Playful Activities for READINESS

Laying a Foundation for Literacy

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Acknowledgments

Years ago, I read this quote from Irene Gaskins, founder of the Benchmark School: "Expert teachers become experts because they are always honing their skills. They regularly read and discuss with colleagues professional books and journals and seek answers to questions about how to better meet the needs of their students. The inevitable outgrowth of these professional learning activities that are based on research about what works in classrooms is better instruction for all children." I took this to heart and have been on my professional journey ever since. I'd like to acknowledge my colleagues who have joined me along the way.

Coming from middle grades, it was Erica Fulmer and Laura Lindemann who showed me the way to early childhood. Erica let me in on the playfulness of lessons with young children while at the same time implementing expert, intentional literacy instruction. Laura opened my eyes to systematically teaching young children to do a whole host of things through modeling and guided practice.

My early search for professional learning led me to Marcia Invernizzi at the University of Virginia, who opened my eyes to young children's reading development. Many thanks to Virginia Coffey and Liza Taylor, a dynamic mother-daughter duo, and Alisha Demchak—all three are extraordinary early childhood educators. While my list of collaborators is long, I am especially indebted to Gail Lovette and Steph Tatel for challenging me and helping me grow as an educator. I have come to rely on our discussions and our collective search for insights on teaching young children to read and write.

Lastly, I am deeply grateful for the many young children in my life—past, present, and future—and perhaps most especially for Preston and Bella. Having first-row seats to their journeys in learning to read was one of the true pleasures of my life.

1 CHAPTER ONE
Setting the Stage

A child's early years build the foundation for their success in school and life. Since Head Start was established in 1965, more and more children have had the opportunity to participate in early childhood education, and these prekindergarten experiences can have long-lasting positive effects (Magnuson and Duncan, 2016). Since the National Institute for Early Education Research's (NIEER) first report on prekindergarten in 2002, access to state-funded prekindergarten has dramatically increased. This increase in access has occurred alongside important research findings and subsequent educational policies and standards. Today, all but six states contribute to prekindergarten programs, equaling approximately 1.64 million children (NIEER, 2021). Moreover, NIEER reports total state funding surpassed $9 billion for the first time in the 2019–2020 school year.

Snapshot on Research and Policy

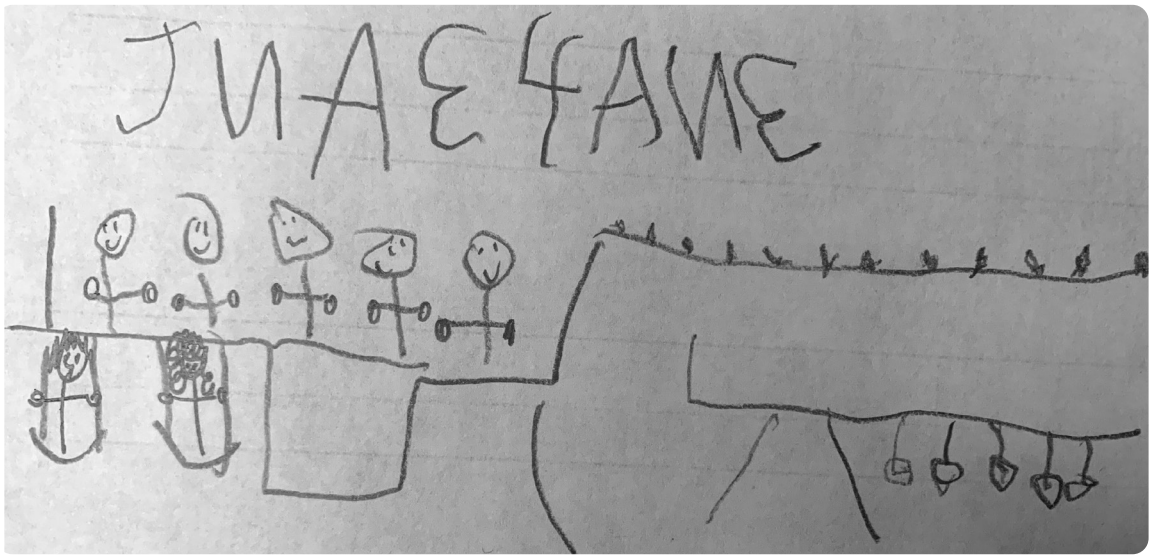
Research over the last three decades has provided guidance on literacy instruction and assessment in early childhood classrooms across prekindergarten and kindergarten. Some key reports, both meta-analyses and syntheses of this body of research, have provided us with valuable resources to guide our work with young children. For example, the National Education Goals Panel published a research-based report, *Reconsidering Children's Early Development and Learning: Toward Common Views and Vocabulary* outlining learning indicators and expectations for young children across five developmental domains (Kagan, Moore, and Bredekamp, 1995), including phonological awareness and print awareness. In 2000, the National Reading Panel report mapped out the research to date across the component reading skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. In 2008, the National Early Literacy Panel report reviewed research specific to the foundational skills prekindergarten children need to develop for later success in elementary school. Paulson and Moats (2018) note that "the job of all early childhood educators is to deepen their understanding of the processes involved in children's learning so they can do the best job possible." In addition to providing you with activities to develop young children's literacy skills, this book also seeks to help deepen your understanding of literacy learning.

Snapshot on Literacy Standards in Early Childhood

Acknowledgement of these foundational literacy competencies has notable implications for early childhood educational standards and, as a result, educational practices. In 2002, Good Start, Grow Smart, a federal initiative to improve early childhood education, called upon states to develop standards such as those in K–12 education. The release of the report of the National Early Literacy Panel in 2008 resulted in many states developing or revising their early childhood guidelines to reflect research evidence. Head Start established the *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five* in 2015 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, 2015), and the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers developed the Common Core State Standards in 2010 (NGA and CCSSO, 2010). Throughout this book, I'll refer to these two sets of standards to ground each chapter in what children are expected to learn in our early childhood classrooms.

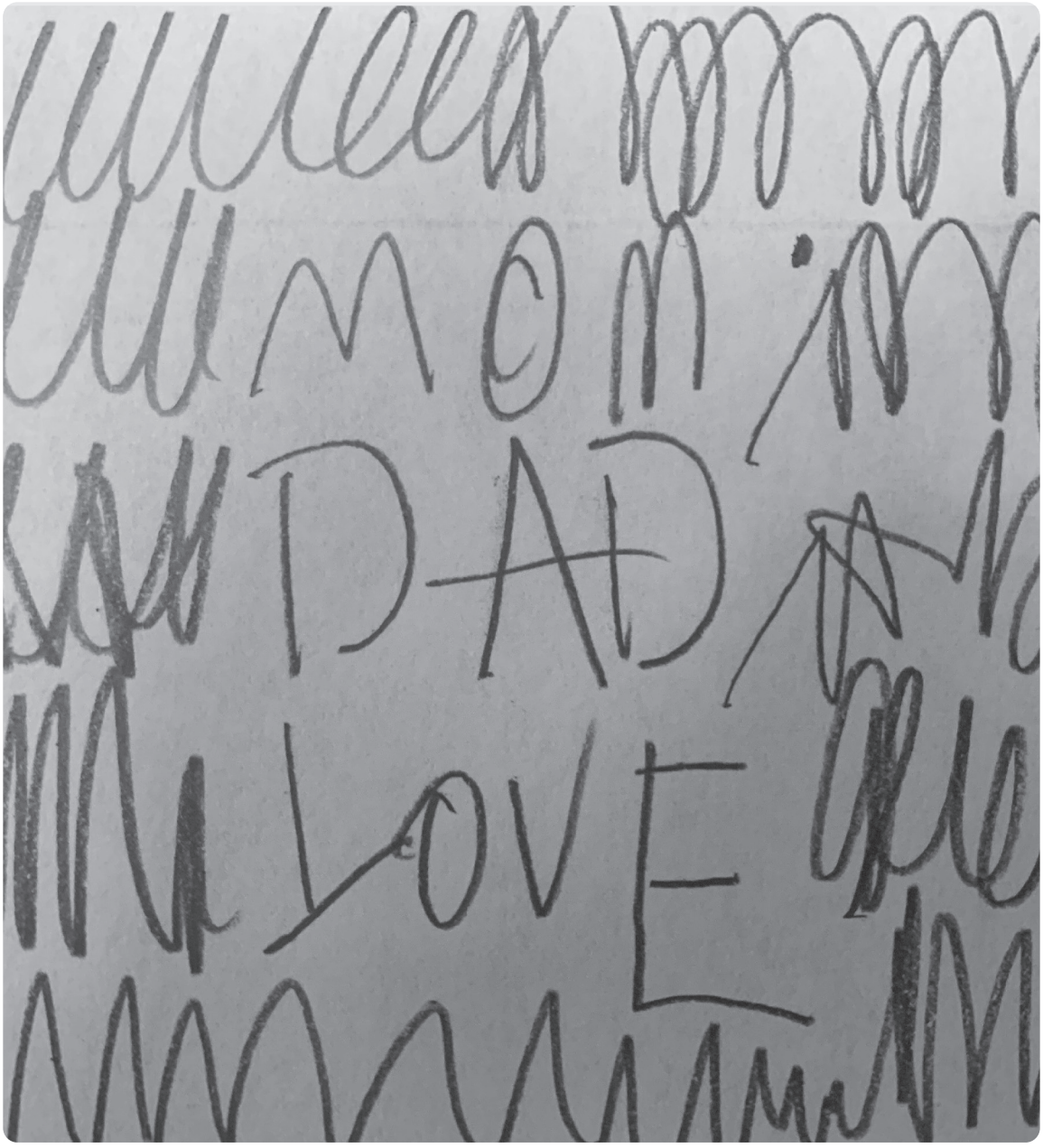
Snapshot on Foundational Literacy

Children are inundated with print every day. Print is everywhere, and children start developing ideas about print before they enter our early childhood classrooms. For example, young children make scribbles and even letter-like shapes in attempts to mimic the readers and writers in their lives. Children then begin to notice marks on the page and start to learn how to make some letters, especially those in their names. At this point, you'll notice a variety of symbols making their way into their writing. For example, take a look at kindergartner Janya's story about recess with her friends on the playground.



You'll notice children engage in pretend reading as they practice concepts about print. They'll turn pages in a book, label pictures, and perhaps even retell a favorite story they've heard many times. As they learn more about our written language, they'll start to notice the letters on the page and even words. They'll learn to write special words, such as their names, by heart.

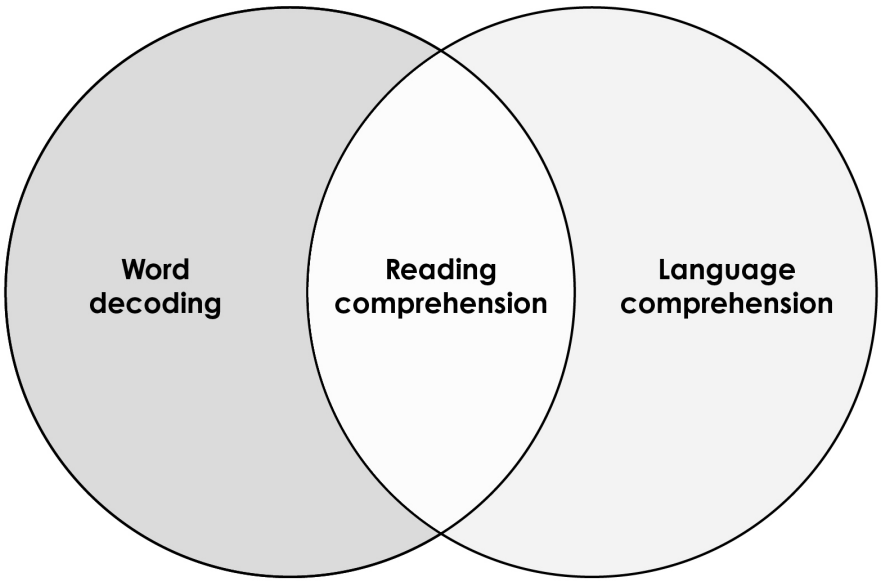
Take a look at the story here written by a prekindergartner about visiting her cousins over the summer. She used mock linear writing infused with words special to her: *mom*, *dad*, and *love*.



It is our responsibility as early childhood educators to nurture this literacy growth and harness young children's natural curiosity. The process of learning to read and write a language is not like learning to listen to and speak a language. Think about it this way. Human speech dates back to 100,000 years or so, but an alphabetic writing system wasn't invented until around 3,800 years ago. Even then, the alphabetic writing system wasn't widely used until about 500 years ago. While oral language is learned naturally through immersion during the early years of life, reading and writing must be directly taught over several years.

The Simple View of Reading as a Framework for Developmental Trends

We'll explore a model known as the Simple View of Reading to help us understand the factors involved in learning to read and write (Gough and Tumner, 1986). To understand written text, a reader relies on components: word decoding and language comprehension. Seems simple, but it is anything but. In fact, each of these components of the simple view is complex and multifaceted.



WORD DECODING

In the left circle of the Venn diagram is *word decoding.* This component involves the ability to decode printed letters and words into pronounceable words. To do this, readers must rely on their understanding of the sound structure of our language, *phonological awareness*, and the letter-to-sound correspondences. This process of connecting sounds to letters to make words leads to a critical awareness called the *alphabetic principle*—the awareness that letters are connected to sounds that we use to read (decode) *and* write (spell) words. To grasp the alphabetic principle, young children must have phonological awareness, and, more specifically, they must be able to recognize individual sounds in spoken words. They must also have a growing knowledge of letter-sound correspondences (what we often refer to as *phonics knowledge*). With these two parts working together harmoniously and with increasing automaticity, children begin to build a small corpus of words that they can recognize at first sight, meaning they don't need to decode them—they recognize them right away. Word-recognition abilities are especially important as children begin learning to read and write.

Let's unpack word decoding with a child decoding a word such as *run.* The child says the sounds the letters represent, holds those sounds in their memory, and blends to make the whole word *run.* As the child makes this pronounceable word, they also connect to the meaning of the word and think of children running. Eventually, that same child will not need to decode *run* upon encountering it. The word will become part of that growing corpus of words they know at first sight.

LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION

Now let's look at the right circle of the Venn diagram, the language-comprehension component. Children build their language comprehension alongside word decoding. Language comprehension is the ability to understand the meanings of spoken words, phrases, sentences, and longer connected texts, meaning the things we *hear* rather than what we *read*. As children listen to a story, for example, they need to orchestrate many language skills. They need to call upon vocabulary knowledge as well as their understanding of language structures, for example, how *but* connects ideas or how an introductory clause such as "once upon a time" functions in a sentence. They must understand verbal reasoning, such as inferring a word's meaning or a character's motives, and have some background knowledge.

Let's think back to our example of *run*. Now let's say a child heard someone say, "I need to run to the store." The child knows the word *run* means "to move fast," and they know that in the context of that sentence that someone needed something fast. At the same time, they know that their parent, for example, doesn't literally run to the store. The parent might drive in their car to the grocery store or walk to the corner bodega, but in most cases they wouldn't literally run. So, the child makes an inference using their verbal reasoning. They infer that the person needs something from the store, and they want to get it quickly.

READING COMPREHENSION

Now let's go back to our Venn diagram. Notice reading comprehension is represented by the overlapping circles in the middle. Reading comprehension depends on *both* word decoding and language comprehension. It is possible to have strong language comprehension but still experience obstacles to understanding what you read if you struggle recognizing words. On the flip side, it is possible to have strong recognition of the words in a written text but still experience obstacles if you don't have the language comprehension to support understanding. Successful reading comprehension requires both components.

Let's say a child is reading about bodies of water and reads the sentence, "The water runs in the river." If the child cannot read the words, reading comprehension cannot occur. If the child can read the words but has difficulty making the leap from *run* as "moving fast" to water rushing in a river, then the meaning of the sentence might be lost.

Importantly, this does not mean we focus solely on word decoding in the early years and language comprehension in the later years. Across all grade levels, and even during the prekindergarten and kindergarten years, we must provide literacy instruction that ensures children become decoders, build oral-language skills, and develop background knowledge to support their ability to understand written language in the books of our early childhood classrooms.

What Does This Mean for the Children in Your Classroom?

What does this mean for the children in your classroom? In the prekindergarten classroom, you can expect the children to start recognizing letters, especially those in their names. They will begin to grasp concepts about print such as identifying the front and back of a book, distinguishing the print from the illustrations, and understanding that text moves from left to right. Your prekindergartners will also begin to develop a level of phonological awareness, such

as identifying rhyming pairs—*cat* and *bat*—or categorizing words that begin with the same sound—*fish-face-fan*. They will enjoy listening to stories, engage with story lines, and learn new concepts.

By the end of kindergarten, children typically recognize all or most letters, including upper- and lowercase. They will also know the sounds of single letters, especially consonants, and will know some short vowel sounds. Many kindergarten curricula teach children to decode simple consonant-vowel-consonant words, such as *cap, bet, mop, hug, lid*. Their oral-language comprehension exceeds their reading comprehension, meaning they can understand texts while listening that they would not be able to understand if reading, due to their limited word-recognition skills.

How Does Assessment Fit In?

Informed and integrated assessments can help you gather the necessary information to plan effective, engaging, and developmentally appropriate literacy instruction for the children you teach. Through assessment, you will identify what they already know and what they need to learn. You can use screening measures to efficiently assess children's levels of performance on indicators that predict future achievement. For example, in prekindergarten, three key early literacy indicators are alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and rapid naming: rapid picture, color, letter, and digit naming. You can also use tools developed to monitor progress and help you identify children who are *or* who aren't learning at an appropriate rate. Your assessments should help you target your instruction and best meet the needs of all children in your classroom.

How Does This Inform My Instructional Practice?

As noted in the International Literacy Association's position statement *What Effective PreK Literacy Instruction Looks Like*:

> ***"Children will need to learn the technical skills of reading and writing. Letter knowledge, phonological awareness, and an understanding of speech–sound correspondences are essential for children to learn how to become readers and writers. However, it is critical for children to also learn how to use these tools to better their thinking and reasoning. Developing oral language comprehension and engaging children in meaningful oral discourse is crucial because it gives meaning to what they are learning" (Neuman, 2018).***

Developmentally appropriate practice is a core concept guiding early educators as we create learning environments where children can explore. In 1987, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) put out a position statement on developmentally appropriate practice, stating such practice would include rich learning environments that encourage learning and exploring. In 2009, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8* pointed to the importance of a rich learning environment plus intentional instruction of skills (Copple and Bredekamp).

Broadly, the early childhood classroom should be:

- developmentally appropriate;
- explicit, with concepts explained directly and clearly with concise language;
- intentional, with thoughtfully chosen activities based on research, assessment, and a preplanned sequence of study; and
- part of a playful learning environment.

Developmentally appropriate practice necessarily includes intentional assessment as well as instructional practices that support children's learning of key foundational competencies. This book homes in on key foundational *literacy* competencies.

Current practice in early literacy instruction is increasingly informed by several key studies and policy documents, such as the report of the National Early Literacy Panel. Armed with an understanding of the processes involved in early literacy and language development, early childhood educators can intentionally plan activities, create literacy-rich learning environments, and provide purposeful (and fun) opportunities to support children's growing literacy knowledge. Children need to engage in instructional experiences, including opportunities to practice, that integrate their interests with early literacy activities across these six foundational literacy competencies:

- **Oral language** to foster both expressive and receptive language as well as verbal reasoning
- **Phonological awareness** to develop their understanding of the sound structure of language
- **Alphabetic code** to build children's letter-sound connections and ultimately achieve the alphabetic principle
- **Foundational fluency and word recognition** to provide opportunities for letter-to-sound connections while blending words and print conventions as they engage with books
- **Reading aloud** to foster their appreciation and comprehension of text while simultaneously developing vocabulary and world knowledge
- **Early writing** to apply sound-to-letter connections when writing and to explore writing as a means of communication

ORAL LANGUAGE

As mapped out in the Simple View of Reading, oral-language abilities contribute to learning to read. Moreover, they predict future academic achievement and life outcomes. Young children are building their oral vocabulary as well as relationships across words. In fact, a child's oral vocabulary grows at warp speed between the ages of two and five, resulting in an *expressive vocabulary* (words they can say) of a few thousand words by age five and a *receptive vocabulary* (words they understand) of thousands more. Oral-language development also includes implicit understandings of grammatical rules, such as pronouns and verb tense, as well as syntactical rules used to put words in the sequential order of a sentence. Each of these

oral-language components are interrelated and develop simultaneously as children gradually learn to talk and communicate on increasingly complex levels. The oral-language activities in chapter 2 provide children with opportunities for targeted practice and orchestrate these components through conversations and by following directions—calling upon Dana Suskind's "three Ts" (2015):

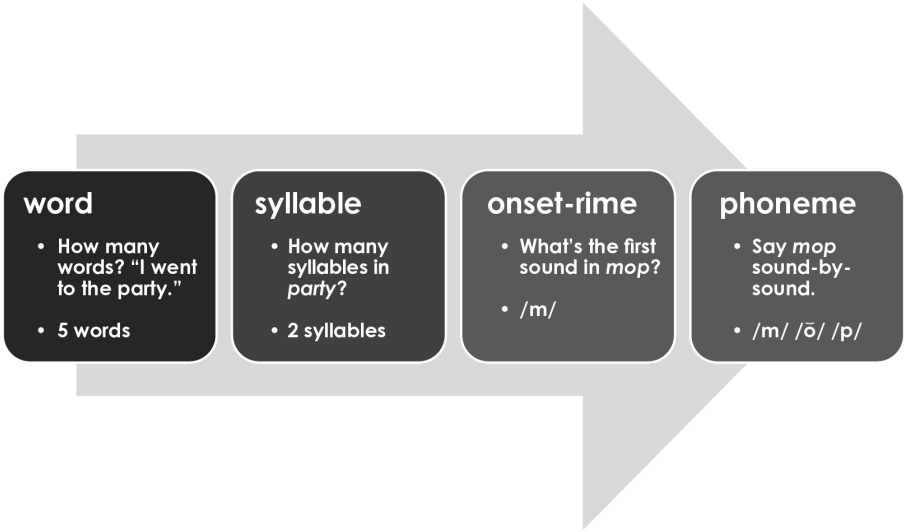
- Tuning in to children's interests
- Talking with children (both child-directed and adult-directed)
- Taking turns in conversation

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

Children start to develop phonological sensitivity in infancy as they learn the speech sounds of their home language. During the prekindergarten years, they play with speech sounds through language play, especially with rhyming and alliterative books. With this, they begin to develop phonological awareness. This awareness follows a developmental sequence along a linguistic hierarchy, starting with awareness of rhyme, word, and syllable, then moving to onset-rime and phoneme.

Across the sequence, children become more refined in their understanding of the sound structure of language. Children often become aware of sounds through rhyme play. They begin to notice it's not just about a *mouse* in a *house*, but that *mouse* and *house* sound the same at the end—they rhyme. Early in the sequence children begin to determine word boundaries as they orally segment the words in spoken sentences such as, "I went to a party," with five words. They begin to hear syllables within words as they clap the two syllables in the word *party*: /par/

/tē/. Later in the sequence, they start looking within the syllable as they segment beginning sounds. For example, they segment a word such as *mop* into its *onset* (beginning sound) /m/ and *rime* (the vowel and what follows) /ŏp/. Finally, they focus within the rime and segment all sounds, or *phonemes*: /m/ /ŏ/ /p/. When you help children develop phonological awareness, you are influencing their later reading and writing development. The activities in chapter 3 foster phonological awareness across this linguistic hierarchy.



ALPHABETIC CODE

Building a child's understanding of the alphabetic code involves recognizing and naming both upper- and lowercase letters as well as recognizing the paired association between a letter's name and its sound. Ultimately, letter name and sound fluency give a child a real advantage when learning to read and write. In other words, children need to be accurate *as well as* automatic, or quick, identifying letter names and providing letter sounds. More than quick and accurate letter knowledge, children must learn to connect letters with their sounds when they decode and spell words. This is known as the *alphabetic principle*, the understanding that letters are connected to the sounds that make up our words. With this in mind, the activities in chapter 4 work to build quick, accurate letter naming and letter-sound production.

FOUNDATIONAL FLUENCY AND WORD RECOGNITION

Young children just starting out on their journey as readers and writers are working to build their concepts of print. Understanding how to navigate written texts is a foundational skill. For example, young readers begin to understand that we read books moving from the front to the back and from the left page to the right. We start in the upper-left corner of a page and read text from left to right. When they write, they'll begin moving left to right (even if with scribbles!) and will use a return sweep when they get to the end of a line.

As they learn more about letter sounds and build an awareness of phonemes, they will begin to build a bank of known words through activities that provide many opportunities to read highly frequent words, such as *she*, *was*, and *in*, as well as decodable words, such as *cat*, *bat*, and *that*.

They will start to read decodable books and poems as they practice reading and decoding words. In chapter 5, you'll see activities that build these early concepts about print as well as activities that foster the alphabetic principle and later word recognition.

EARLY WRITING

As children are building the foundational skills of writing, they explore through both less structured writing activities and very structured activities that help them learn more about the form and function of print. For example, less structured activities, such as drawing about a shared experience like a class trip to the park and then using scribbles or letter-like forms, can help children explore the differences between illustrations and print. They can also explore the global form of print, such as left-to-right writing and the return sweep (moving from one line of text to the next). More structured activities help children learn the formation of uppercase and lowercase letters as well as the application of letter-sound connections when writing words. Taken together, children's early writing ultimately leads to the acquisition of the alphabetic principle. The activities in chapter 6 encourage children to form letters, begin to apply their letter-sound knowledge to spelling words, and explore writing for authentic purposes such as class books or lists.

COMPREHENSION, VOCABULARY, AND WORLD KNOWLEDGE

Learning to read requires the orchestration of many skills. Word decoding from the Simple View of Reading pulls in skills such as phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge. In early grades, we tend to focus on the skills of word decoding to help children learn to read the words on a page. This makes sense because reading comprehension is primarily constrained by decoding.

Skills in language comprehension are also necessary for learning to read. Comprehension requires children to understand the meanings of words and sentences while also integrating their knowledge of the world. The influence of language comprehension on reading comprehension—our ultimate goal—increases over time (Catts, Hogan, and Adlof, 2005). In early childhood classrooms, read-alouds are a mainstay in fostering language comprehension. Children's books with sophisticated vocabulary, concepts that extend world knowledge, and sentence complexity provide rich learning opportunities. The activities in chapter 7 work toward these goals: building vocabulary and world knowledge alongside early comprehension skills.

Ultimately, through application of decoding *and* spelling to a word and its meaning, children develop the alphabetic principle. One way to think about this is the interplay of sound, spelling, and meaning. Take the word *chop.* The sounds, or phonological information, for *chop* include the three different phonemes that, when combined, produce the oral form of the word *chop*: /ch/ /ŏ/ /p/. The spelling information for this word consists of the visual representation of the sequence of letters *(C-H-O-P)* that, when combined, form the spelling of the word *chop.* Finally, the meaning, or *semantic information*, includes the definition of the word *chop* (to cut something into pieces) and understanding how *chopping* carrots into pieces with a knife is different from *cutting* paper into pieces with scissors. These connections are at the heart of the alphabetic principle, a key foundational skill for early literacy.

Core Practice in Early Childhood Classrooms

All of the upcoming chapters are focused on activities that acknowledge developmental trends and current research on early literacy. In addition, I've vetted hundreds of activities to ensure that the ones included in this book also reflect developmentally appropriate practices of early childhood classrooms. In particular, the activities include hands-on engagement, purposeful play, and read-alouds. They are all activities you can read today and use tomorrow.

HANDS-ON, USE-TOMORROW ACTIVITIES

Hands-on activities are alive and well in early childhood classrooms. We believe in their power to keep our young learners engaged and active. We know children are more focused and motivated to learn when they are engaged with both their minds *and* their hands. Hands-on activities make learning less abstract for our young learners and can also provide an opportunity to improve fine motor skills. The activities in this book encourage active engagement and many are hands on.

Each set of activities begins with a brief introduction to connect to the purpose, so you can see how the activity fits within your early reading and writing instruction. Each activity includes tips to prepare before the activity, explicit steps and language to use during the activities, considerations to modify activities for children who may have difficulty grasping concepts, and ideas for wrapping up the activity and extending. Throughout these activities, you will see things to look for—or how to observe children's learning and gauge their understanding.

PURPOSEFUL PLAY

The activities come from a stance of purposeful play. As Mraz, Porcelli, and Tyler (2016) said, "Play isn't a luxury. It's a necessity." Not only does play offer multiple opportunities for children to reach various standards—be they the Common Core State Standards or the Head Start Early Learning Outcome Framework—but play also provides children with opportunities to engage in discussions and build oral language, turn-taking skills, and literacy skills in authentic (and fun) ways in an environment where they feel safe taking risks.

READING ALOUD

In their landmark review *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (1985), the Commission on Reading call reading aloud to children "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for success in reading." In this book, every chapter includes ideas for literature connections. For example, the sentence "It kinks, coils, and curls every which way," from *Hair Love* by Matthew A. Cherry, can be used to develop concepts about print as children practice tracking left to right. *Mary Wears What She Wants* by Keith Negley provides a context for learning the word *courage* and the related word *courageous*. *Strictly No Elephants* by Lisa Mantchev introduces acceptance and tolerance while also acting as a backdrop for a syllable sort with animal names to build phonological awareness.

Nonfiction, too, is highlighted. Books such as *Give Bees a Chance* by Bethany Barton support learning how bees help plants grow while also using *bees* as a springboard for the letter-sound connection of *B* to /b/. *Living Things and Nonliving Things* by Keven Kurtz supports development of the science concept of living versus not living and builds world knowledge as well as serving as a jumping-off point for matching rhyming pairs like *rock/sock* and *plant/ant*.

Summary

Young children's overall development is complex and multifaceted. In early childhood classrooms, we observe them grow and learn across physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. During these early years, they learn to communicate, form relationships, and explore the world around them. Each child comes to your classroom with different experiences, especially when it comes to literacy. The opportunities you provide the children in your classroom are critical in building the foundation they need for their future reading and writing success. To this end, chapters 2 through 7 provide you with more than one hundred activities informed by research in early literacy and specially selected based on developmentally appropriate early childhood practices. Lastly, chapter 8 details how early childhood teachers bring all of these critical literacy practices to their classrooms to provide valuable learning opportunities for the children in their care.

Let's get started!

2 CHAPTER TWO
Developing Oral Language

This chapter zeroes in on building children's oral language. Not only is oral language critical for comprehension, vocabulary, and concept development, it also contributes to literacy skills such as phonemic awareness, which in turn contributes to phonics. To begin, let's take a look at the early literacy standards from the Head Start Early Learning Outcome Framework and the Common Core State Standards that address oral language. As you can see, these standards span oral language elements such as conversing and asking questions to increasing the breadth and depth of word meanings and how words fit together in messages.

HEAD START EARLY LEARNING OUTCOME FRAMEWORK 36–60 MONTHS	COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS KINDERGARTEN
■ Demonstrates interest and understanding when participating in language activities and games (36 months) ■ Initiates and responds in conversations with others (36 months) ■ Participates in simple conversations with others that are maintained by back-and-forth exchanges of ideas or information ■ Engages in simple conversations by expressing own feelings, thoughts, and ideas to others (36 months) ■ Asks and answers simple questions in conversations with others (36 months) ■ Shows ongoing connection to a conversation, group discussion, or presentation (60 months) ■ Demonstrates understanding of a variety of question types, such as "Yes/No" or "Who/What/When/Where" or "How/Why" (60 months)	■ Participates in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about kindergarten topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups: • Follows agreed-upon rules for discussions • Continues conversation through multiple exchanges ■ Confirms understanding of a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media by asking and answering questions about key details and requesting clarification if something is not understood ■ Asks and answers questions to seek help, get information, or clarify something that is not understood

HEAD START EARLY LEARNING OUTCOME FRAMEWORK 36–60 MONTHS	COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS KINDERGARTEN
■ Maintains multiturn conversations with adults, other children, and within larger groups by responding in increasingly sophisticated ways, such as asking related questions or expressing agreement (60 months) ■ Categorizes words or objects, such as sorting a hard hat, machines, and tools into the construction group (60 months) ■ Discusses new words in relation to known words and word categories, such as "The bear and fox are both wild animals" (60 months) ■ Identifies shared characteristics among people, places, things, or actions (60 months) ■ Identifies key common antonyms and identifies 1 or 2 synonyms for very familiar words (60 months) ■ Shows an ability to distinguish similar words, such as "It's more than tall, it's gigantic" (60 months)	■ Determines or clarifies the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on kindergarten reading and content: • Identifies new meanings of familiar words and applies them accurately (for example, knowing *duck* is a bird and learning the verb "to duck") • Uses the most frequently occurring inflections and affixes (for example, *-ed, -s, un-, pre-, -ful, -less*) as a clue to the meaning of an unknown word ■ With guidance and support from adults, explores word relationships and nuances in word meanings: • Sorts common objects into categories to gain a sense of the concepts the categories represent • Demonstrates understanding of frequently occurring verbs and adjectives by relating them to their opposites (antonyms) • Distinguishes shades of meaning among verbs describing the same general actions (for example, *walk, march, strut, prance*) by acting out meanings • Uses words and phrases acquired through conversations, reading and being read to, and responding to texts

As discussed in chapter 1, the Simple View of Reading demonstrates the importance of oral language to later reading achievement (Gough and Tunmer, 1986). "Language has the power to shape our consciousness and it does so for each human child, by providing the theory that [they use] to interpret and manipulate their environment" (Halliday, 1993). In the first years of life, children develop foundational understandings of the sound system of language (*phonology*), the meanings of words across contexts (*semantics*), the way we put words together to communicate (*syntax*), the meaning units of words (*morphology*), and the rules that guide the way we communicate with each other (*pragmatics*).

Young children are experiencing intense growth in language development. To put this into perspective, children in prekindergarten know between one thousand and ten thousand words (Shipley and McAfee, 2015). By the time they enter first grade, many of them have learned an average of 14,000 words (Carey, 1978). Putting it another way, the children in our prekindergarten classrooms, on average, are acquiring somewhere between one thousand and three thousand words per year. This means they are acquiring as many as eight new words a day!

This rate of intense growth, unfortunately, is not universally so. In a classic study, Hart and Risley (1995) estimate that some children heard three million more words than other children by the age of three, and by the time they reached kindergarten, some heard 30 million more words than other children. The sheer difference in number is astounding, but that only paints part of the picture. There was also a notable difference in the contexts in which these words were used and in the interactions with caregivers. Moreover, adult clarification of words within the course of conversation is associated with increased vocabulary (Weizman and Snow, 2001). Our early childhood classrooms are filled with children across a range of language skill, and this chapter focuses on ways to support children's language growth. Some of these activities will be a part of the fabric of your everyday routines, and others will be part of more explicit, intentional instruction.

Everyday Routines

One goal of the early childhood classroom is to turn ordinary exchanges into rich language experiences. Oral language is developed even when teachers don't intentionally focus on building vocabulary or conversation skills. Consider the following five practices to build your everyday routines: recasts, expansions, and questions; sophisticated words; and narrations.

RECASTS, EXPANSIONS, AND QUESTIONS

We have an important role to play in children's language development. When we respond to what children say, we let them know that we care about their thoughts, their stories, and their contributions. The linguistic quality of our responses is equally important. McGinty and Justice (2010) suggest recasts and expansions as ways to support language growth and provide timely feedback. Recasts allow you to correct children's ungrammatical language use while also acknowledging what they've said. Expansions involve this same acknowledgment while also adding detail to their message.

Questions serve many purposes, such as information gathering. When it comes to language development, our purpose in questioning is about encouraging children's participation in sustained, meaningful conversations. McGinty and Justice (2010) suggest using topic-continuing questions and *wh*–questions, with preference given to *wh*– questions. *Wh*– questions have been shown to be very helpful in supporting oral language, especially in prekindergarten and kindergarten. Moreover, we can consider the type of *wh*– questions. Closed *wh*– questions—*who, what, when, where*—usually require only a one-word response, but they still play an important role in early childhood classrooms because they keep children engaged and help you check for understanding. Open-ended *wh*– questions—*why*—require more detailed responses and help foster language growth.

As you think about incorporating these language-support practices, here are three important considerations. First, be selective with your recasts and expansions within an oral exchange. This keeps the exchange more natural, and when it comes to recasting, less is more. Second, keep the child's level of understanding in mind. You don't want to jump too many levels of language complexity. Third, give *wh*– questions priority with a slant toward open-ended ones.

SOPHISTICATED WORDS

Young children love a big word! Using big, or sophisticated, words encourages interest in words and a motivation to learn new words. Sophisticated words are words that aren't likely to be

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