

TYC

Vol 17 No 2
Winter 2024

TEACHING YOUNG CHILDREN



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Message from Michelle



Dear colleagues,

When my children were young, I relished reading books with them. There were many joyful moments of us looking at beautiful illustrations, pointing out interesting new words, and talking about how ideas in the books' pages related to our own lives.

I knew these moments were nurturing my children's literacy development, but I also knew they had other powers—the power to show my children new people, cultures, and ways of being and the power to reflect their own culture and experiences. Growing up, I rarely encountered a book that showed my identity as a first-generation Korean American. I wanted something different for my children—to see themselves in the landscape of the diverse books we read. So I actively looked for books that portrayed multiracial families and books that depicted Korean families. A few of our favorites were *The Have a Good Day Café*, by Frances Parker and Ginger Park, and *Peach Heaven*, by Yangsook Choi.

Developmentally appropriate practice recognizes the context in which children are growing and developing. This issue of *Teaching Young Children* is focused on literacy and language practices in preschool. It includes an article about creating a diverse collection of books and another about showcasing children's lived experiences through alphabet books. Besides this issue, we encourage you to learn more about literacy and other areas of development through NAEYC's books (like the recently published *Literacy Learning for Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers: Key Practices for Educators*), position statements, and other resources.

Thank you for looking to NAEYC as a source for your continued professional growth and learning.

In gratitude,

Michelle Kang
Chief Executive Officer

Message from the TYC Editorial Team

Literacy development begins at birth, and the early years that follow are key for later learning and success. These days, a great deal of attention is being paid to learning to read, but fostering young children's literacy and language development entails understanding and supporting a range of areas, including print awareness, comprehension, links between sounds and letters, language and knowledge, and writing (in various forms).

This issue of *Teaching Young Children* aims to complement and expand the practices you already engage in, like interactive read alouds. Read about ways to plan and use your learning environment and materials to spur literacy and language learning while including children's cultures, opportunities to play, and intentionally integrated direct instruction. Be sure to share the two Message in a Backpack™ features with families in your setting.

Reflection Questions for This Issue

1. What have you observed about children's literacy and language development in your setting?
2. As you consider the different areas for literacy and language learning, in which do you feel confident about your knowledge and practices? Which do you feel you need to learn more about?
3. As you think about the books in your setting, to what extent do they offer a window and a mirror for the children you educate and care for?

NAEYC Calendar

Highlights	Get Involved	Learn More
EVENT 2024 Public Policy Forum	Join us virtually in February & March! You can raise your voice and take action to support early childhood educators.	NAEYC.org/policy-forum
NEW BOOK Healthy Young Children	Updated to reflect new health and safety protocols and standards! This sixth edition brings together the expertise and experience of health and early childhood education professionals in one informative and approachable resource.	NAEYC.org/books
NEW BOOK Coaching with Powerful Interactions	From the authors of the bestselling book <i>Powerful Interactions</i> comes a second edition guide crafted especially for coaches and all professionals supporting the work of early childhood educators.	NAEYC.org/books

We encourage you to share your voice with us! Submit an article ([NAEYC.org/resources/pubs/tyc/writing](https://naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/writing)), nominate yourself or a colleague to be a Feature Teacher ([NAEYC.org/resources/pubs/tyc/cover-teacher-nomination-form](https://naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/cover-teacher-nomination-form)), or provide feedback to us about TYC (tyc@naeyc.org).

Feature Teacher

Chandler Graddick has been an educator for eight years. He is a lead teacher of 3- to 5-year-olds at Family and Child Empowerment Services, a nonprofit organization that serves families with low incomes who live and work in San Francisco, California.



What has kept you in the field as an early childhood educator?

I teach younger children, ages 3 to 5. They have a drive to learn and are curious—they'll ask about themes, materials, and even why I'm setting up a table for an activity. I also want to be a role model. I'm a 32-year-old African American man. There are negative portrayals of Black men in society and the media. I want to provide children with a different narrative. I want them to see that there are Black men who are loving, caring, successful, and want the best for them.

Describe some ways in which you communicate with families to build and maintain positive and reciprocal relationships.

We use a family messaging app (Learning Genie) to communicate with families. I like to take pictures of in-the-moment learning and play. For example, I set a large cardboard box in the middle of the carpet. Within an hour, a group of children had filled it with trains, LEGOs, and animals. One child, Lucian, even brought in a book to read there.

When sharing experiences with individual families, I include captions to describe what their child did and to explain activities and learning processes. For group activities—like making cookies, which we did recently—I post images and captions for all the families to access.

What is your proudest accomplishment as an educator?

Supporting social and emotional development is what I feel proud of. It has taken seven years to refine how I individualize my practices—which strategies to use for individual children and for specific situations. For example, the language I use has changed as I've grown into my role as a teacher and by learning from research-informed resources.

I taught a child named Senna during my first year. She was highly inquisitive, but I didn't yet have the strategies to work with her. Recently, there was a similar child in my class, Diova. She challenged me because she asked a lot of open-ended questions. After I responded, she had even more questions. I developed a new approach: I began replying to her questions with open-ended questions, giving her the opportunity to think more deeply. If I didn't know an answer, I was honest while telling her, "I'll do research and get back to you." I always want the children to know that I see them and hear them.

How has being part of NAEYC positively impacted your teaching and/or interactions with children?

I attended my first California AEYC conference in April of 2023 in Santa Clara. Since then, I have felt more confident creating conditions that foster play and creativity while responding to children's assets and needs. To encourage children to find solutions for situations during free play time, I set boundaries and observe, intervening as needed (like reminding them of expectations). I appreciate the knowledge I gained, and I look forward to future NAEYC conferences.

To learn more about Chandler Graddick, continue reading online at [NAEYC.org/tyc/winter2024](https://naeyc.org/tyc/winter2024).

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Leveraging the Environment to Ignite Children's Literacy Learning

Leslie La Croix, Kimberly Sanders Austin, Christine Pegoraro Schull, Sara E. Miller, and Julie K. Kidd

Four-year-old Camila opens a class recipe book in the home environment center that includes photos and recipes from children's families. She turns to her family's recipe for corn tortillas. Pointing to the text, she says, "First, I have to put in la masa." She dips a measuring cup into a canister with a picture and the words *corn flour* and *masa* on the outside, then dumps two imaginary scoops into a bowl. She returns to the book and says, "Then I have to put in the water." Camila reaches for an empty pitcher and pretends to pour in water. She puts scraps of paper on a plate to represent a pile of tortillas then calls, "Tortillas for sale! Come have a hot, fresh tortilla!"

Tariq sits down. "I want a tortilla," he says.

Teacher Olivia, who is documenting Camila's play, joins the scene and prompts, "Oh, I think your customer might need a menu to help him decide what else he wants with his tortilla." Camila picks up a clipboard and marker and begins to write strings of letter-like symbols. When she's done, she hands the clipboard to Tariq and says, "We have cheese and chicken. What would you like?"

Opportunities to promote young children’s language and literacy development abound in early learning settings. Early childhood educators can facilitate these experiences by offering materials, routines, and interactions that set the stage for rich language and literacy activities and exchanges, as Olivia did in the vignette above. Among other literacy skills, the class recipe book allowed Camila to demonstrate her understanding of print concepts (such as holding the text correctly, flipping the pages, pointing to the words), to strengthen her oral language by integrating both of her languages, and to use her emerging writing skills through the use of strategically placed materials.

As teacher educators, we (the authors) work in racially, economically, and geographically diverse higher education contexts. Situated across two- and four-year institutions, we work with early childhood educators to develop their learning environments for children and families in rural and urban communities. Focusing on the ecology of the classroom allows educators to intentionally create opportunities throughout the learning day to foster children’s early literacy and language skills. In this article, we share ways to shape the classroom environment to immerse young learners in authentic literacy explorations.

Using Materials to Enrich Early Literacy Environments

The learning environment is a crucial part of early childhood education. Teachers are called to design and implement settings that help every child achieve their full potential across developmental domains and content areas. This includes opportunities to embed rich literacy experiences, such as the reading and writing tools Olivia included in the home environment center.

Teachers can use a variety of materials to promote children’s literacy. These include

- › **integrating books, interactive print materials, and other literacy props.** Turning the dramatic play center into an animal shelter invites children to use animal name cards, adoption certificates, and veterinarian health charts. In the science discovery area, STEM-focused writing tools and print materials could include scientific illustrations, graph paper, markers, science logs, rulers, and lab books.
- › **emphasizing print by labeling classroom spaces.** Working with children to label supplies (art supplies, musical instruments, blocks) and learning areas (storage areas, cubbies) with pictures, symbols, and/or words increases ownership and agency in these spaces and promotes literacy skills.

- › **honoring children’s diverse social identities.**

Knowing about and valuing children’s unique social and cultural experiences help teachers to include children’s home literacy assets and practices. Emphasizing literacy traditions found in oral storytelling, poetry, music, and the spoken word honors diverse literacy and language expressions. Providing props like finger puppets, felt boards, and costume accents for storytelling supports children’s narrative storytelling and reenactments.

Besides giving children daily access to literacy tools, these robust, intentional literacy environments also set the stage for teachers to facilitate children’s literacy engagement during everyday routines and interactions.

Using Routines to Spark Literacy Expressions

Both formal and informal routines occur across the learning day. Routines support children through transitions, mealtimes, and center time explorations. They also inform read-aloud activities, morning meeting discussions, and even outside play.

Teachers can integrate language and literacy opportunities into children’s routines by

- › **creating literacy activities that are personally relevant to children.** Morning sign-in routines can start with pictures of children. Adding their names to these pictures draws children’s attention to the new text element and encourages conversations about the role of print. As children gain confidence in recognizing their names, teachers can remove the pictures, shifting the literacy environment again. Over time, children can progress to writing their own names to sign in.
- › **watching for opportunities to establish new child-initiated literacy routines and activities.** When children notice ants on the playground, the teacher can prompt them to wonder how they can learn more about the insects. Following the children’s lead, the class could decide to create a “wonder investigation basket” with notebooks, informational texts about insects, writing tools, and magnifying glasses that can accompany outside play.
- › **enriching vocabulary through playful engagement with new words and concepts.** Celebrating children’s literacy moments is an engaging and playful way to expand children’s word knowledge and their world (or background) knowledge. The “Recipe Chant” (at [NAEYC.org/tyc/winter2024](https://naeyc.org/tyc/winter2024)) is one way Olivia, from the opening vignette, could reinforce the recipe book experience.

Using Interactions to Support Children's Literacy Engagement

Meaningful interactions occur in the context of relationships. A rich literacy environment offers children tools to develop reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. However, the availability of materials and other literacy supports doesn't guarantee that children will use them. Teacher-child interactions—such as conversations, modeling, scaffolding, and feedback—are critical.

Educators can expand children's interactions and support their literacy experiences by

- › **responding with enthusiasm and encouraging conversational exchanges.** Teachers can welcome children at arrival and engage them in conversation as they transition from unpacking to table activities. Supporting children in turn taking during conversation and extending their responses to include more vocabulary and longer sentences build important literacy skills.
- › **scaffolding children's literacy and language use organically.** Observing how children engage in the environment reveals opportunities for extending literacy. Olivia, for example, supported Camila and Tariq's literacy play in the tortilla restaurant by suggesting the use of a menu.
- › **integrating, modeling, and using technology to support children's literacy expressions.** Educators can use technology and media to support meaningful interactions among children in the classroom and to connect families to the learning setting. (See "Using Technology to Foster Interactions" on this page for an example.)

Using Technology to Foster Interactions

Applications and programs like Book Creator and Flip allow children to use technology tools as creators rather than passive consumers. With the class recipe book, for example, Olivia could create a digital file and share the link with families, who could access it at home. Children could use an iPad or other device to access the file in the classroom. In this way, literacy learning is experienced across home and early learning settings.

Conclusion

Educators expand children's literacy learning when they intentionally use their settings' materials, routines, and interactions to center children's interests and engagement in productive literacy tasks. To ensure your environment is promoting these essential early skills, we suggest asking:

- › What space in your classroom could be enhanced with additional literacy materials?
- › Where could you include a new routine or revise an old routine to promote literacy learning?
- › How can you intentionally leverage your interactions with children to support literacy development?

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This article supports the following NAEYC Early Learning Programs standards and topics

Standard 2: Curriculum
2D: Language Development
2E: Early Literacy

Planning a Trip? Encourage Your Child to Help

Deborah Farmer Kris



No matter where you're going—whether running errands around town or to a big gathering far away—you can encourage your child to practice their literacy skills as you plan together. Here are some resources and tips from PBS KIDS to help.

In the *Molly of Denali: The Big Gathering* shorts, Molly and her family prepare to go to the annual Alaska Federation of Natives gathering, where Alaska Native people from across the state come together. As Molly learns how a trip is planned, she uses literacy skills—and contributes to her family and community.

Here are four ways to involve your child in preparing for a trip.

1. **Set a schedule together.** To find her dance performance time, Molly checks the event schedule. Making a schedule with your child can help them anticipate what comes next. Create a table with time indicators, words, and pictures for activities. Your child can help decide which activities to include.
2. **Explore with a map.** Molly uses a map to learn how far her family and friends travel to get together. Share a map (digital or printed) that shows your home and destination. Discuss the places you'll visit and the different routes you can take. Encourage your child to consider distances, travel times, and what factors make one route preferred over another.
3. **Get more information.** Molly helps her friends prepare for the gathering by looking up information online, including ferry schedules and delivery dates. Researching together can help your child practice using keywords and finding information for planning. With the schedule and map as a reference, your child can help research questions—independently or with support—like the following:
 - › What is the weather forecast during the trip?
 - › What are some sites and attractions at our destination?
 - › How will we get around?
4. **Create checklists.** Molly and Grandpa Nat use a checklist to keep track of items to pack. Offering help as needed, invite your child to create and use a checklist by writing a title and listing items to pack or tasks to complete. Checking off items after completion can also help children develop handwriting skills while remembering the details.

These activities encourage children to engage in literacy skills that are essential for practical, everyday tasks. Children thrive when they feel useful and have something important to contribute. Happy travels!

Deborah Farmer Kris is an education journalist, parent educator, and the author of the *All the Time* picture book series.

The contents of this article were developed under a grant from the Department of Education. However, this content does not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. The project is funded by a Ready To Learn grant [PR/Award No S295A200004 CFDA No. 84.295A] provided by the Department of Education to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. All rights reserved.



Creating Dramatic Play Areas That Support Literacy Development

Jemmael Joseph

Play is an essential part of childhood. It allows children to explore, experiment, and learn about the world around them. It can also be a powerful tool for promoting foundational early literacy and language skills. Children develop these skills through engagement in a variety of learning areas and experiences. Intentionally blending literacy with dramatic play is one such avenue for meaningful and enjoyable engagement. In this article, I describe the ways dramatic play fosters literacy skills and offer strategies for creating literacy-enriched dramatic play environments.

How Dramatic Play Promotes Literacy

Dramatic play serves as a context for early literacy and language learning. It offers children opportunities to

- › **engage in language-rich interactions.** Children expand their vocabulary, enhance communication skills, and develop an understanding of narrative structure.
- › **encounter print materials.** Books, signs, and labels foster print awareness (understanding how print works), letter recognition, links between letters and sounds, and more.
- › **explore different genres and storylines.** Children can act out familiar stories or experiences, invent narratives, create literacy-related artifacts and props (grocery lists, field notes during an expedition, or recipes), or retell information they've learned. These kinds of activities enhance their understanding of the different types and features of texts and their real-life purposes.

Dramatic play also supports other skills that are intertwined with literacy and language development—such as critical thinking, problem solving, and social and emotional skills. Children participate in decision making, negotiation, and cooperation as they interact with peers during dramatic play. This helps to develop their comprehension skills, perspective taking, and their ability to analyze and make connections within and across narratives. As they navigate play scenarios, children practice empathy and cooperation. These skills lay a foundation for effective communication and understanding diverse perspectives, which are also useful as they learn to read and write.

Planning for Literacy in the Dramatic Play Area

Dramatic play areas are often equipped with props, costumes, and other materials that support a particular theme or play event. By incorporating literacy materials (books, writing tools, and technology), teachers create spaces and scenarios that foster children’s literacy learning. (See “Examples of Dramatic Play Scenarios That Foster Literacy Learning” on this page for some suggested play scenarios.)

To scaffold children’s understanding, educators can first model working with a new literacy-related material, then provide guidance, and finally invite children to engage with the material independently. For example, after multiple readings and discussions of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, by Eric Carle, educators can introduce felt pieces that correlate to the story (caterpillar, butterfly, fruits). Placing each piece on the felt board, the educator retells the story, then encourages the children to choose felt pieces and tell the story together. Then the pieces can be placed in the dramatic play area, so children can retell the story independently.

As children play, teachers can introduce and reinforce new vocabulary, incorporate authentic opportunities for writing, and scaffold their storytelling. A discussion of each follows.

Introduce New Vocabulary

Incorporating new words and concepts during pretend play supports children’s literacy learning. Children can use and practice the words they’ve learned as they engage in role playing. Along with bolstering their listening and speaking skills, this expands their world (or background) knowledge and the words they’ll encounter in print. For example, in my preschool classroom, children learned the names of vegetables

Examples of Dramatic Play Scenarios That Foster Literacy Learning

Scenario	Sample Materials	Connections to Literacy
Post office	Envelopes, stamps, paper, writing utensils, mailbag, mailbox, and dress-up clothes	As children write letters, they practice various forms of drawing and writing. As they deliver letters to their classmates, children practice matching the letters on the envelopes to the names of their peers.
Cooking	Recipes (cards, books, or posters), measuring cups and spoons, utensils, and play food and ingredients	Children are exposed to print, sequencing, and prediction when following recipes. They are also introduced to new vocabulary.
Camping expedition	Camping gear and signage, maps and books about nature and camping, s’mores recipe with pictures, camping notebooks/journals, and writing utensils	Children develop vocabulary and concept knowledge related to nature, camping, and directions as well as print awareness as they recognize and interact with written words and symbols.
Concerts or other performances (like a puppet show)	Music (radio, CDs, videos), play or real microphone, materials to construct a stage area (such as milk crates), dress-up clothes, puppets, concert tickets, song lyrics, and set lists	Through songs, children hear and use rhyming words and alliteration. Children also practice links between letters and sounds as they construct posters and tickets as well as compose lyrics. They create new or retell familiar stories as they put on a puppet show.

along with words to describe their taste (*scrumptious*) during daily routines; these new words and ideas then filtered into their play.

New vocabulary can also be introduced during instructional times, like morning meetings, and can be incorporated by children during their play. For instance, during our morning circle, I read a book about construction and introduced the words *build*, *construction*, *sturdy*, *stable*, *wobbly*, and *brick*. My coteacher and I placed materials that were highlighted in the text, along with labels showing the words and corresponding images for them, in the dramatic play area to expose children to print and the new ideas. While children interacted with the materials, they practiced the words learned from the book, such as “It’s *wobbly* and looks like it’s going to fall down.” I also used these vocabulary words while facilitating children’s play. For instance, when Steve built his brick house, I said, “Your brick house is *sturdy*.” I also commented on Celia’s house that was falling by saying, “Oh no! The bricks are *wobbly*. How can we make the house *stable*?”

Incorporate Writing

When early childhood educators encourage children to write (by providing writing materials, props, and labels), children gain valuable experience with written language. Writing in dramatic play can help children practice the physical aspects of writing, including the fine motor skills involved in holding writing tools and making marks on a page. In addition, writing goes beyond the physical to meaning and purpose: whether writing a letter, creating a menu, or making signs for a pretend store, teachers can help children learn that writing is a way to express their thoughts and that writing serves important purposes for real-life activities. Writing also allows children to engage in meaningful interactions: they can write notes to their peers, leave messages for others, or record their pretend play experiences.

Encourage Storytelling

When children engage in storytelling, they actively construct narratives to express their ideas. Through storytelling, children learn to organize their thoughts, articulate ideas, and develop a sense of narrative structure. They begin to understand character development, plot progression, and

story elements—essential components of reading and writing stories. (For more on this topic, see “6X. Developing a Storytelling Culture in Early Childhood” on page 12.)


So much of children’s dramatic play involves storytelling, with imaginative scenarios, characters, and settings. For example, during a discussion about tigers, children in my class learned that the Sumatran tiger is an endangered species. My coteacher and I explained that not many of them are left, so we (as humans) need to take care of the ones that remain. Later, I observed children creating and acting out their own story. They created a plot and assigned roles to each other. Charles said, “Put them [the tigers] inside the house; the hurricane is coming.” They also had a veterinarian, or “animal doctor,” as Jane said, to care for the tigers who got hurt from the hurricane and someone to fix the houses damaged by the storm. This kind of back-and-forth interaction nurtures young learners’ literacy development as well as development in other domains.

Conclusion

By intentionally weaving literacy with dramatic play, early childhood educators create a dynamic and enriching environment that supports early literacy development and prepares children for a lifelong love of reading and writing. I invite you to get creative and design literacy-rich dramatic play areas that will inspire and engage children in the joy of learning in your setting!

Jemmael Joseph is a passionate early childhood education author who spreads joy through words and education. She is also the assistant director at Easterseals Child Development Center in Silver Spring, Maryland.

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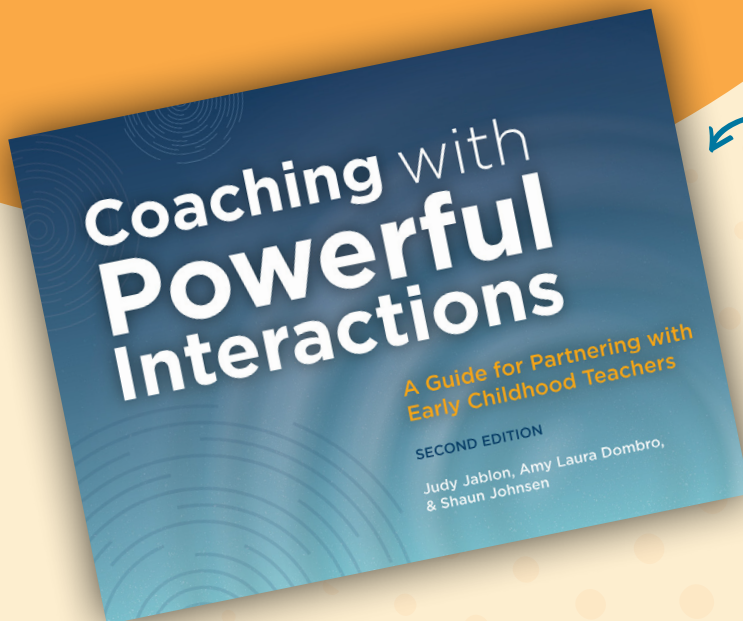


This article supports the following NAEYC Early Learning Programs standards and topics

Standard 2: Curriculum
2D: Language Development
2E: Early Literacy
2J: Creative Expression and Appreciation for the Arts

Standard 3: Teaching
3F: Making Learning Meaningful

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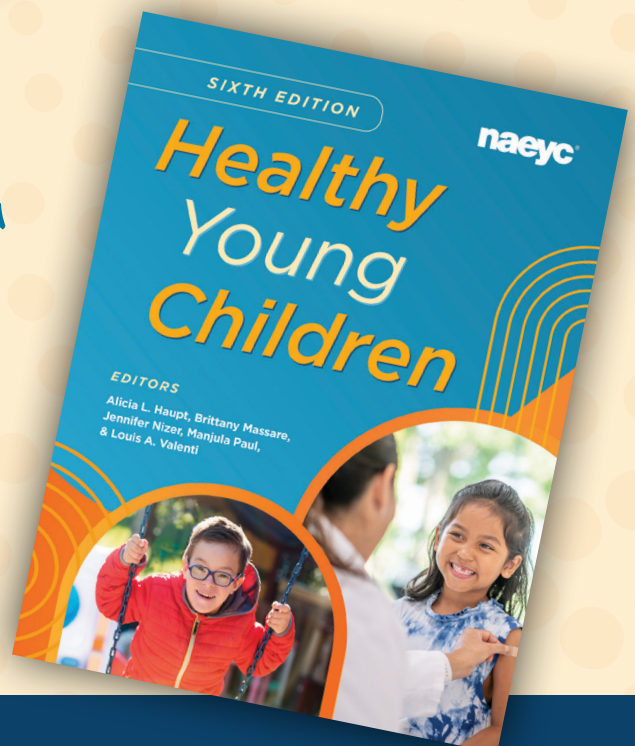


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6X

Developing a Storytelling Culture in Early Childhood

Stacy Simonyi and Margaret Gerowe

Telling stories—both oral and written—is a natural form of creative expression driven by imagination and play. Through their play and everyday activities, preschoolers are storytellers. Sharing stories helps children express their ideas, new learning, and feelings through a form that is familiar and makes sense to them. When children's tales—even if very brief—are honored and celebrated, they will feel valued and a sense of belonging in their learning communities. They will also learn the power and importance of their own voices. By creating a culture of storytelling, you can encourage a range of early language and literacy skills. Research shows that such rich experiences can positively affect children's later literacy learning and skills.

Storytelling need not be an occasional event; instead, it can be part of each preschool day. Following are six ways to promote a variety of storytelling activities in your setting.

1 Set the stage

Offer a storytelling area as a choice during play or center time, with a table, comfortable seating options, and supporting, open-ended materials (like story stones or story cards, animal figurines, puppets, felt boards, or natural objects). This setup will allow you to work with children individually or in small groups and will prompt children to create stories with the materials. You can also curate and regularly change these items to guide children's narratives. Include paper, crayons and markers, clipboards, and perhaps a recording device, so children can write down or record their stories.

2 Provide opportunities to retell stories

Another popular provocation is a story retelling area. Retelling stories helps children deepen their comprehension of the text, build vocabulary from it, and practice oral language skills. It can also be a key step in developing children's storytelling processes and a storytelling culture. After a read aloud, offer children the book (in print and/or digitally), props, and other related materials, so they can retell it. They can even make the story their own by including new characters or ideas based on their own experiences.

3 Encourage collaborative storytelling

Storytelling gives children the opportunity to form connections with their classmates and to develop conversational and social skills. Hearing others' voices will introduce different perspectives and invitations to think about the world in different ways. Crafting stories together can capture a growing sense of community and put into words children's shared experiences.

Group times, such as morning meetings, snack times, or lunch, are ideal to engage in collaborative storytelling. Start with a prompt or sentence frame and ask children to add to the story one part at a time. This way, each child can contribute if they choose. (For more details about how teachers can start with informal storytelling and move into formal storytelling, visit naeyc.org/tyc/winter2024.)

4 Honor children's funds of knowledge

One crucial aspect of building a storytelling culture is to integrate each child's lived experiences and to engage families in the storytelling process. Find ways to bring in families' stories and to share their children's stories with them. For example, families can share their stories through the use of a journal that accompanies a stuffed classroom "pet," documenting the pet's journey over a weekend. They can explore children's creations in storytelling areas at drop-off and pickup times. Use different methods for sharing each child's stories with their family, so they can listen and/or read them together. This will help children develop a sense of pride in who they are, help families see the importance and value of their children's work, and give families a more in-depth perspective into children's learning.

5 Consider scribing children's stories

Teacher scribing is another important part of storytelling culture. When a child dictates a story, write what the child says word for word. Ask questions to gather more information, including how the story starts, what details are included throughout, or how it ends. You can also help children form connections or extend vocabulary, such as by asking how the characters are feeling. However, these interventions should be minimal so that children have creative freedom and ownership of their stories. Then, read the narrative back to them to ensure it fully captures what the child intended.

As you write, you are modeling—and can talk about—the connections between oral and written language and specific aspects of it (links between letters and their sounds, word meanings, and directionality of print). This showcases the importance of writing to preserve stories. Giving your full attention and listening closely to each child will help build positive relationships too. Using a recording device is also an option, depending on group size, teacher availability, and time constraints. You can then scribe the dictation at a later time or use it as an audio retelling.

6 Embrace joy and playfulness while storytelling with children

Storytelling should be a joyful and playful experience. You may find yourself tempted to stick to a set format or plan. You may also be tempted to have a fully formed and cohesive story as a result. Storytelling will help preschoolers develop important narrative skills, but the stories told along the way may not have an ending or may change topics throughout. As you embrace the joyful process and culture of storytelling, children will embrace it too.

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This article supports the following NAEYC Early Learning Programs standards and topics

Standard 2: Curriculum

2D: Language Development

2E: Early Literacy

2J: Creative Expression and Appreciation for the Arts



Building a Diverse and Inclusive Library for Preschool Settings

Suzanne Metcalf, Rebecca Chrystal, and Michelle Sioson Hyman

Creating an environment of empathy, understanding, and acceptance is crucial to the early childhood and preschool experience. Children's books are powerful tools for learning and exploration. They provide a gateway for children to discover more about themselves and the world around them. Through the pages of a book and with a caring adult by their side to help guide them and answer their questions, young readers can encounter new cultures, identities, and perspectives as well as see their own identities and perspectives represented.

We (the authors) are advocates for constructing a diverse and inclusive library for young children. We do this work as members of an organization called Raising a Reader. At Raising a Reader, we have learned that incorporating children's books that celebrate differences and promote inclusivity is one of the first steps educators can take to foster environments of empathy and understanding.

In this article, we explore book selections based on the four tenets of NAEYC's anti-bias education: identity, diversity, action, and justice. (See "The Four Core Goals of Anti-Bias Education" on page 15.) In the process, we share information about building a library that reflects a diverse world and allows children to explore various cultures, identities, and perspectives. We encourage teachers to select books that challenge stereotypes, embrace diversity, promote justice, inspire action, and cultivate a love for reading while instilling important values.

The Four Core Goals of Anti-Bias Education

Goal 1, Identity

- › Teachers will nurture each child's construction of knowledge and confident personal and social identities.
- › Children will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.

Goal 2, Diversity

- › Teachers will promote each child's comfortable, empathetic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds.
- › Children will express comfort and joy with human diversity, use accurate language for human differences, and form deep, caring connections across all dimensions of human diversity.

Goal 3, Justice

- › Teachers will foster each child's capacity to critically identify bias and will nurture each child's empathy for the hurt bias causes.
- › Children will increasingly recognize unfairness (injustice), have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.

Goal 4, Activism

- › Teachers will cultivate each child's ability and confidence to stand up for oneself and for others in the face of bias.
- › Children will demonstrate a sense of empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.

Source: *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, 2nd ed., by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards, with Catherine M. Goins

Books as Invitations

Children's books can be opportunities for home caregivers, educators, and children to have conversations about identity, diversity, justice, and action. In addition to the meaningful conversations they inspire, reading books with a caring adult supports the development of important skills and knowledge, from language and literacy to social and emotional areas and beyond.

Based on the work of Rudine Sims Bishop, we can think about how books can operate as mirrors and windows. Books can work as mirrors by positively reflecting children's and families' own cultures, backgrounds, and lived experiences. They can act as windows through which children can learn about experiences, viewpoints, and identities that differ from their own. Importantly, a single book can serve as a mirror for one child while being a window for another. Ultimately, books are a tool to help children and families celebrate their own identities and provide a sense of belonging while also honoring the diversity in the world around them. (For further resources, see "Resources for Developing a Diverse Library" at NAEYC.org/tyc/winter2024.)

Strengthening Children's Sense of Self and Identity

Every child possesses a unique identity, and choosing books that reflect this is vital. Children can explore aspects of their identities through books that highlight personal experiences, celebrate individuality, and embrace different social identities, including those related to race, gender, culture, abilities, family structure, and more. Through these kinds of texts, children can develop a sense of self-efficacy, pride in who they are, a sense of belonging, and acceptance of others. Seeing themselves in books can also communicate important messages to children about their place in learning communities and environments. In *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards, with Catherine M. Goins, note that

Good stories capture the heart, mind, and imagination. They entrance and engage children and give teachers an opportunity to be their most lively and creative selves. They also provide a wonderful, ongoing way for children to learn about diversity and fairness. As a result, books are one of the most important anti-bias learning materials (2020, 44).

Consider the following books:

- › *I Am Every Good Thing*, by Derrick Barnes and illustrated by Gordon C. James, celebrates personal strengths and individuality.
- › *The Boy Who Grew Flowers*, by Jen Wojtowicz and illustrated by Steve Adams, addresses self-acceptance and identity while promoting empathy.
- › *Eyes that Kiss in the Corners*, by Joanna Ho and illustrated by Dung Ho, is a lyrical ode to loving oneself, inspiring readers to recognize their own beauty and strength.

- › *Love Makes a Family*, by Sophie Beer, is a board book that celebrates the one thing that makes every family a family—the love the family members share.

Encouraging Joy in Human Diversity

Promoting diversity in the preschool library exposes children to different lived experiences, interests, and assets or strengths. Featuring characters from various backgrounds, cultures, races, abilities, and family structures helps children develop empathy, respect, and appreciation for differences. However, a single book cannot fully express the experiences of a group of people. Educators should include a variety of books that introduce and share with children a wide range of experiences within and across cultures and communities.

While it is important to have diverse children's books in your classroom or program library, it is critical to have books authored and illustrated by individuals with authentic experiences and connections within a community or culture. Those experiences and connections can widen a child's perspective of the world around them while ensuring positive and accurate portrayals. Dual language and non-English books can also celebrate linguistic diversity and create a welcoming atmosphere for children from all language backgrounds. Include bilingual books from an early age and continue adding bilingual books to your collection as children grow.

Consider the following books:

- › *Where Are You From?*, by Yamile Saied Méndez and illustrated by Jaime Kim, is a great conversation starter about people's origins.
- › *All the Colors We Are: The Story of How We Got Our Skin Color*, by Katie Kissinger with photographs by Chris Bonhoff, is an informational book that discusses the interaction between human ancestry, melanin, and sun exposure on our various skin tones.
- › *Luli and the Language of Tea*, by Andrea Wang and illustrated by Hyewon Yum, embodies how common bonds can create beautiful, multicultural connections.
- › *My Town/Mi Pueblo*, by Nicholas Solis and illustrated by Luisa Uribe, looks at the lives of two cousins living on either side of the US-Mexico border. Written in English and Spanish, the book celebrates how their communities are both the same and wonderfully different.



Supporting Children's Understanding of Equity and Justice

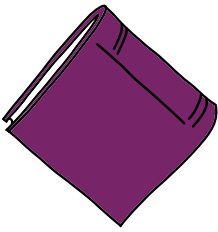


Books that address social issues, challenge stereotypes, and promote inclusivity are vital in nurturing children's understanding of justice and equity. Through these stories, children learn about fairness, empathy, and the importance of standing up against bias and injustice. Engage in meaningful discussions about these topics, allowing children to develop a sense of social responsibility.

Consider the following books:

- › *The Day You Begin*, by Jacqueline Woodson and illustrated by Rafael López, reminds us that we all may feel like outsiders sometimes—and how brave it is that we go forth anyway.
- › *Change Sings*, by Amanda Gorman and illustrated by Loren Long, teaches that anything is possible when voices unite.

Nurturing Children's Capacity to Act on Behalf of Themselves and Others

In addition, as the anti-bias education approach highlights, encouraging children to act against bias and injustice is an essential part of an inclusive library. Choose books that inspire children to make a difference in their own lives and communities. These stories empower children to embrace their unique voices, promote acceptance, and advocate for positive change. For example, *We Are Water Protectors*, by Carole Lindstrom and illustrated by Michaela Goade, promotes safeguarding and taking action to protect the Earth's water from harm and corruption.

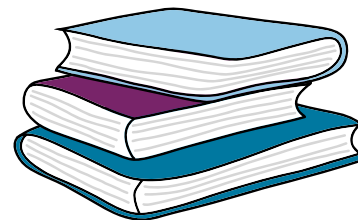


Building a diverse and inclusive preschool library, full of books that serve as mirrors and windows, is a crucial step toward fostering a respectful and accepting environment. By incorporating books that align with the four tenets of anti-bias education—identity, diversity, justice, and action—educators can help children develop empathy, understanding, and appreciation for the diverse world they inhabit. Regularly assess and update your collection to reflect the evolving perspectives and experiences of your community. Through the power of storytelling, we can cultivate a generation that embraces diversity, feels seen and heard, and strives to build strong communities.

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Standard 2: Curriculum
2A: Essential Characteristics
2D: Language Development
2E: Early Literacy

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Motivating Awesome Great Amazing
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Purposeful Hopeful Educational Encouraging
Useful Wonderful Work Inspirational New Rewarding
Life-changing
Informative
Fulfilling Hands-on-learning Good Exciting Incredible



Using Story Baskets to Foster Literacy Engagement

Meg Fitzgerald and Molly Simmons

As early childhood educators, we often ask ourselves, “How can we address literacy standards and goals in ways that are meaningful to children?” We find ourselves searching for avenues to invite children to engage in novel ways and to build early literacy knowledge and skills, including comprehension, through rich and authentic experiences. Children need time to tell stories, use multiple sentences, hear a variety of new words, and be encouraged to express themselves in safe and comfortable ways.

At our school, we embrace the Reggio Emilia approach and use a child-driven, emergent curriculum. (To learn more about this approach, read “Inspired by Reggio Emilia: Emergent Curriculum in Relationship-Driven Learning Environments,” by Mary Ann Beirmeier, in the November 2015 issue of *Young Children*.) This means that we, an early childhood director and a prekindergarten educator, are constantly challenging ourselves to think differently when it comes to instructional planning. We have found that story baskets—which include a book and objects connected to the book’s story—can encourage children to explore texts in ways that honor them as collaborators in the learning process. In this article, we share how story baskets spur children to explore various materials, tell a familiar tale with ease and comfort, and give them the freedom to go off script while promoting literacy learning. We also offer recommendations for creating and using story baskets in a variety of preschool settings.

How Story Baskets Can Spark Literacy Learning and Beyond

The educators of Reggio Emilia use the term *provocation* to describe an invitation that provokes or expands on thoughts, discussions, questions, interests, creativity, and ideas. A provocation can be simple creations, beautifully displayed, with materials that prompt expression and open-ended play. Story baskets serve as invitations, which are set out for children to gravitate toward and use in different ways. When children engage in story basket explorations, they create and tell a meaningful story that includes a beginning, middle, and end. This supports their sequencing skills and gives them

the opportunity to identify key story events and settings. Additionally, as they explore the physical book in the basket, they begin to understand different aspects of print awareness, such as how to hold a book, how to turn its pages, and where to start reading. That is, they become familiar with how print works.

Because story baskets can be explored in pairs or small groups, they provide opportunities for children to use listening and speaking skills as they converse. In addition, storytelling can help children learn about others' perspectives and feelings, express their own emotions, and collaborate in the shared storytelling process. Storytelling often spills into dramatic play scenarios as well, extending children's literacy and language learning and their social and emotional learning.

Inviting Children to Explore Story Baskets

Teachers can support children's initial engagement by modeling the use of materials. For example, as one teacher reads a book to the class, another can use items from the story basket to reflect what's happening in the story. While some children will immediately engage with story baskets, others may wish to watch and observe. If a child who is observing seems interested in participating, the teacher can offer a specific suggestion to encourage interaction, such as "We need someone to set up these trees for the forest. Can you be in charge of that?"

Knowing that children's interests ebb and flow—what captures their attention one week doesn't necessarily excite them the next—teachers can try different strategies to inspire and retain children's interest. One way to reinspire play is to show a picture during the morning meeting of children exploring a story basket and offering support to the children as they share about their explorations with others.

Creating Story Baskets in Preschool Settings

Story baskets can be planned and implemented in all preschool settings, allowing for flexibility and the individualization of learning experiences. What constitutes a familiar story will differ from one learning setting to another. Teachers can intentionally choose stories that are culturally appropriate, familiar to children, and related to the classroom explorations in their settings. Additionally, teachers can select accessible and cost-effective materials connected to these stories. (See "Story Basket Examples" on page 20 to learn how we used story baskets in our setting. An extended version is online at [NAEYC.org/tyc/winter2024](https://naeyc.org/tyc/winter2024).)

Choosing Books to Include in Story Baskets

Before children explore a story basket, teachers should ensure that children have repeatedly engaged with the narrative through read alouds. Children enjoy and benefit from revisiting the same texts many times. With repetition, they build familiarity with new words and concepts, and they play with the sounds of language.

When choosing books to include in story baskets, consider texts that feature repetition of phrases, rhyming patterns, and alliteration. These text features not only invite children to participate in low-risk opportunities, but they also build a child's phonological awareness, which research assures us is a key pathway to future reading success. Narrative fiction stories, such as those with animals, are effective for this and feature approachable and familiar interests to children from a variety of backgrounds and experiences.

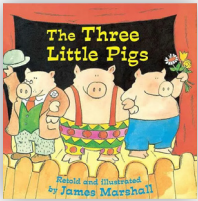
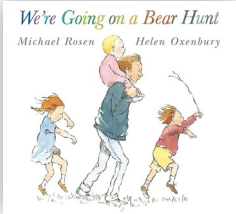
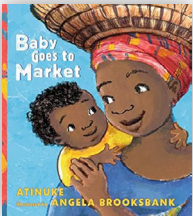
Choosing Materials

When children are encouraged to use tangible materials, their play is heightened and so is their ability to apply sequencing in their storytelling. Sequencing supports their ability to tell cohesive stories with a beginning, middle, and end. When teachers arrange items in an inviting way, children feel welcome to play and respond to the scene, reference a familiar book's text and illustrations, and retell the story in their own words, which supports sharing narratives with purpose and understanding. While we use natural materials in our story baskets, teachers can create a story basket using items available in their own settings and materials that connect with children's social and cultural contexts.

Following are materials teachers can use to create story baskets:

- › a container or basket large enough to hold the book and story items
- › a fiction book with narrative elements from a shared read aloud
- › small figurines to represent main characters or costumes and props children can use to act as characters in the book (such as a wolf's ears, a pig's nose, or a baby doll)
- › natural or recycled items or loose parts to enhance a story's plot line (gems for a pond, rocks for items such as food, cardboard for construction materials)
- › an appealing piece of fabric, such as a scarf, that can be used as the base for the story objects or to represent part of the book (such as a flowing river)

Story Basket Examples


Book	Supporting Materials	Teacher Scaffolding
 <p><i>The Three Little Pigs</i>, by James Marshall</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› Small toy pigs› Natural items to use for building (straws, sticks) as well as bricks or blocks› A costume or handmade prop, like a wolf nose	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› Narrating the story› Helping to build the three houses› Taking on a character’s role and acting out some of their actions› Repeating the familiar chant “Then I’ll huff, and I’ll puff . . .”
 <p><i>We're Going on a Bear Hunt</i>, by Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› A toy bear and figurines of people› Stones or gems for the river, cotton balls for the snow, straw for the grass, tree props for the forest, brown paper for the mud	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› Using key words in the text (<i>under, over, through</i>) as children explore materials› Offering a challenge for children to create a cave with available materials› Asking children to think of new obstacles and come up with sounds for going through them
 <p><i>Baby Goes to Market</i>, by Atinuke and illus. by Angela Brooksbank</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› Toy or printed banana, oranges, chin-chins, corn, and/or coconut› Toy motorcycle or other vehicle› A baby doll› A small bowl	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› Encouraging children to count the food items as they’re added to the basket or container› Encouraging children to role play being food vendors talking about and handing the food to the baby

Story baskets provide an opportunity for a familiar literacy routine while changing the text as curriculum and topics develop in the classroom. Using materials in unanticipated ways allows teachers to broaden the thinking of children and to honor what they bring to literacy experiences. Story baskets empower children to take learning into their own hands as they explore narratives through storytelling, acting, and play.

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Molly Simmons is a prekindergarten teacher at Bennett Day School in Chicago, Illinois.

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Standard 2: Curriculum

- 2C: Physical Development
- 2D: Language Development
- 2E: Early Literacy
- 2J: Creative Expression and Appreciation for the Arts



Word Play Throughout the Day

Phonological Awareness in the Preschool Classroom

Anne Gritt and Kalie Standish

Ms. Diane and her preschoolers are preparing for snack time. As the children come to the table, she begins to play a rhyming game. “This chair is for someone whose name rhymes with ‘dawn,’” she says.

“Shawn!” shout the children.

“That’s right. Shawn, can you help me? Please give everyone something that rhymes with ‘dune.’”

“A spoon!” Shawn replies.

“Yes. We’re eating applesauce today, and we each need a spoon. ‘Spoon’ and ‘dune’ rhyme. They sound the same at the end.”

Activities like the one above help build children’s developing *phonological awareness*, or the awareness of the sound structure of an alphabetic spoken language (like English and Spanish) and the ability to manipulate it. As a speech-language pathologist and an early childhood educator, we (the authors) focus on the importance of authentic, play-based experiences for fostering preschoolers’ language development. In this article, we highlight specific phonological awareness skills, then offer suggested activities to help children develop them.

Identifying Phonological Awareness Skills

Phonological awareness skills emerge during the early years and continue to develop through elementary school. This means that the lessons and activities introduced by early childhood educators can build a strong foundation for literacy development later on. Specific skills (adapted from *Literacy Learning for Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers: Key Practices for Educators* by Tanya S. Wright and colleagues) include:

- › **Rhyming:** *Cheese* and *knees* sound the same at the end.
- › **Alliteration:** The words *peanut* and *pasta* start with the same sound.
- › **Sentence segmentation:** *It is raining* has three separate words.
- › **Syllabification:** *Butterfly* has three syllables (bu-tter-fly).
- › **Onset-rime blending and segmentation:** The *onset* is the beginning consonant or blend (two consonants) of a word. The *rime* is the rest of the word. The /m/ sound can be blended with the rime /ap/ to make *map* (blending); the onset /t/ can be separated from the rime /op/ in the word *top* (segmentation).
- › **Phonemic awareness:** Attending to the smallest units of sound (phonemes), such as the phonemes /h/, /o/, and /p/ within the word *hop*, or blending the sounds /t/, /i/, and /p/ to make the word *tip*.

(“Key Terms,” on this page, offers definitions for related yet different elements of sound and letter learning associated with an alphabetic language.)

Key Terms

Phonological awareness: A broad term that refers to the awareness of the sound structure of an alphabetic spoken language, including the ability to manipulate it.

Phonemic awareness: A subskill of phonological awareness that refers to the ability to identify and manipulate the smallest unit of sound that distinguishes one spoken word from another.

Phoneme: An individual unit of sound that can distinguish one word from another (for example, /b/ and /m/ are different phonemes in English because *bat* and *mat* are different words).

Grapheme: A symbol (in English and Spanish, for example, a letter or set of letters) that represent(s) a phoneme.

Alphabetic principle: The understanding that alphabet letters represent spoken sounds in a systematic way.

Phonics: An instructional practice that explicitly maps graphemes onto phonemes.

Spelling: Connecting phonemes to graphemes to represent spoken words in print.

Source: *Literacy Learning for Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers: Key Practices for Educators*, by Tanya S. Wright, Sonia Q. Cabell, Nell K. Duke, and Mariana Souto-Manning (2022)

Introducing Phonological Awareness Activities

Because preschoolers learn best through a combination of planned and spontaneous learning experiences, effective phonological awareness instruction incorporates some planned small- and/or large-group instruction as well as learning opportunities like the one in the opening vignette. It's important to include children's home languages and other aspects of their social and cultural contexts when planning these activities. Consider incorporating words in a child's home language, using a nursery rhyme or familiar story that is important to the family's culture, and sharing fingerplays that families can use in their home languages.

Remember that children do not need to master one skill before moving on to another; rather, teachers can introduce these concepts at the same time. Following are some ideas for playful activities that teachers can incorporate throughout



the learning day that integrate movement, songs, books, and creative expressions.

- › Embed rhymes to help develop **rhyming** skills. For example, recite “Humpty Dumpty” as children build with blocks or play in the kitchen. Say “Pat-A-Cake” as children play with clay. Send children on a rhyme search: ask them to find something that rhymes with “cook” (“book”), “rink” (“sink”), and “boar” (“door”). Or use a rhyming word instead of a child’s name to call on them (as in the opening vignette). There are a variety of engaging rhyming books to read aloud with children, such as *Families, Families, Families*, by Suzanne Lang, *Frog on a Log?*, by Kes Gray, and *Billy Bloo Is Stuck in Goo*, by Jennifer Hamburg. Also consider tapping into favorite rhyme and rhyming books from children’s homes or communities.
- › Read books rich in **alliteration**. *Pete the Cat and the Perfect Pizza Party*, by James and Kimberly Dean, *The Worrywarts*, by Pamela Duncan Edwards, and *Old MacDonald Had a Dragon*, by Ken Baker, are some of our favorites. Along with stopping to note and play with the alliteration in these texts, practice this skill by adding a word before a child’s name that starts with the same sound (Jumping Jada, Charming Charles).
- › Practice **sentence segmentation** by counting the words in familiar sentences. For example, tell the children “It’s time to get our coats,” counting the six words with your fingers as you speak.
- › Introduce movement into **syllabification** by clapping, hopping, or stomping each syllable. Bring in musical instruments (drums, tambourines, rhythm sticks), and ask children to hit them for each syllable.
- › Use your hands or objects (magnetic tiles, puzzle pieces, blocks, or pieces of playdough) to illustrate **onset-rime blending and segmenting**. For blending, face the children and hold out your right hand (by itself or holding an object) as you say the onset, then your left hand (with or without an object) as you say the rime. Move your hands or the objects together as you say the whole word. When practicing segmenting, begin with your hands or the objects together, then move them apart as you segment the word into its onset and its rime.

- › Build **phonemic awareness** skills by calling children’s attention to the smallest unit of sounds in familiar words, such as pointing out two names that start with the same sound or telling the children, “It’s cold outside. We will all need to wear something on our heads that starts with /h/.”

Conclusion

Phonological awareness is critical for children’s literacy development. As these skills develop in the preschool years, we should incorporate them into our daily practices. Word play that includes movement and manipulatives will help you target phonological awareness in developmentally appropriate ways that are also playful and joyful.

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Standard 2: Curriculum

2D: Language Development
2E: Early Literacy
2J: Creative Expression and Appreciation for the Arts



Literacy Learning Using Large-Format Class Books

Amanda Wilson and Sarah Ramsey

One spring morning, a group of preschoolers gathers on the carpet to hear Ms. Sarah read *Red-Eyed Tree Frog*, by Joy Cowley. The large photographs and simple text draw the children into the red-eyed tree frog's nighttime journey to survive rainforest predators and find food.

"Do you think you know what makes this frog unique?" Ms. Sarah asks as she points to the cover of the big book.

"Good eyesight," says Tate.

"Yes, and why do you think he has good eyesight, Tate?" Ms. Sarah asks.

"Because of the red eyes," Tate confidently replies.

When Ms. Sarah finishes the story, another teacher, Ms. Amanda, guides the children to two oversized sketchbooks open on the floor. Seven children circle each sketchbook, crayons in hand, as Ms. Amanda asks them, "What do you remember from the reading today?"

The opening vignette shows that placing large-format class books on the floor can give children the space and materials to share their learning experiences in writing. *Class books* are child-created texts filled with children's compositions, which may come in the form of drawings, scribbles, and estimated spellings. In our experiences, we have found that they can be a powerful tool to foster an array of early literacy skills with children as young as 3. Together, children can express their thoughts and their combined learning and build a sense of ownership, collaboration, and pride as they document their collective voices. Additionally, early childhood educators can keep these class-created texts and—with children—plan and design future learning experiences.

Our practice of creating floor-based class books was inspired by the work of Claire Warden, which is outlined in *Talking and Thinking Floorbooks*. In this article, we discuss our experiences using large, collaborative, floor-based class books to promote early literacy skills alongside read alouds of informational texts. In addition, we share how others can implement class books in their own settings and across the curriculum.

Supporting Early Literacy Skills

“What did the red-eyed tree frog eat in our story?” Ms. Sarah asks.

“A moth,” Georgia says. She smiles and begins to draw the moth.

Another child nearby, Kelsie, sketches a black box around her animals.

“Kelsie, is that at nighttime?” Ms. Amanda asks.

“Yes! Because the frog woke up at night,” says Kelsie.

As the pages fill with colorful depictions of snakes, moths, and red-eyed frogs, the preschoolers sign their names. Some write their names with one or two letters; others write a string of letters. They return their crayons to their bins and share what they contributed.

Reading informational texts aloud can capture children’s attention and provide rich language and details that stimulate children’s thinking, anchor their learning, and help formulate their ideas for writing. Placing blank books on the floor to record their collective writings (in all forms) encourages and harnesses a connection to print. For example, through their compositional drawings, Georgia and Kelsie shared what they learned from the read aloud, and their teachers encouraged them to elaborate by asking them questions. They and the other children also practiced writing their names in letters, letter-like formations, and scribbles.

In addition to spurring and showcasing writing, teachers can use large-format, floor-based class books to foster other areas of early literacy development, including oral language skills, listening comprehension, and print concepts. Some suggested strategies teachers can use as children create collective class books include

- › pointing to parts of the children’s work and prompting children to talk about their ideas and learning with open-ended statements and questions, such as “Tell me about your drawing/writing”; “What do you

remember?”; “What is happening here?” Encourage more drawing and writing based on a child’s response.

- › transcribing a child’s dictation and placing the text near the child’s drawings. Children can also add words to the page in any form they’re comfortable with.
- › encouraging children to sign their names next to their work in the class book.
- › acknowledging the various forms of children’s compositions, such as wavy scribbles mimicking writing, reversed lettering, and strings of letters.
- › prompting children’s thinking and interactions by offering copies of photographs or illustrations from the read aloud book. Photographs serve as a reminder of the information in the text and help children maintain a connection and engagement with it.
- › making the book and physical representations of information in the book (such as plastic animals, nature-based elements, and loose parts) available when possible.

Selecting Books and Materials for Large-Format Class Books

Before early childhood educators introduce large-format class books to children, they can prepare by carefully considering the texts and materials needed. Considerations include:

- **Selecting texts.** Informational texts for read alouds can provide simple, accurate concepts and ideas. Children find this information familiar, relatable, and easy to depict in drawings and writings. Among other features to look for, consider texts with real-life photographs that connect to overarching learning goals and that link to children’s interests and lived experiences. Teachers can vary the selections to integrate topics linked to all content areas, but informational science texts often present engaging images and are a great place to begin with preschoolers.
- **Choosing writing materials.** Oversized sketchbooks that are spiral-bound with thick paper measuring 18-by-24 inches work well. As a cost-saving measure, teachers can use 20 or more 22- by 28-inch poster boards bound with large metal rings. Two poster-sized pages can provide adequate space for six to eight children to gather and find space to contribute their scribbles, drawings, and writings. In addition, providing crayons or writing utensils that do not bleed through the paper works best.

Cross-Curricular Opportunities

High-quality informational texts are rich with concrete concepts and language about the natural and social world and provide relevant and useful details that link to many curricular topics. Class books can easily integrate into other content areas: teachers can use them before, during, or after read alouds and with other structured experiences in math, science, and social studies. (To learn more, see “Selecting Books and Materials for Large-Format Class Books” on page 25.)

In addition, class books can provide extensive, long-term documentation for teachers (which can be shared with families too). They can be kept over time so that teachers and children can revisit children’s previous experiences with print. As children add to the books, teachers can date each of their contributions. Then, they can use the children’s entries to help guide and plan future learning activities and experiences.

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Want to Learn More?

For more about informational texts in early childhood, read “Nurturing Curiosity: Using and Creating Informational Texts,” by Nell K. Duke, in the December 2019/January 2020 issue of *Teaching Young Children* and “Tapping into Children’s Curiosities Using Informational Books in Early Childhood,” by Kathryn Lake MacKay and colleagues, in the Fall 2021 issue of *Young Children*.

Photographs: courtesy of the authors

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This article supports the following NAEYC Early Learning Programs standards and topics

Standard 2: Curriculum

2E: Early Literacy

2J: Creative Expression and Appreciation for the Arts

Big Words for Little Learners

Building Vocabulary While Reading Together

Mary K. Requa and Jill Yochim



Children enjoy sharing in the joy of reading with their families. Research shows that reading books together holds many benefits, including helping children build vocabulary knowledge—an important part of literacy learning. *Vocabulary* refers to the words we understand when reading or listening and to the words we use when writing and speaking. Learning vocabulary in the context of a book can encourage your child's interest in understanding and using new words.

Here are some ways to foster vocabulary knowledge as you read together. The examples are from the book *Giraffes Can't Dance*, by Giles Andreae, in English, but you can use the following strategies as you read to your child from a variety of books in any language.

Preview the book to choose new words to share with your child. Before reading with your child, look through the book and find words they may not know. Plan to pause to explain these new words.

Give a brief explanation of the new word. Use words your child already knows as you define new words. For example, in *Giraffes Can't Dance*, your child may not know the word *rooted* in “Gerald simply froze up. He was *rooted* to the spot.” You can define *rooted* as “frozen in place, stuck.”

Provide a synonym. Offering a different word that shares a similar meaning is helpful. You could share, for example, that another word for *rooted* is *unmoving*.

Ask your child to repeat the word with you. Say the target word (*rooted*) together.

Connect the new word to something your child already knows. Think about what your child already has experience with. For example, you may say, “Remember when I dropped my plate, and I was so surprised I didn't move? I was *rooted* in place for a moment.” You can help your child notice how words and concepts fit into different categories or experiences they know.

Use objects, pictures, and movements to demonstrate the meaning of the new word. Point to illustrations in the book that help explain the new word. Make use of objects and/or movements to demonstrate a new word's meaning (make a game of dancing and then suddenly being rooted to the spot).

Read the book with the new word multiple times. Children often enjoy rereading their favorite books. Explaining words during repeated readings can help your child remember new words.

Use the word at other times. Use the new word when you are not reading the book. For example, if you see a character in another book or in a movie who's rooted to the spot, point out the expression and remind your child of the word *rooted*.

Reading together is a great way to introduce new vocabulary to your child and support literacy learning.

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Spotlighting Children's Lived Experiences to Learn Letters and Sounds

Shelly L. Counsell, Mary J. Palmer, and Felicia G. Peat

Children are surrounded and immersed in a world of print. To increase their understanding of letters and the spoken sounds they represent (the *alphabetic principle*), early childhood educators can capitalize on the rich funds of knowledge, experiences, interests, and curiosities of the children in their settings. After all, children learn best when their learning experiences are meaningful, purposeful, and relevant. Recognizing what they already know helps them connect literacy learning among their home, community, and early learning program environments.

One way to make these connections is through child- or class-created alphabet, or ABC, books. Rather than relying solely on published texts, teachers can draw on children's lived experiences and interests to capture letters and the sounds they represent. Each page can introduce and reinforce a letter name, a letter's shape (both upper and lowercase), a common sound (or sounds) linked with that letter, and a picture of a word (or words) that begins with the letter sound. Asking children and their families to contribute images and words for an ABC book fosters literacy development as well as rich home-school connections. It's also a key component of an equitable classroom.

In this article, we (the authors) outline the benefits of ABC books and offer strategies for creating and using them. As early childhood and teacher educators, we have found that using community ABC books is an authentic approach to learning the alphabetic principle: when we capitalize on topics and themes that matter most to children, we're more likely to capture their fullest attention and active engagement.

Linking Letters and Sounds

Early knowledge about the alphabet—the distinct features of letters, the sounds they make, and their names—is a predictor of future reading success. These elements are interrelated; research suggests that children should learn letter names and sounds at the same time.

“Letter of the Week” is one longstanding practice that teachers have used to help children recognize letters and their corresponding sounds. This activity is largely teacher-directed and controlled: Letters are introduced in isolation and often recited and repeated out of context. Little attention is given to differentiation or children’s prior knowledge. This kind of rote learning may stifle children’s curiosity and the joy of early literacy. It also doesn’t reflect what we know about letters and how children tend to learn them. Some letters take more time and effort to learn, whereas others do not (for example, children often learn the letters in their own names more easily).

A more effective approach is to introduce letters and their sounds in an intentional, purposeful way; for example

- › teaching letters that occur more frequently in English sooner than other letters
- › teaching at least one vowel early on
- › tracking each child’s alphabet knowledge to differentiate instruction

(You can read more about systematic alphabet instruction in the NAEYC book *Literacy Learning for Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers: Key Practices for Educators*, by Tanya S. Wright and colleagues.)

Above all, teachers should use culturally relevant and responsive strategies to help children increase their understanding of the alphabetic principle. By involving children and their families in the literacy curriculum, educators ensure that each and every child sees themselves represented in the learning community. ABC books are one way to do this.

Creating a Class ABC Book

ABC books can be based on a variety of topics and experiences. Teachers can help children brainstorm possible subjects or themes during class meetings, read alouds of favorite books, mealtimes, nature walks, or dramatic play. For example, Dr. Palmer (the second author) used the book *The Bag I’m Taking to Grandma’s*, by Shirley Neitzel, to link to an ABC book about taking a trip. To help children come up with words for

their book, she brought in a packed overnight bag and asked children to

- › select an item from the bag
- › name it
- › identify its initial sound (such as /b/ for *ball* and *book*)

(For additional ideas on helping children brainstorm words, see “Activities to Spark Book Ideas” on this page.)

Once children have identified words for an ABC book, they can work in small groups to draw pictures or look for photos of the items in printed material (magazines, catalogs, grocery store flyers). These pictures are added to corresponding letter/sound pages to form the class book.

It is important to allow each child the opportunity to paste in their selected items and to use as many pages as needed for each letter. ABC books do not have to include all 26 letters to provide a meaningful alphabetic experience. As children create multiple ABC books around different themes, they will develop awareness concerning the size and quantity of pictures that can be placed on each page.

To involve families, teachers can invite them to contribute to the class ABC book. To reach as many families as possible, communication should be sent in multiple ways (email, notes, text messages). Teachers can assign a letter, let children select one randomly (such as drawing a magnetic letter from a bag), or leave the letter choice to each child. To offer the most flexibility, teachers can take different approaches for each ABC book their class creates. Children and families can use digital photos, drawings, labels, and words to visually represent their particular letter.

Activities to Spark Book Ideas

Read alouds are one way to help children decide on a theme for an ABC book, but other activities can spark ideas too. Here are a few that could supplement *The Bag I’m Taking to Grandma’s*.

- Recite the “Grandma’s Glasses” fingerplay with children.
- Discuss the relatives children like to visit and travel with (siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins). Record their answers in a picture bar graph.
- Brainstorm different types of luggage children could pack for a trip (duffle bag, backpack, suitcase).
- Discuss different items children might put in the luggage.

ABC books should be living documents, allowing children to add new items as their funds of knowledge expand with new experiences. We recommend creating one to two class ABC books near the beginning and at the end of the school year. This will help teachers document children’s learning of the alphabetic principle and their content knowledge. Children may want to create more books individually or in small groups throughout the year.

Family ABC Book Lending Library

Class ABC books should be displayed in the learning setting and available for checkout and overnight use at home. Teachers can tell families about them during home visits and open houses, in newsletters, on program websites, and during family-educator conferences. Teachers may also consider creating digital copies of the texts for families to access and use.

For additional practice and enrichment, families can create their own ABC books for children to share in class. With permission from both children and families, teachers can photocopy and laminate these books to add to the lending library. Children can check them out individually or in rotation to read at home and learn more about their classmates.

Family ABC books become personalized mirror and window books for preschoolers to read at home and in their early learning programs. As mirrors (reflecting the reader’s social and cultural contexts), family ABC books allow classmates with similar contexts to see and appreciate the practices, traditions, and routines they share as well as the differences that make them unique within a larger group identity. The books serve as windows (seeing and experiencing the reality and world of someone whose background and experiences are different) for those whose race, ethnicity, culture, language, gender, economic status, or abilities differ.

Teachers may want to include a reflection journal with each ABC book. This will encourage children and families to ask questions and/or make comments about the items they like and the new concepts or ideas they learn.

Getting Started

Both class and family ABC books help teachers create rich, high-quality, and culturally relevant and responsive literacy materials that help maximize the development of children’s essential reading and writing skills. (For some suggestions on high-quality, published ABC books, see [NAEYC.org/tyc/winter2024](https://naeyc.org/tyc/winter2024).) To begin this practice, we recommend that teachers first create an outline of the topics, themes, and units of study in their curricula plus any additional topics children are interested in exploring. For their own planning purposes, teachers can create a table for each topic with the letters A to Z. They can brainstorm possible items or ideas that support the topic and place these in the table, adding additional information as children investigate and explore. Educators can use this table as an ABC book teacher’s guide to help facilitate children’s brainstorming.

It is important to ask guiding questions to stimulate and support children’s thinking (“What do you need to get ready for bed?”) rather than tell children the specific items they should include to represent different letters. The goal is for children to actively engage, learn from, and enjoy the process and the product.

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This article supports the following NAEYC Early Learning Programs standards and topics

Standard 2: Curriculum
2D: Language Development
2E: Early Literacy

How Do You Use Storytelling in Your Program?

Q A study by Nicole Gardner-Neblett and John Sideris, published in the journal *Child Development* in 2017, shows that strong oral storytelling skills in preschool lead to better reading scores for Black boys as they progress through elementary school, while for Black girls proficiency in oral storytelling in preschool has the strongest effect during their first years of school but is less important later on.

Do you use storytelling as part of your literacy program? If so, how?

TONYA, MARYLAND

A I find that children's engagement is different when I tell stories versus reading a book. We include songs, and the children are developing their listening skills. I've also had great success using number stories with them; usually, after I model how to do it, the children come up with their own! We ask "why" a lot too, such as "Why did that caterpillar turn into a butterfly?" This is the basis for many of the stories we know and love.

AMY, NORTH CAROLINA

I like to use a lot of storytelling in various ways. We "tell news," where each child dictates their news (based in reality) weekly to the teacher, who writes it down verbatim.

We dramatize adult-authored and child-authored stories. The teacher sits with one child each day to write a story (often fiction but sometimes nonfiction). After the story is written, the child selects a cast to dramatize their story during the next class gathering. Most of my children love this!

ERICA, TEXAS

We use a storytelling approach based on the work of Vivian Paley, in which a child dictates a story to a teacher, who writes down the story word for word. The teacher then reads it, making sure that the child's story has been recorded accurately. Later, the children gather around our stage—marked by masking tape—to see and hear the story acted out by volunteers. The author chooses whether or not to be in the play and decides which character they want to be. Without rehearsal, the teacher begins to read the story. The brief story is acted out, the audience claps, and the class moves on to another child's story.

Children are the owners of the content, free to explore themes like power, friendship, and tragedy—all in ways that feel safe to them. Their questions, fears, hopes, sense of adventure, or explorations are explored through the world of play. This is a blend of literacy practice and dramatic play and involves the willingness to take risks.

HILARY, MINNESOTA

NAEYC's **HELLO** online forum is a great place to have conversations and create connections with peers around important early learning issues. Excerpts from HELLO have been edited for style and length.

Do you have questions or suggestions to share with your peers? Are you simply interested in reading different takes from early childhood educators around the country? Tap into the vibrant discussions on HELLO at hello.NAEYC.org/welcomehello.

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TEACHING YOUNG CHILDREN For the Preschool Professional

Vol 17, No 2 • Winter 2024

Published by the National Association
for the Education of Young Children

TYC—Teaching Young Children/Preschool

Vol 17, No 2
Winter 2024

TYC—Teaching Young Children/Preschool (ISSN 1939-7283) is published quarterly (mailing in the months of January, April, July, and October) by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 1401 H Street NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20005-2110.

NAEYC.org/tyc

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Cover Photo: Courtesy of Jose Vendil

Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in Pewaukee, Wisconsin.

Postmaster: Send address changes to:

TYC—Teaching Young Children/Preschool,
NAEYC Member Services, 1401 H Street NW,
Suite 600, Washington, DC 20005-2110.

Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation of *TYC—Teaching Young Children* (Publication ISSN 1939-7283)

Frequency of issue: Four times annually,
in Oct 2022, Jan, April, and July 2023

Annual subscription price: \$33.00.

Owner, publisher, and business office:

National Association for the Education
of Young Children

1401 H St. NW, Ste. 600
Washington, DC 20005-2051.

Editor: Annie Moses

Managing editor: Francine Markowitz

Contact person: Francine Markowitz
202-350-8839

**Bondholders, mortgagees, and other security
holders:** None.

Tax status: The nonprofit purpose, function,
and status of this organization and the exempt
status for federal income tax purposes have
not changed during the preceding 12 months.

**I certify that all information furnished
is true and complete:**

(signed) Francine Markowitz,
Managing Editor, 09/23/2023

	Average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months (Oct. 2022–Sep. 2023)	No. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date (Oct. 1, 2023)
A. Total number of copies printed (net press run)	25,460	24,642
B. Paid circulation		
1. Outside-county mailed subscriptions stated on form 3541	24,429	23,638
2. In-county mailed subscriptions stated on form 3541	0	0
3. Non-USPS [®] distribution—via dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales, and other means	277	267
4. Other classes mailed through USPS [®]	15	0
C. Total paid distribution (sum of B1, 2, 3, & 4)	24,721	23,905
D. Free distribution		
1. Outside-county mailed as stated on form 3541	0	0
2. In-county mailed as stated on form 3541	0	0
3. Other classes mailed through USPS [®]	0	0
4. Non-USPS [®] distribution	245	244
E. Total free distribution	245	244
F. Total distribution	24,966	24,149
G. Copies not distributed	464	493
H. Total (sum of F & G)	25,460	24,642
I. Percent paid and/or requested circulation	99.02%	98.99%



Big Beats for Young Peeps

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Nature-Based Early Learning is one of four concentrations offered within the Associate in Early Childhood Care & Education and Bachelor's in Early Childhood Education programs.

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