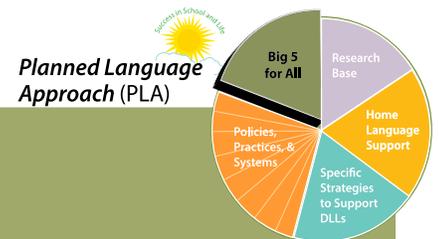


The Big 5 *The Big Picture* Background Knowledge



1. Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing
2. **Background Knowledge**
3. Book Knowledge and Print Concepts
4. Oral Language and Vocabulary
5. Phonological Awareness

At Miss Stacey's family child care, everyone is singing *Un Elefante*. Miss Stacey helps the children draw 10 elephants on paper, pointing at the elephants as the children sing. Two-year-old Rosa smiles and claps. She is beginning to develop an idea of what an elephant is and enjoys the singing and movement. Three-year-old Ana also loves this counting song and is learning number names by singing it. Five-year-old Jorge likes to see how high he can count.



What is Background Knowledge?

Background Knowledge includes:

- ▶ Information that children learn and store in their memories—including information about themselves, other people, objects, and the world around them
- ▶ Beliefs, values, rules, and expectations for behavior developed in different cultural settings and environments

Background Knowledge is:

- ▶ Developed through children's daily interactions and experiences in their families and communities
- ▶ Organized into concepts (schemas) in children's minds, from birth, enabling them to connect new information to existing knowledge
- ▶ Developed in one or more languages and can transfer from one language to another



Why Background Knowledge matters

- ▶ “Knowledge begets knowledge. Everything that children read or hear is automatically interpreted relative to what they already know about similar subjects...children with rich knowledge bases are more successful at learning new information” (Pinkham, Kaefer, & Neuman, 2012, p. ix).
- ▶ “...the development of knowledge-based competencies occurs over a lifetime; beginning with the language a child is exposed to from birth, and must be supported with good instruction throughout schooling” (Lesaux, 2013, p. 6).
- ▶ “...a child’s literacy experiences determine not only how many and what kinds of words she or he will encounter but also the background knowledge with which a child can conceptualize the meaning of any new word... Every opportunity should be taken to extend and enrich children’s background knowledge and understanding” (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 219).
- ▶ Content knowledge is important not only for content and conceptual development but is central for reading achievement as well. Prior knowledge is important for reading comprehension (Duke, Halvorsen, & Knight, 2012).

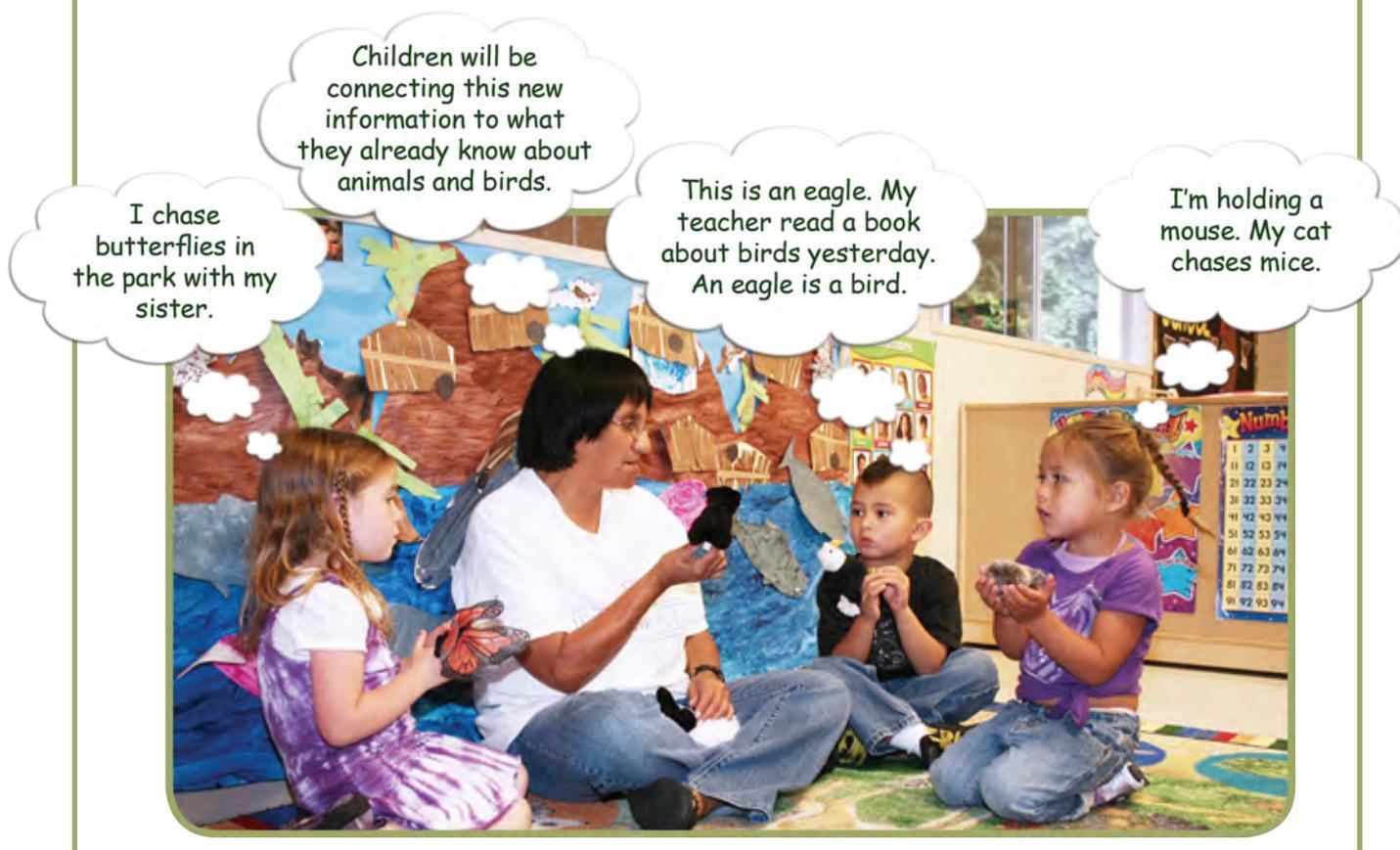
“Clearly, then, children’s knowledge base is a critical component of their cognitive development and academic success”

(Pinkham, Kaefer, & Neuman, 2012, p. x)

How children develop and use Background Knowledge

Children develop and use background knowledge when they:

- ▶ Connect new information to knowledge they have already stored and organized in their memories
- ▶ Understand and gain new knowledge through a variety of diverse experiences and instruction—including observations, modeling, explanations, books, and other intentional interactions
- ▶ Solve problems and figure things out based on their emerging and basic scientific understandings about how their world works
- ▶ Expand their use of language and develop new vocabulary as they learn more about their world
- ▶ Reflect on their knowledge, gain new insight, and rethink or ask questions based on those insights (preschoolers and older)



Children have different funds of knowledge

Children have similarities and differences in their background knowledge because they each have their own “funds of knowledge.” Funds of knowledge are information that children have developed through their experiences in their cultures and families (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). For example, some children may have lived in another country and be familiar with a different climate and landscape. Others may have traveled little, but they have wide and varied experiences in their local communities that include going to the zoo, playground, library, or beach. These differences can be a rich source for conversations as children bring different backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge to the classroom. It is important not to assume what background knowledge children possess. The best way to find out is to engage with the children and their families. Understanding children’s prior experiences and background knowledge is crucial for valid screenings and assessments. See *Gathering and Using Language Information That Families Share* for more on assessing background knowledge.



How Background Knowledge develops

Alicia develops background knowledge throughout her early childhood, and this directly supports her school readiness. Alicia, a dual language learner (DLL), is learning Spanish and English at home and English at school. She will develop skills in each language based on how each language is used with her, and how she uses each language. Here we see how the knowledge she develops from birth directly supports her school readiness.

INFANT/TODDLER

Infants and toddlers develop background knowledge primarily from their varied experiences exploring their world. Adult support can help them make sense of these experiences.

- Alicia has always known the family dog, Lola.
- Alicia knows that Lola is a dog and names other 4-legged animals *perro* (Spanish for dog) as well.
- Alicia has experiences with cats and learns the correct name and characteristics of two animals.
- Alicia expands her knowledge of 4-legged animals through experiences and books, learning the names and characteristics of many different animals.

PRESCHOOL

Preschoolers can connect their experiences with books that are read to them and other sources of knowledge. They also enjoy displaying and sharing their knowledge with others.

- Alicia increases her knowledge about animals through books and school projects, in Spanish and English. She learns to categorize the ones she knows into farm, zoo, and jungle animals.
- Alicia learns to categorize more animals—for example, mammals, birds, fish, insects, and reptiles—and to identify them as either wild or domesticated. Alicia begins to understand the larger concept of mammals and their characteristics.
- Alicia becomes curious about insects and how they differ from mammals.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Early experiences building background knowledge support school readiness skills. This includes word recognition, reading comprehension, and positive approaches to learning.

- Alicia recognizes and understands words, such as “mammal,” “jungle,” and “wild” when reading.
- Alicia can write some of the names of her favorite animals and insects.
- Alicia uses her knowledge of animals to help her comprehend the books she reads.
- Alicia confidently asks questions and engages with science and social studies activities because she likes showing what she knows and learning new things.

Dual language learners: Culture and Background Knowledge



- ▶ Each child's background knowledge is unlike any other child's because it is based on the child's own experiences and interests.
- ▶ DLLs bring background knowledge they have developed in their own languages.
- ▶ Screening and assessment of DLLs should involve families and include an understanding of children's experiences and the prior knowledge that they have developed in each of their languages.
- ▶ DLLs, with their rich and varied experiences, may be valuable resources for learning about classroom topics.
- ▶ Teachers should support all children in learning the vocabulary used in class themes and lesson content.



Alicia, a Spanish and English speaker, and Xiao, a Chinese and English speaker, are preschoolers who have both developed background knowledge about animals based on their experiences in their families and communities.

Alicia

Animals are pets. My dog cuddles with me. He licks my face. He loves me!

My dog has a collar around his neck with my phone number. He stays close to me on a leash.



Xiao

Animals are food. We buy chickens from the market and my grandmother makes delicious soup. I help!

You can make lots of food from chicken. My favorite is chicken dumplings. I help make the wrappers and we fold the meat inside the dough.



Note that Alicia and Xiao may be using their home languages to express their knowledge about animals. Each child has already developed a lot of background knowledge about animals through their experiences at home.

Cultural knowledge is one important type of background knowledge. Children begin learning how to participate in a culture at birth. For example, preschoolers learn how to participate in a classroom culture. They learn to sit quietly in a circle, how to line up to go to the bathroom, that loud voices should be saved for outdoors, and that they must raise their hands to speak during circle time. They may be expected to behave quite differently at home. It is important that teachers are aware of the different expectations between home and school and that they support children who may struggle to understand different sets of expectations.



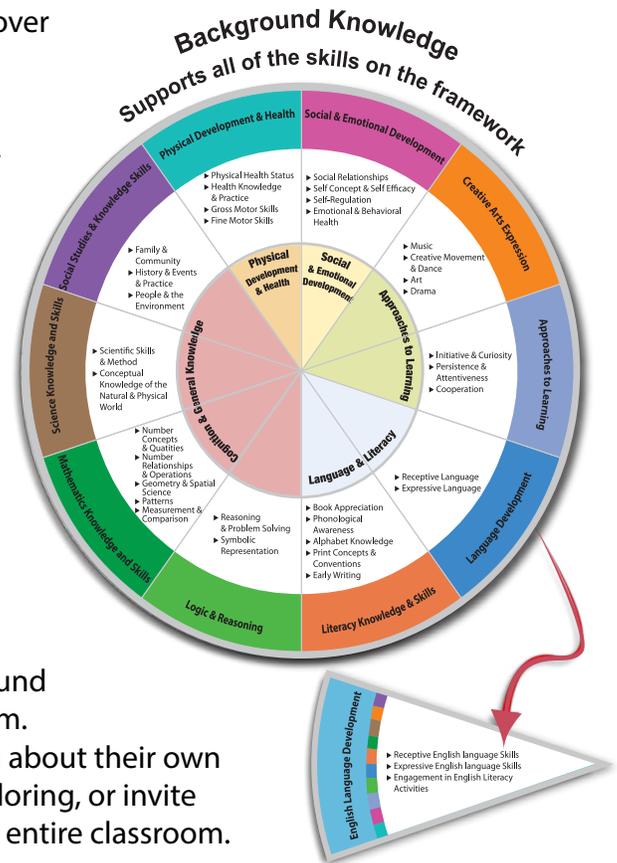
- ✓ Decide as a teaching team how you will transition between activities and what behavior you expect from children during different activities.
- ✓ Expect to spend weeks explaining, describing, modeling, and practicing these behaviors with children.
- ✓ Use graphics or picture cues to help remind children what kind of behavior is expected during classroom activities.
- ✓ Lead a discussion with children about how to behave in different places—including home, the center, stores, houses of worship, homes of friends, the car, the bus, etc.
- ✓ Understand that some children will need reminders more often than other children.
- ✓ Expect to spend extra time with children who are new to the classroom and support these children with explaining, modeling, and practice. Sometimes pairing a new child with a child who has already learned the classroom expectations is a good strategy.



Supporting Background Knowledge

- ▶ Explore rich and engaging topics together over time.
 - ▶ Choose fun and interesting topics to explore based on children’s preferences, families’ suggestions, and your own interests and knowledge.
 - ▶ Explore topics repeatedly over time—even over the whole year. It is easier for children to remember what they have learned when the information is repeated several times over an extended period.
 - ▶ Create a classroom environment in which children’s questions are taken seriously and respected even if they cannot be answered immediately.
 - ▶ Involve families as providers of background knowledge at home and in the classroom. Encourage them to talk to their children about their own experiences with the topics you are exploring, or invite them to share their knowledge with the entire classroom.

- ▶ Build on children’s prior knowledge.
 - ▶ Look to families as a source of understanding about children’s background knowledge. Talk with them about what their children know, do, say, and enjoy.
 - ▶ Consider children’s prior knowledge as you conduct assessments and screenings.
 - ▶ Talk with the children about the connections between what they are doing and seeing at the moment, what they have done and seen in the past, and what they will do or see in the future.
 - ▶ Ask children about what they already know about an activity or a topic as you begin to explore it.
 - ▶ Plan activities that both build on prior experiences and consider school readiness goals.
 - ▶ Share information with families on an ongoing basis as you build children’s knowledge together.



Background Knowledge in action for infants and toddlers

Reyna supports Jamal as he explores his world. While his explorations of food can be a distraction at mealtime and snack, Reyna knows they can also provide rich opportunities for learning.

Reyna notices that her toddlers love to touch their food, especially Jamal. He is very interested in separating the bread from its crust. When Reyna speaks with Jamal's family about his interest in bread, she learns that he has always loved bread and that his family eats it daily. As an infant, he would grab for it. With

encouragement from Reyna, his family is following his lead and providing opportunities for him to explore bread. They have begun to introduce different toppings, like butter, jam, and cheese. Reyna builds on these home experiences and provides opportunities for further exploration in the classroom.

Reyna says the word "crust" each time Jamal tears off the crust. She also asks him to help her serve the bread and shows him what a whole "loaf" looks like. Jamal will not use these new words yet, but with Reyna's support he is learning information about his world that interests him greatly.

Reyna also shares books about bread with him, reminding him as she reads that he eats bread. She encourages Jamal to explore toppings as new ones are introduced, such as hummus and sunflower butter. She even has Jamal share crumbs with the birds.



Background Knowledge in action for preschoolers

Ina is a home visitor to seven Armenian-speaking families and five English-speaking families. When she visits their homes, the children often talk about what they like to eat.

When Ina decides to explore bread and bread-making with the children, she talks to families about the types of bread they eat. Families respond by providing her with the names of the breads in their home languages, recipes for making the breads, and descriptions of how the breads are used in their cultural traditions (for example, for certain holidays or at particular times of the day or year). One family shares gluten-free bread recipes because a family member has celiac disease.



During a home visit, Ina and each family make the family's favorite breads. Many of the Armenian-speaking families want to make *lavash*, a thin unleavened flatbread. Reyna and each family make a chart of all the steps involved in making bread. They also read books about bread (a favorite is *Bread, Bread, Bread* by Ann Morris). The children learn the vocabulary of making bread, including "knead," "rise," "bake," "crust," "dough," and "yeast." The families even gather for an evening event and make an illustrated recipe book together. Each family receives a copy. The children enjoy flipping through the book as they remember making bread and decide which bread to make next.

References for Background Knowledge

Professional References

- Duke, N. K., Halversen, A. L., & Knight, J. A. (2012). Building knowledge through informational text. In A. M. Pinkham, T. Kaefer, & S. B. Neuman (Eds.), *Knowledge development in early childhood: Sources of learning and classroom implications* (pp. 205-219). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Lesaux, N. K. (2013). PreK-3rd: Getting literacy instruction right. *PreK-3rd Policy to Action Brief*, 9. Retrieved from http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/PreK-3rd_Getting_Literacy_Instruction_Right.pdf
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
- Pinkham, A. M., Kaefer, T., & Newman, S. B. (Eds.). (2012). Preface. *Knowledge development in early childhood: Sources of learning and classroom implications*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Children's Books

- Morris, A., & Heyman, K. (1989). *Bread, bread, bread*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books.



This document was prepared under Grant #90HC0001 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, by the National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic>

