

What does 20 years of research say about teaching language and literacy in preschool?

The REL Southeast research team summarized 20 years of research to identify instructional practices that best support the language and literacy development of preschool students. The systematic review included 109 rigorous studies that evaluated 132 language and literacy interventions. The review reported the overall impacts on students' language and literacy performance before entering kindergarten.



How should schools or districts decide which instructional materials and strategies to use?

When making decisions, it is important to match the instructional objectives with student needs. In addition, determining required resources is fundamental for successful implementation.

Details about each intervention and how each was implemented in different settings can be found in the systematic review report. [Click on the report cover or here for more information.](#)

Click on the circles below to learn more about each instructional area.

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Supporting Language Development in Preschool

Language is the foundation of thinking and learning. Almost all interventions reviewed in the report included some language related instructional activities and some even taught language exclusively. The report identifies some effective instructional strategies and common misunderstandings when supporting preschoolers' language development.

We love interactive book reading! Read to them with tons of WH-questions!

Most of the interventions that taught language included interactive book reading as part of the instructional activities. In general, interactive book reading is an effective way to teach language. Specifically, evidence shows that asking questions before, during, and after interactive book reading can enhance the impact on language performance.

While reading a story, teachers may provide opportunities for students to find the main idea, connect text to students' life experiences, draw inferences beyond the text, make predictions, recall the story, or retell the story. Teachers may also introduce new vocabulary by labeling or identifying, defining, using word maps to generate synonyms and antonyms, or by providing examples and non-examples.

Small group activities support language development

One way to increase interactive instructional opportunities in your classroom is to carry out small group activities. When teaching language, students perform better when the intervention occurs in one-on-one or small group settings. Small groups allow students to receive more intensive instruction and allow teachers to have a more precise evaluation of student performance. Among interventions that taught language exclusively, the research team explored the impact of varying group size. Specifically, the review found that language-focused instruction had greater impact in groups smaller than six students than those occurred in whole group settings.



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Supporting Print Knowledge Development in Preschool

Print knowledge is another building block in preparing students to become good readers and writers. More than half of the interventions included in the report taught print knowledge. Specifically, most taught letter names or sounds, and some taught concepts about print. It is worth noting that no intervention taught print knowledge exclusively. Print knowledge instruction frequently co-occurred with language and/or phonological awareness instruction.

Does order matter when teaching letter names and sounds?

Most students enter preschool having some knowledge of the alphabet. Regardless, teachers should still plan to teach all 26 letter names and their sounds. Of the studies included in the report, only a few examined teaching letter names/sounds sequentially, and little evidence supports one instructional order over another. In fact, teaching either letter name or letter sounds or both, all produce similar improvement in letter knowledge.

Is teaching letter names and letter sounds enough to prepare preschoolers for reading and writing?

Of all the interventions that taught print knowledge, some did not teach phonological awareness. We compared the impacts of these interventions with those that taught both. The results showed that interventions that taught both print knowledge and phonological awareness improved print knowledge performance, while interventions that taught print knowledge without teaching phonological awareness did NOT. Teachers can introduce letter names and sounds while also providing phonological awareness activities. There is no need to delay teaching print knowledge until after phonological awareness instruction or vice-versa.

What are other effective strategies to teach print knowledge?

Another component of print knowledge is concepts about print which includes the understanding that print carries meaning, and how a book “works.” Some interventions introduced concepts about print by using print referencing during shared book reading. Teachers may direct students’ attention to print by explicitly commenting on, asking questions about, pointing to, and tracking text that is being read.

For more information, please go to the [other resources](#) section for other strategies to promote print knowledge in your classroom.



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Supporting Early Writing Development in Preschool

Early writing is supportive of students' later literacy development. Preschoolers might start exploring writing with drawing, marking, or scribbling letter-like shapes. In addition, early writing also involves the understanding of general conventions such as English print going from left to right on a page, and how written language works (for example, speech can be represented by individual sounds, which can be written down using letters). Preschoolers' exploration with writing can demonstrate their knowledge of the English writing system.

Is it too early to teach writing in preschool?

In this report, most interventions that taught writing included some phonological awareness or print knowledge instructional components. Some studies evaluated the impact on writing even when the intervention did not teach writing. The evidence shows that teaching writing solely is not likely to improve writing performance. However, when interventions also included phonological awareness and print knowledge, we found a positive impact on writing even when writing was not taught. Teachers are encouraged to include writing in their overall instructional program, while also emphasizing language, phonological awareness, and print knowledge.

What else can be done to support preschoolers' writing development?

Writing time is considered an important activity in many preschool classrooms. Yet, it might be challenging to offer explicit writing instruction when your students have diverse experiences in writing. Besides playing with sounds in the words and introducing letters, teachers may demonstrate writing those taught letters or words, and encourage students to copy, trace, or even spell them when teachers see fit. Inviting students to write their names is another way to foster early writing skills. Writing instruction that address composition can help students make the connection between oral language and written language.

For more information, please go to the [other resources](#) section for other strategies to promote early writing in your classroom.



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Other resources

Language

[Snapshot series: Foundations in Emergent Literacy Instruction infographic](#) Vocabulary and Oral Language

[Professional Learning Community: Emergent Literacy](#) Module 3 and 4

[WWC Shared Book Reading intervention report](#)

[WWC Dialogic Reading intervention report](#)

[Joyful Reading and Creative Expression with Young Children: Planning Tips and Tools](#) video

[A Teaching Routine for Academic Vocabulary in Grades PreK-1](#) video

[Supporting Dual Language Learners in the PreK Classroom](#) blog

Phonological Awareness

[Snapshot series: Foundations in Emergent Literacy Instruction infographic](#) Phonological Awareness

[Professional Learning Community: Emergent Literacy](#) Module 2

[WWC Phonological Awareness Training intervention report](#)

[WWC Phonological Awareness Training plus Letter Knowledge Training intervention report](#)

[FCRR Student Center Activities PreK](#) Phonological Awareness

Print Knowledge

[Snapshot series: Foundations in Emergent Literacy Instruction infographic](#) Print Knowledge

[Professional Learning Community: Emergent Literacy](#) Module 1

[FCRR Student Center Activities PreK](#) Alphabet Knowledge

Decoding

[FCRR Student Center Activities PreK](#) Letter-Sound Correspondence

Early Writing

[Joyful Reading and Creative Expression with Young Children: Planning Tips and Tools](#) video

[FCRR Student Center Activities PreK](#) Emergent Writing