

Introduction

A Few Big Ideas

This Book Will Improve Your Teaching and Raise Your Students' Assessment Scores

Preschool and kindergarten teachers, this toolkit is for you. It is designed to be a quick read or a pick-up resource that will make your job easier and your teaching more effective. Educators can also use this book to facilitate in-school professional development on early language and literacy learning.

Within these pages, you will find references to core research in early literacy. Just as important for your daily classroom, you will find carefully designed, easy-to-use ideas and activities for every segment of emergent literacy development. Beginning with the most foundational skills, this book ends at the point children are ready to crack the reading/alphabetic code.

“Why do I need anything else?” you might ask. “I have curriculum. I have standards. I have a degree.” My answer is that we are learning new information about how children prepare to be readers every day. No practicing teacher can keep up with it all. And no curriculum addresses the needs of all children.

To be an effective teacher, you need a toolbox full of “What do I do when...?” ideas, from trusted, experienced voices. The most dynamic and effective classrooms are full of those “tricks.” As you embed the three ready-to-read foundations in your classroom, you *will* have more children reach benchmarks and goals identified by your school, school district, and state. You will have more children truly ready to read.

Perhaps most importantly, this book will help you discern when the *time is prime* for each student to begin to read. While each is growing to that moment in time, you'll have tons of ready-made activities to support them where they are.

I purposefully address both preschool and kindergarten here for several reasons. One: you (and your students) will benefit immensely by having a wide variety of strategies beyond those strictly for your

“Children who are immersed in activities that combine active experiences, rich conversations and print-related activities are apt to develop the foundational skills required to become successful readers and writers .”

—Dorothy Strickland,
Distinguished Research
Fellow at the National
Institute for Early
Education Research

Dr. Marie Clay, creator of Reading Recovery and former president of the International Reading Association, defines emergent literacy as “what children know about reading and writing before they actually learn to read and write in a conventional way.” It only makes sense that a child will be a better reader if he knows a lot about what reading is and what it is for before he tries it himself.

GET PARENTS INVOLVED

In addition to the practical ideas for classrooms, through frequent sidebars like this, you will learn secrets for partnering with families (an essential and often neglected piece of the reading puzzle). The companion title for families, *Anytime Reading Readiness*, offers even more ways for families to join you on this early literacy road.

age/grade level. Understanding the “before and after” steps and expectations smoothes the path for students.

Also, kindergarten and preschool teachers have the inimitable potential for building transition partnerships. “In-the-trench” dialogues and collaboration between preschool teachers and their counterparts in kindergarten improve results for both. The best part of such an alliance is that, with a consistent message, more children fall in love with language, reading, and books. If we light that spark of literacy when they are young, they will forever be readers.

The Rush to Reading

Dr. Robert Meyers (Child Development Institute, CA) says, “We often expect children to think like adults when they are not capable of doing so.” Nowhere is that statement truer than in our rush for young children to become readers. I often hear parents of five-, four- or even three-year-olds ask their child’s preschool teacher “When are you going to teach my child to read?” That same question is on the lips of most parents when children start school.

A constant diet of myths and sales pitches in today’s media leads many of us as parents *and* educators to believe that somehow earlier is *always* better. That’s a lie. Some statistical research indicates that the differences between those who read at an earlier age than when formal school begins and those who do not virtually disappears by the time children reach third grade. Even when we look beyond the statistics, it is more likely that children who read early at *their own instigation* do so as a result of a steady diet of rich experiences with language, text, and human interaction from birth. They are ready earlier because the foundations have been laid and they are developmentally ready (which happens at a different place for different children). Conversely, children pressured into reading before they are ready have a negative

early experience, which often hinders their literacy growth and may even color the rest of their school life.

How do we counter such challenges? As educators in preschool and kindergarten, you are in a unique position to look at literacy with a panoramic view. We must seize children’s natural curiosity, watch for their internal “I’m ready” buttons, learn what they know and don’t know and what their home literacy is like, and then teach what they need at individual points in time.

Three Essentials

Keep in mind as you gear up to make this your best teaching year ever that young children learn holistically. The three essentials addressed in this guide—conversations, interactive read-alouds, and listening games—mirror that holistic approach and apply whether we are helping children with literacy, math, or social skills.

Young children’s brains are primed to learn. Perhaps no aspect of child development is as amazing as the progress of a young child’s brain. Researchers, such as Dr. Sally Shaywitz of Yale University, have conducted extensive studies in this area in recent years. The conclusion? A child’s brain is growing faster during the early years than any other time in her life.

This growth surge creates a challenge for teachers. Dr. Reid Lyon, an internationally recognized education authority, says there is a window between the ages of five and seven when the underlying skills of reading are most easily learned. “A kindergarten teacher can accomplish in 30 minutes what a fourth-grade teacher would need two hours to do.” This book maximizes those efforts.

A young child learns differently. Only when the proper foundations are established through repeated and varied concrete experiences can we expect young children to grasp higher-level skills. Sitting young children at desks all day with worksheets and structured activities will end in failure. The more focus there is on problem solving and thinking during this important time, the better prepared a child is for the academics that come next.

“Children are not little adults. We often expect children to think like adults when they are not yet capable of doing so.”

—Dr. Robert Meyers of the Child Development Institute, Orange, CA

TEACHER TIP

Dr. Hirsh-Pasek, co-author of the best-selling book, *Einstein Never Used Flashcards*, cautions us that accelerated, overly structured academic programs, especially in preschools, do not have long-term positive effects. In fact, they seem to have a negative emotional impact. Children from such programs are more anxious, less creative, and less positive toward school, compared with those who went to play-oriented preschools.

Grasping this important fact every day will revolutionize your teaching. You will spend less time herding and directing, trying to fit students into a mold for which they are unprepared. Instead, you'll discover your day is full of actively engaged students immersed in true, effective learning.

Play is an important vehicle for learning. You may be surprised to hear that play is research based. In fact, play is the prime way young children develop problem-solving skills and creativity (essential skills for the 21st century and beyond). It's not a waste of time. Make sure that when you are having staff discussions about research-based teaching, you bring this subject up. A respected early childhood researcher, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, sees it as a driving force. "Play is to early childhood what gas is to a car."

But we so often make so little time for play in the real world. Dr. David Elkind, author of *The Power of Play*, frequently cites an American Academy of Pediatrics 2007 report that documents play as a factor in promoting "behavioral development *and* brain growth." I know that each of you has seen firsthand how a child's social and emotional maturity impact her learning.

The University of North Carolina's Abecedarian project on early childhood intervention found that children who received an enriched, play-oriented parenting and early childhood program had significantly higher IQs at age five than did a comparable group of children who were not in the program (105 vs. 85 points). Pair this with the brain research Dr. Sally Shaywitz is conducting. Wow!

Simple, Effective Pathways

With those brief reminders, it's time to focus on the subject at hand. My aim is not to address learning to read. Instead, we will hone in on what has too often been ignored: the very foundations that create the most skilled, most internally motivated, and most enthusiastic readers. Let's not be guilty of putting the cart before the horse and then forgetting the horse.

If we do so, we may succeed in creating strong decoders, Speedy-Gonzalez word callers, or maybe even minimally adequate classroom readers, but there will be something missing, something that may very well prevent children from becoming lifelong readers. In Chapter 1, you'll learn more about these important "pre-reading" foundations and understand the overall spectrum: what children need *before* they read.