
Even Start Family Literacy Program
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Professional Development

U.S. Department of Education

Language in Preschool Learning: the Link to Learning in Other Domains

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Language in Preschool Learning: the Link to Learning in Other Domains

Introduction

Research has provided early childhood educators with clear direction about the importance of designing language and other literacy learning experiences in preschool classrooms. Language arts, formerly thought of as an isolated block of instruction, is now thought of as being intentionally integrated throughout the preschool curriculum. With that understanding, Even Start programs have been directed to review their current preschool practices and make meaningful changes in program content and design. Through examples and reflection, this paper provides a tool to promote discussion among preschool providers about current practices in language instruction, and ways that language instruction can strengthen all other areas of schooling.

Even Start project coordinators are encouraged to discuss the ideas in this paper with preschool staff. After reading the paper, preschool staff could discuss the extent to which their current practices integrate language and literacy with other domains: Are there ways to extend social and motor development by the way language development is supported? Are there ways to bring language learning into other classroom learning activities and routines? Staff could also identify how the teacher exemplified in this paper has planned activities that build oral language (including background knowledge), phonological awareness, print awareness and writing, and alphabet knowledge. They could then discuss how similar practices could be incorporated in their Even Start program. Finally, staff and local coordinators can use the ***Reflection and Planning Checklist*** (page 10) to review their current practices and instigate ideas that will lead to concrete improvements.

The Preschool Challenge in Even Start

At a recent U.S. Department of Education training session, a presenter introduced a study about language acquisition by saying that “while language was traditionally thought to be a cognitive process, in fact, it is a social phenomenon.” The statement puzzled early childhood staff in the audience who had studied language, social-emotional, cognitive and physical development as separate domains of learning and development. By the time the researcher completed her presentation, the audience understood that developing language was indeed a social process that was highly dependent on interactions with others. This process depends on and supports the development of all learning domains — language is inextricably related to cognitive, social, emotional and motor development.

Think about a typical day in a classroom. Try to envision helping children scaffold new ideas without the use of language. Imagine how difficult it would be to guide them to cooperate and collaborate with peers and moderate their actions without relying on language. Think about how challenging it would be to teach movement and directionality without language prompts. From the moment preschoolers find their personalized cubbies as they enter the classroom each day, teachers and

children rely on oral and written language to converse, to explore and learn, and to negotiate the environment.

Some children, including many Even Start children, enter preschool without the oral language skills that allow them to fully participate in and benefit from the preschool experience. The job of the preschool teacher is to support the language learning that facilitates development of the full child. This paper provides research-based examples of ways that preschool teachers can develop and use language to support learning across all developmental domains.

Case Study Example:

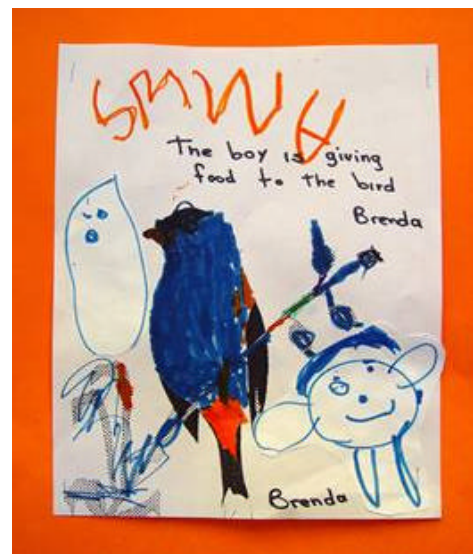
A Day of Language in the Preschool Classroom

During the first month of classes, a pre-kindergarten teacher had observed that there were marked differences in how children participated in activities and group experiences. Initially, the teacher thought that it was a typical adjustment to a new classroom, teacher and peers. But the differences persisted even though the teacher was confident that children were comfortable in the new setting after several weeks. Through a review of observation notes, the teacher determined that the differences in participation were related to children's varying levels of background knowledge. She noted, for example, that when the children visited a petting zoo, they were all interested in the animals, but some were not able to name the animals which limited their participation in conversation.

Building on the children's current interest in animals, the teacher developed a series of learning experiences based on the theme "Animals, Animals Everywhere." The teacher's plan was to introduce content about the animal kingdom with the goal of increasing vocabulary and background knowledge while supporting learning in all the other domains of development.

Introducing the Study of Animals

To introduce the theme "Animals, Animals Everywhere" and the concept of animals, the teacher showed the class a variety of pictures of animals that lived in homes, on farms, and in the wild. As each animal was introduced, a child was given the picture to hold. (The teacher had pre-determined who would get which picture, matching the first letter of the animal's name with the child's name — David and donkey, Gina and giraffe, Carol and cat). As the teacher distributed the animals, each child was also given a "word tag" to wear throughout the day. The word tag was a picture of the animal with the name below the picture on one side and the child's name on the back side. Children identified the animal by name, then sounded out the first letter of the animal name and the child's name, and then said the letter.

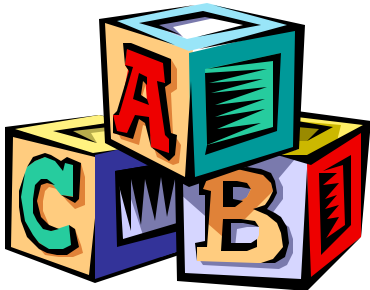


The teacher then introduced the book *I Went Walking*, by Sue Williams. The book has much repetition of text and pictures of common animals. Children were invited to hold up their animal pictures if they were “found” in the book during the reading. The teacher skillfully read the book with the children, encouraging children to name animals on each page, to guess the next animal from picture cues, and to join in the repeated chant, “What did you see?” Throughout, the teacher paid attention to how individual children responded.

The teacher used the word tags in a variety of ways throughout the day. She took the time to converse playfully with each child about the animal named on the tag. The teacher pointed out the letter similarities in the child’s name and the animal name. For those who had limited letter recognition skills, she focused only on the beginning letter; for those with some familiarity, she included additional letters. For example, with Gina the giraffe, she pointed out “G” and “a.” She encouraged children to find the animals on their tags in pictures, books and activities. The word tags were also used in gross motor play later in the day.

Building with Blocks

In the block center, the teacher had posted pictures of animals found on farms, in homes, in the wild, and in zoos. She also added a large sign: “Please build us a safe place to live!” There were pictures of “animal homes,” a dry erase board for drawing plans and note taking, and measuring tapes and rulers. To get children thinking and to promote planning, the teacher asked open-ended questions about where the different animals usually lived, what children thought the animal homes looked like, and how animals came to live in zoos.



As they worked in small groups, the teacher asked children to decide why particular animals lived in different areas. Children discovered through conversation, trial and error, and questioning that there might be more than one suitable home for a particular animal, that a zoo was a “contrived habitat,” and that different animals had different care and space requirements.

The teacher provided opportunities for planning and practice, problem-solving, measuring and balancing — all typically thought of as cognitive skills. The activities also helped to develop fine motor skills as children worked on building animal homes, and contributed to children’s social development as they worked collaboratively to create the different kinds of homes.

Dramatic Play

The teacher set up the play area as a veterinary center with a variety of stuffed animals and appropriate props, such as medical equipment, a telephone, a calculator, dress-up clothes, clip boards, brochures from a nearby veterinarian’s office, baskets for beds, prescription pads, pencils and pens, and pictures of veterinarians caring for animals. Using those pictures, the teacher introduced the concept of care for animals. Some children knew about veterinarians, but for those who did not, the teacher made the connection to pediatric care, something every child already knew about.

The language of veterinary medicine, with such words as boarding, kennels, fleas and felines, provided opportunity for expanding vocabulary and exploring rare and unusual words. While most of the conversation among the children centered on the care of domestic animals and reflected what they knew from their own medical visits, the teacher asked probing questions such as, "How would the veterinarian take care of an elephant? Could the elephant come to the office? Why or why not?"

Caring for animals provided a social, emotional, cognitive, motor and language learning experience that drew on background knowledge to build additional knowledge and expand vocabulary. Children represented this knowledge by acting it out in social-dramatic play in which they took on roles of people and animals.

In the Art Center

Continuing the theme of *I Went Walking*, the teacher suggested that the children create animals they might have seen on a walk. The art center had a variety of materials (crayons, pencils, sponges, paint, tissue paper, glue, sticks, feathers, glitter, etc.) and informational books, as well as narrative books about animals and art. The planning activity (identifying animals and choosing of materials) provided opportunities for conversations between the teacher and the children and among the children themselves. The finished art works were opportunities for extended one-to-one conversations. When each creation was completed, the teacher wrote and labeled it with the child. The teacher encouraged each child to write independently as she coached and modeled the writing: "Child's name" went walking and what did he see? When the child responded, the teacher wrote: "I saw an animal name" looking at me." The art pieces were then placed on display by each child — a collective class wall book, *We Went Walking*, to be used as a language activity over the next few days.



While preschool children typically move from the concrete to the abstract, in this art activity they took their abstract perception of animals and created a concrete representation. This required them to use cognitive, language, sensory-perceptual and fine motor skills. They practiced emerging writing skills with their brief "stories" and picture labeling. They also experienced being a member of a community when the artwork was pieced together as a class wall book.

Large Motor Play

The teacher considered acting out the *I Went Walking* story by taking children for a walk, but she decided the nearby area was too limited in terms of how far they could walk and the chances of seeing a live animal. So instead she created a gross motor activity game. The teacher demonstrated the game by walking around the circle of children and calling on the animals identified on the word tag cards distributed that morning. For example, the teacher said "I went walking and what did I see? I saw a zebra running." Then the child wearing the zebra tag would run around the teacher and circle of children. For children who had limited background knowledge about animals, the teacher used an extra name cue: "I saw Hannah the horse galloping." But for those who were more familiar with animals, the child's name cue was dropped: "I saw an elephant stroll in front of me." (Eric the

Elephant would walk slowly around the circle.) Once the children had the idea, they became the leaders in the game, calling out the cues to each other.

In this interactive game, children demonstrated their ability to listen, respond, and understand prepositions and animal names, while practicing gross motor skills such as running, walking, hopping and skipping. In addition, taking turns and cheering on peers provided social stimulation.

Other Learning and Play

The day included other learning opportunities and choices for play that did not focus directly on the theme, but the teacher was careful to observe whether children spontaneously related another activity or conversation to the theme. Did they talk about animals in other play? Did they choose a book from the library center that was about animals? Did any conversations happen at snack time that related to the theme? Did they write about animals in the writing center? What seemed interesting to them and what might they want to know more about? Most importantly, was the level of discussion and participation increasing for the children who typically spoke very little or withdrew?



Daily Closing

At the end of the day, the teacher routinely held a reflection time where children talked about the day. The teacher wrote the reflections in a journal. Two new vocabulary words that were introduced during the day were written on a large sheet of paper, and the teacher asked children to describe the meaning of the words. Those words would be reviewed the following day and incorporated in some way in activities for reinforcement. On this day, the vocabulary words were “duckling” and “veterinarian.” The teacher closed with one more reading of *I Went Walking* with the intention of observing children’s learning and interest in continuing with the theme. As they left the school, the teacher urged the children to “keep their eyes open when walking outside” and be ready to talk about what animals they saw when they returned the next day.

Reflecting on Pedagogy

In this example, the teacher intentionally planned for building background knowledge and vocabulary through direct instruction combined with child-directed play on a **topic of interest** to the children. While learning occurred across all domains, the emphasis placed on language and cognitive development and the many opportunities to practice through play promoted and heightened oral language and vocabulary acquisition. This is not simple work; on the contrary, it requires a skillful, responsive and knowledgeable teacher to successfully individualize and balance children’s learning. It requires a teacher to reflect daily about each child’s experiences and accomplishments that day, and then plan how to build on those accomplishments tomorrow – and the day after tomorrow, and the day after that.

“Effective early childhood literacy programs:

- are grounded in what is known about children’s physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development;
- are playful and intentional;
- acknowledge and value differences among children;
- engage children in ways that are meaningful and pleasurable,
- involve scaffolding children’s experiences from the known to the unknown; and
- are developmentally appropriate.” (Strickland and Schickendanz, 2004)

All of these markers were evident in the case study example. The teacher observed and assessed that there were children in her class who could neither express themselves effectively nor participate fully in activities because they lacked necessary vocabulary and cognitive experiences. The teacher developed a plan to address that gap, using play as the vehicle to practice and to expand on new learning with an emphasis on building vocabulary and knowledge about a topic of interest to the children.

Prior to planning content, the teacher thought about a number of questions that could be answered from her observations and experiences:

- What did each child already know about animals and how could the teacher best build upon that knowledge?
- How could the teacher extend planned learning into play so that the children had sufficient opportunity to practice what they were learning?
- What materials and changes in the environment would be required to effectively engage children in meaningful play?
- What could the teacher do in large, small and one-to-one groupings that would support new learning?
- How could the teacher maintain a balance between child-directed and teacher-directed activities and still meet intended goals?
- What would be used as built-in assessments of learning?
- How long and how far could the teacher extend the theme and still be engaging while building knowledge?

While the teacher planned ways to extend learning about animals during the day, she was also mindful that children needed to **direct their own play**. This required her to set up the environment for purposeful play, coaching children to focus on interesting tasks but allowing them to direct the play. This extending of learning through practice is described as “time windows — a time when a child develops networks of associations with repeated learning experiences that are related in content.” (Landry, 2004) The charge for the teacher was to think about ways that learning about animals could be connected to other learning and, at the same time, encourage learning in all the domains.

Well-designed play settings are one feature of this classroom, but the other key ingredient is the teacher. This teacher played three important roles identified by Billie Enz and James Christie (1997): stage manager, co-player and play leader.

- As **stage manager**, the teacher gathered relevant and engaging props, organized the setting and dialogued with children about how they might play/explore in each setting. The use of open-ended and probing questions helped children to set a play direction.
- As **co-player**, the teacher took on minor roles to nudge the play along and/or to model some behaviors and skills so that children could continue their play. This role was particularly important with the children who typically withdrew from play — the teacher, as co-player, could “give them the words/actions through play” to continue their play.

- As **play leader**, the teacher asked questions and enriched play settings by leading conversations with each child or small groups of children.

The teacher used many effective “tools of the trade”: picture prompts to gain meaning, stressing phonological awareness; print for meaning, moving from the abstract to the concrete; scaffolding children’s practice of new concepts; repeating content in new ways; having children reflect on what was learned and; paying careful attention to individual and small group conversations. These strategies were incorporated into both direct and indirect instruction.

Case Study Example, continued:

Extending the Theme and Extending Learning

The teacher planned to extend the theme as long as the children were engaged. For the following day, she maintained the veterinary office and the block corner as designed because there seemed to be great interest and much unfinished play. She planned to use the wall book made in the art center by having each author “read” his or her page as part of a choral reading.

To incorporate literature, she planned to re-read “I Went Walking” and add a similar concept book, “Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?” by Bill Martin Jr. She would then guide the children in identifying differences and similarities between the stories and text. This discussion would provide a springboard for other related learning activities: placing animal figures on a large floor Venn diagram to represent animals found in the books; sorting animals by size, color, and typical venue; using pictures to teach baby animal terms (e.g., calf, duckling, kitten, foal, cub); acting out going on a bear hunt with physical actions, gesturing, and rare vocabulary.

The extension and expansion of learning can take many directions; how the teacher moves forward is dependent on the intent of the learning and the interest of the children. Whatever the decided path for learning, language and literacy will be integrated purposefully with other areas of content and development.



Key Ideas

- ☞ Planning for language development intentionally is essential. “In every activity, throughout every domain of instructional goals, the teacher has a meta-goal: developing children’s language and literacy.” (Tharp and Entz, 2003) Think carefully and creatively about ways to infuse literacy throughout each day. Lesson plans should reflect how literacy is part of each activity. Asking open-ended questions, writing children’s dictation, posting word lists, using environmental print, playing with the sounds of language, introducing new vocabulary, and connecting books to play are a few ideas on a long and growing list of ways to integrate language into content.
- ☞ Think about the amount of time that is spent in productive interactions in one-to-one, small and large groups in the classroom. There should be a preponderance of small and one-to-one groupings where children can have a voice and ask questions freely. While children are learning through conversation, they are also developing social competencies and self-regulation. While “having conversations” seems so simple, the quality, intent and sensitivity needed to promote learning require a well-trained and thoughtful teacher. Finding time to be responsive requires thinking about ways to efficiently manage the classroom, so that the teacher can attend to initiating and engaging in meaningful discussions with children as individuals and in small groups throughout the day.
- ☞ The goal of creating activity centers is to engage children in meaningful play and exploration of their choice, not to direct or require specific play. The art of the teacher as stage manager lies in being able to arrange and equip centers with props and materials that are very inviting and also likely to promote desired learning. Be thoughtful about the kinds of artifacts and materials placed in settings; learning develops by connecting new learning to things already known. More important than any prop, however, is conversation as teachers guide children to think about materials and ideas within settings.
- ☞ Neuroscience findings about how the brain develops in the early years confirms the importance of providing children with opportunities to practice or “rehearse” new learning so that the information becomes part of the child’s memory or knowledge base. That practice should be engaging and interesting to the child, and typically designed as play activities during the day. Teachers need to carefully monitor that practice and assess when a child masters a skill or understands a concept so that they can then scaffold new learning.
- ☞ The variability in preschool children’s exposure to literacy-rich environments and interactions is huge, and the **most economically disadvantaged children usually have the poorest experiences**. Research demonstrates that children living in poverty typically have less exposure to rich vocabulary, fewer opportunities for extended conversations, and less opportunity for literacy development. The preschoolers Even Start serves are some of the most disadvantaged children in the country. They are the very children that need to be in the highest quality classrooms in order to diminish the inequality for disadvantaged children noted at school entry. Language and cognitive experiences that are meaningful, interesting, and productive are key to the thriving development of this vulnerable group of children.

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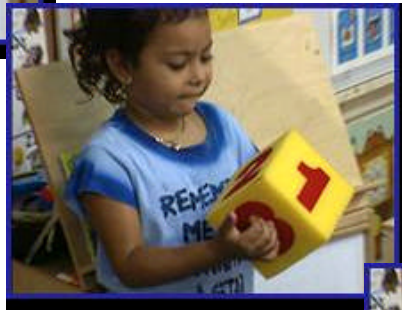
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Reflection and Planning Checklist

Designing and Providing Language-Rich Learning Experiences

Below is a checklist of some key considerations for designing a preschool classroom environment and daily instruction that supports the development of oral language, phonological awareness, background knowledge, and alphabet and print knowledge. This list is not meant to be inclusive but, rather, highlights factors that a preschool teacher might consider when planning instruction that will build language and literacy — and build on language and literacy.

-  What specific skills and concepts will I be teaching? How do those skills and concepts align with curricular goals?
-  If the focus skills are *not* about language and literacy development, what role do language and literacy play in the learning? What language and literacy skills (oral language, phonological awareness, background knowledge, alphabet and print knowledge) will I intentionally build into the learning experience and into practice?
-  If the focus skills are about language and literacy development, what role do other domains of development play in the learning? What cognitive, physical development, and/or socio-emotional skills will I intentionally build into the learning experience and into practice?
-  How do I present the learning so that it is interesting to the children? Are there areas of children's interests that can be used as a beginning point for developing instructional activities?
-  How might I introduce the new learning? How will I present, demonstrate, or model the skill or task? What materials should be made available? What particular books and other print would support the learning? What tools (writing, art, etc.) should be made available?
-  How can I differentiate instruction so that it is appropriate for all the children? What kinds of groupings would be preferred and who should be in the groupings?
-  How can I extend this new learning into other learning during the day so that children have an opportunity to practice in other contexts and activities?
-  What changes need to be made within the classroom setting to promote the desired learning? What and how can activity centers be modified to support new learning? What props could be made available to encourage learning and conversation?
-  What actions can I take throughout the day to encourage and extend learning, e.g., conversations to initiate, ideas that can be built into routines, etc.?
-  How will I assess learning outcomes? What specifically am I planning to observe (seeing, hearing and listening) throughout the day?