptions.

This caused a backlash in preschool programs. The notion that literacy activities might now be included in the preschool curriculum was cast in a negative light. Rather than examining how literacy skills might best be included for four-year-olds, teachers reacted mainly against the way these skills were often being taught at the kindergarten level. Here's how the argument went: "If worksheets are inappropriate for kindergarten children, their inclusion in preschool programs will be devastating." Except in some preschool programs that advertised themselves as including the teaching of reading, the vast majority of early childhood programs continued on with their traditional programs.

The real entry of literacy skills into preschool programs happened as a result of several factors. Sesame Street, with its emphasis on the alphabet and language development, brought literacy skills into the home. Head Start programs began to include basic skills. A new breed of parents and families realized that their children could be involved in literacy skills at a younger age than they had assumed. Finally, public kindergartens felt the pressures of teaching to a wide range of individual differences within the traditional group-oriented curricula. This called for two approaches: either holding some children back until they were "ready" for kindergarten or asking preschool teachers to begin including basic literacy skills in the four-year-old curriculum.

In the later 1990s and early 2000s, with the growing emphasis on integrated language-arts programs in professional writings and textbooks, the development of literacy skills found a legitimate place in prekindergarten programs. The idea was that basic and literacy skills could be introduced through authentic activities while being adapted to each child's level of ability and learning style.

However, recognizing that preschools could now be involved in activities that help children be successful in later school programs has not changed the face of early childhood programs. Much of the training needed to implement such an approach has not been made available to preschool teachers. Rapid turnover in the field has further clouded the issue. Some programs have resorted to published curricula with their worksheet approach commonly found in kindergarten. As for the emerging curricula, written especially for preschool programs, most are organized in such a way that it is difficult for untrained teachers to understand and make the best use of the material.

Stages of Reading

Children evolve through several stages as they learn to read: emergent, beginning, developing, and independent. Most three- and four-year-olds are in the emergent stage. This stage includes mastery of concepts, behaviors, and skills that prepare children for the next stages, which highlight actual reading and writing skills.

The literacy activities presented in this manual are developmentally appropriate for children in the emergent stage of reading.

Basic to any skill development for emergent readers are these understandings:

- Print has meaning and function.
- Illustrations aid in telling a story.
- Print is made up of letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs.
- Reading progresses from left to right and top to bottom on the page.
- Letters and words have sounds that help the reader decode meaning.

Activities to promote these understandings and related skills are included throughout the book.

Program History and Focus

It is the current response of preschools across America to the changing beliefs about preschool literacy that has led to this book. The purpose of this publication is to assist all preschool teachers to know

- the outcomes that should be aimed for to best prepare young children to become readers;
- how to assess children's progress and adapt literacy instruction to their needs;
- how to select literacy activities that integrate into the existing curriculum.

This book was developed over time and with great care and effort. It began with our desire to remain active in early childhood education after leaving our academic careers. Once we decided on Naples, Florida, as our winter residence, we set out to find the best opportunities for volunteerism to benefit young children. We attended several fund-raisers for young children's projects and were soon contacted by Myra Shapiro, president of the Naples Alliance for Children.

We were invited to join the Apple Blossom Committee to select the top preschool teachers in Collier County. This Florida county includes the town of Immokalee, which has a large migrant population. On our visits to observe nominees, we discovered that there were many preschools serving children of low-income families.

One of the needs we perceived was that programs lacked written outcomes for their teachers to follow. Lack of formal training for the teachers, frequent staff turnover, and little on-the-job assistance resulted in programs consisting of random activities on one hand or didactic skills programs on the other. To help solve this problem, we applied for and received a small grant to write outcomes for each age group from infants through four-year-olds. We also developed a recording system to monitor children's progress. The grant provided funds for free workshops for teachers in the county, a copy of the outcomes and recording instrument for each site, and a follow-up consultation in their centers.

We also noted that teachers needed assistance in handling behavior problems. Working with colleagues, we received another small grant that resulted in *The Discipline Toolbox*, a teacher-oriented resource for addressing forty common behavior problems in a developmentally appropriate manner. This booklet was provided free of charge to all preschool teachers in the county.

At the same time these issues were being addressed, the preparation of children for kindergarten was a major concern in the Collier County schools (reflecting what was true across the country). This concern in Collier County started a movement toward establishing formal prereading programs that were not developmentally appropriate.

To counter that movement, we applied for and received a large grant from the Naples Community Foundation to conduct a study to see if preschool teachers could be trained to better prepare four-year-old children for kindergarten in a developmentally appropriate manner. We selected two low-income preschool programs in the area and assessed the programs' current groups of children to serve as a comparison group. Over the next two years, we identified literacy outcomes, developed an assessment tool, and worked with the teachers on appropriate assessment and classroom activities. We considered the first year a training year and the second year the basis for the study. At the end of that time, the children were assessed using the same instrument as the comparison group. The study group showed statistically significant gains over the scores of the comparison group on twenty of the twenty-eight items measured.

We then documented some of the activities that were appropriate for the outcomes, put them together into a book, and used the remaining grant money to publish a skeleton version of the program. Free work-

shops were again provided to preschool teachers in the area, and everyone received a free copy of the book.

Ultimately, we submitted our manuscript to Redleaf Press, and were enthusiastically encouraged to expand the materials into a comprehensive program. *Lessons for Literacy* is the result of that effort.

Strategies to Promote Positive Literacy Development

Some fundamental activities occur in classrooms that promote literacy development. As teachers plan their environments, teaching strategies, and classroom time, these fundamentals should remain at the forefront:

- Nurture print awareness.
- Establish a library center.
- Read aloud to children every day.
- Provide shared book experiences.
- Provide opportunities for choral reading.
- Provide opportunities for functional reading.
- Provide opportunities for children to write.
- Engage children in meaningful conversations.
- Help connect in-class literacy experiences to the home and the community.
- Be intentional when referring to early reading and writing.
- Conduct authentic assessments of literacy experiences.

Nurture Print Awareness

Provide a print-rich environment where children can see reading and writing as useful and themselves as competent communicators. For example, you can include

- individual check-in devices with children's names;
- signs labeling objects in the room;
- a news bulletin board;
- a classroom helpers chart;
- directional signs;
- labeled bulletin boards that give written clues to their content (for example, "Our Yarn and Glue Creations").

Establish a Library Center

Make the library center inviting through the use of comfortable chairs, tables, throw rugs, and pillows. Include a variety of books to satisfy varying interests. Display posters of books, which are easily obtained from libraries or local bookstores. Include media devices that make it easy for children to listen to stories.

Read Aloud to Children Every Day

Reading to children serves three important purposes:

1. It is enjoyable. Read one storybook-style text every day so children will experience the sheer pleasure of hearing a book read from cover to cover. Once you select the book, set the stage for reading it aloud. Introduce the book and bring it to life through varied forms of presentation. Do not follow up with questions. Let the children enjoy the story as they hear it.
2. It informs. Whenever appropriate, read children nonfiction books that provide specific information related to some topic under study or of high interest to the children. Ask questions to make sure they understand the information.
3. It teaches literacy. Read books that involve children in basic literacy activities related to the literacy outcomes. Follow up with questions and discussions of concepts of print, rhyming, retelling, and language development.

Provide Shared Book Experiences

Actively involve the children in reading:

- Read along.
- Read aloud to the group.
- Read to individuals.

Allow time for children to read the pictures of a book or to retell stories to the class or to their friends. Set aside some regular time when children can browse through books.

Provide Opportunities for Choral Reading

Plan large-group readings of familiar written literature (fingerplays, nursery rhymes, poems, songs, stories, and so on). Also encourage small groups to practice and then read to the entire class. Allow the groups to read their works to children in other classrooms.

Provide Opportunities for Functional Reading

Include written information in your classroom such as

- a calendar of events;
- recipes for food preparation;
- bulletin-board displays;
- directions for completing helpers' jobs;
- word cards naming objects around the classroom, at home, in the hallways, and in the neighborhood.

Provide Opportunities for Children to Write

Set up a writing center or table stocked with various paper, magic slates, marking tools, alphabet and number charts, and so on. Encourage picture writing. Provide story starters as motivation for children to write creatively. Assist them in writing birthday cards to family members. Send cards to individuals or families highlighted in the news.

Engage Children in Meaningful Conversations

Provide time for language sharing. Children need adequate opportunities to talk about their experiences—sharing stories during sharing time, reviewing a field trip, or just talking with other children. Help them solve their disputes through oral language. Have them talk about their drawings. Encourage small-group discussions during snacktimes and lunchtimes.

Help Connect In-Class Literacy Experiences to the Home and the Community

Point out to children such things as

- family members reading newspapers, magazines, recipes, or the mail;

- family members reading and writing e-mail, sending cards, jotting down shopping or to do lists;
- community signs for safety, advertising, and addresses;
- maps and directions at public transportation stops.

Encourage families, through regular communication, to share these literacy experiences at home and to send to school some personal examples.

Be Intentional When Referring to Early Reading and Writing

Refer to book browsing or picture discussion as *reading* and random marks, scribbles, and pretend writing as *writing*, because these are legitimate forms of reading and writing. Identifying them as such helps children, early on, to identify themselves as readers and writers. Some children may still respond that they are really not reading and writing. Tell children that there are many forms of reading, and they will engage in other forms in later school years.

Conduct Authentic Assessments of Literacy Experiences

Chart children's progress over the time they are with you, and adjust your instruction as needed. Collect samples of children's works, and keep anecdotal records of children's literacy abilities and interests. Accumulate materials in a portfolio so that you can show families evidence of both accomplishments and areas that need additional development. Suggest specific ways they can work with their children at home.