

How Caregivers and Teachers Support Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing

STRATEGIES

Introduction

Alphabet knowledge and early writing are separate but related skills that together support later reading and writing. Young children show they are developing an understanding of alphabet knowledge and early writing when they:

- ▶ Scribble to share a message, for example, taking an order in a pretend restaurant
- ▶ Form letters that begin to look more and more like conventional print
- ▶ Write (or try to write) their names
- ▶ Begin to recognize letters and letter sounds

Children develop knowledge about the alphabet and writing when they have meaningful experiences in the language or languages they know well. Early writing supports later writing by developing children's understanding of the purposes and functions of written language. It also supports children's later reading because children learn about the relationship between print and language. Alphabet knowledge also supports children's understanding of letter-sound relationships, which is key to both reading and writing in English and other alphabetic languages, such as Spanish, Arabic, and Portuguese.



Planned Language Approach (PLA)



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Supporting babies to develop Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing

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Babies are developing language and motor skills as they watch, listen, and touch everything around them. Through meaningful interactions with caregivers and teachers and through opportunities to safely explore their environment, babies learn about their world and develop knowledge and ideas that they will write about someday.

Babies begin to develop Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing when caregivers and teachers:

- ▶ Form secure relationships with babies by responding to their interests and to their need for sleeping and feeding (Pianta, 2006)
- ▶ Encourage babies to reach for, grasp, shake, and bang objects with a fist grip
- ▶ Offer babies a variety of safe toys and objects, such as balls, spoons, and cups, all with a variety of textures—smooth, bumpy, and soft (Barton & Brophy-Herb, 2006)
- ▶ Let babies experiment with different materials, allowing them to play with water, sand, and finger paints, for example (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2007)
- ▶ Talk to babies as they play and discover how objects work—name objects, describe their textures and shapes, and demonstrate the sounds or actions they make (Pierce & Profio, 2006)
- ▶ Cuddle up and look at books with babies every day, labeling or describing some of the pictures (Hoffman & Cassano, 2013; Zambo & Hansen, 2007)



Some ways caregivers and teachers support babies' Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing

On a Home Visit

Twelve-month-old Sūn reaches for the pen in his home visitor's hand. "Oh! You want to write, too?" she asks as she hands him the pen. She removes several pieces of colored construction paper from her bag and places them in front of him. "I like your blue writing," she says as Sūn grips the pen in his fist and begins to make marks on the paper. "Here are some more colors to try," she says as she places several crayons down next to the paper. "Now you have a green crayon, a yellow crayon, and a red crayon to write with." Sūn picks up the green crayon in his other hand and continues to explore what his hands can do.

At the Early Head Start Center

Darius finishes diapering Jamal and carries him over to the rocking chair. He picks up one of Jamal's favorite books and begins to sing the words, "Twinkle, twinkle, little star . . ." He stresses the rhyming words in the song and pauses to point out and describe the objects Jamal points to in the book. Jamal smiles and babbles along. Darius smiles back and continues to sing. When he finishes, he says "Jamal is a star! Yes, you are!" Then he chooses another book to read together.



Supporting toddlers to develop Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing

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Toddlers enjoy making marks. Many giggle with delight or stare in surprise when they accidentally make marks by jabbing or poking at paper with a marker. Their hands are stronger than they were just a few months ago. They are learning how writing tools work and how to control them. Toddlers learn about writing and print when they see caregivers and teachers writing and when these important people talk about print. Toddlers are observing and learning that writing (and print) is meaningful and important.

Toddlers develop Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing skills when caregivers and teachers:

- ▶ Write in front of them by doing such things as texting, writing notes or emails, or making a shopping or “to do” list (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984)
- ▶ Talk about how writing works, including the alphabet and words (e.g., “Oh look. The P on the pizza box is just like the P in your name, ‘Pilar.’” Or “This says ‘wet paint’ so we don’t want to touch it.”) (Neumann, Hood, Ford, & Neumann, 2011)
- ▶ Encourage children to write in meaningful ways (e.g., “We are going grocery shopping. Here is paper so you can make your list while I make mine.”)
- ▶ Write down what children say, and read it back to them (Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2004)
- ▶ Help children talk about what they are writing and drawing (e.g., “Tell me about this.”) and build on their explanations (e.g., “I noticed that you put all the fall colors in your tree?”) (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013)
- ▶ Describe what the toddler does and the colors she uses, and share what her creation makes you think of (e.g., “That red color reminds me of the apples we had for snack today.”) (Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2004)
- ▶ Create safe spaces for children to write in—such as child-size tables, high chairs, and easels—with lots of writing materials: paper, envelopes, pencils, markers (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013)
- ▶ Provide a variety of materials—such as finger paints, watercolors, paint brushes, crayons, markers, pencils, and pens—and help toddlers to use them safely



At the Early Head Start Center

Siobhan is painting in the art center. When she finishes, her teacher Marilyn says, "Tell me about your picture." Siobhan points. "Yellow," she says. "Yes. I see the color yellow," Marilyn says. "Tell me more." Siobhan points again and says, "Itsy bitsy!" Marilyn nods and says, "Oh, I see! You painted the itsy bitsy spider! I like how you added lots of yellow, legs to your spider." Together they decide that Marilyn will write "spider" and "Siobhan" on the painting. Marilyn also writes down the words to the "The Itsy Bitsy Spider" song for Siobhan. Siobhan can't wait to sing it with her family when she takes her painting home.



At the Early Head Start Center

Ms. Maria's toddlers can see a letter carrier deliver mail every afternoon from the playground. Today, she will show them how they can be letter carriers using old purses for mail sacks. "First we need to write letters. Then we will deliver them, just like our letter carrier does," she explains. Ms. Maria shows the toddlers the paper and envelopes in the writing center. She encourages them to write letters and draw pictures for each other. To give them ideas, she tells them about the kinds of things that come in the mail. After creating their letters, the toddlers pick out a "mail bag" and place their letters inside. Ms. Maria watches as her new letter carriers race around the room happily delivering and receiving mail.

Supporting preschoolers to develop Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing

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Many preschoolers are interested in writing. Some use scribbles to tell a story or to pretend to take a restaurant order. Other preschoolers show their interest in writing by using letters and letter-like symbols—sometimes asking an adult to “read what it says.” When adults read and write with children, children begin to see writing as meaningful and important!

Alphabet knowledge includes letter-name knowledge (in both capital and lower case), letter-sound knowledge, and letter-writing ability. Children learn meaningful letters first—such as the letters in their name—and then other letters that they see often, for example, the letters in the names of family members.



Preschoolers develop Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing when caregivers and teachers:

- ▶ Model interest in letters by talking about the alphabet, pointing out letters in children’s names and other meaningful letters; for example, letters that are in the names of their family members, friends, or pets (Justice, Pence, Bowles, & Wiggins, 2006)
- ▶ Share alphabet songs and alphabet books. (Paratore, Cassano, & Schickedanz, 2011)
- ▶ Provide children with magnetic letters, alphabet puzzles and other alphabet games (Paratore, Cassano, & Schickedanz, 2011)
- ▶ Draw children’s attention to print in the community, for example, stop and exit signs, advertisements and logos; and in the home, for example labels, email, mail (Baghban, 1984)
- ▶ Help children focus on beginning sounds in words; for example, by sorting toys or pictures by sound (Gillon, 2007)
- ▶ Label the letters in their names and other letters of interest (Treiman & Broderick, 1998)
- ▶ Add writing materials to play centers, such as menus in the kitchen, construction signs in the block area) (Morrow, 2007)
- ▶ Encourage preschoolers to write for real and important reasons, such as making cards, letters, books (Adams, 1990)
- ▶ Use different materials to make writing extra fun; for example, using playground chalk, sand, finger-paint, shaving cream (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2007)

Some ways teachers support preschoolers' Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing

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On a Home Visit

Jenifer is conducting a home visit with Miguel and his mother Maya, who primarily speak Spanish. Although Jenifer speaks mostly English, she knows a few Spanish phrases to help her communicate with Miguel and Maya. After chatting for a few moments, Miguel leaves the room and returns carefully carrying a homemade book. "Mostrarle [show her]," Maya says. Jenifer watches as Miguel lovingly opens the cover to reveal several pages of drawings of cars and trucks—Miguel's favorite things! Under each picture Maya has printed a description in Spanish, such as "un camión de volteo," and Miguel has traced over the words. Although Jenifer cannot read the Spanish phrase, the first page is clearly a dump truck. "What a great dump truck," she says. "Did you write this?" she asks while gesturing to show "writing." Miguel and Maya both smile and nod. Miguel then asks if he can bring his book to show his Head Start friends. They all agree that this is a great idea!

At the Head Start Center

Sara reads a story about letter names to a small group of preschoolers before introducing a new game. "I put all of your names on cards in this envelope. My job is to pull out a name, one letter at a time. Your job is to guess whose name it is!" Sara pulls out the first name card so the children can see the first letter. "Here is the letter A," she says. "So let's guess who it might be." As the children call out names, Sara comments, "Yes. It could be for 'Ana' or 'Adam.' Let's look at the second letter." Ana shouts, "Me, me!" when the next letter is an N. "That's right," says Sara. "It's an N so it is not Adam's name. His name is A-D-A-M," Sara says as she points to Adam's name on the chart on the wall. She takes out the "Ana" name card and holds it up so the children can see and say the letters in Ana's name. "Let's play again," she says.



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