

## INTRODUCTION TO THE BIG 5 FOR ALL

To be ready for school, both young children who are dual language learners (DLLs) and those who speak English need high-quality language and literacy experiences. Research shows that knowledge of the Big 5 leads to later school success for children birth to five.<sup>6</sup> The Big 5 are

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

The Big 5 begins with early language learning. Language learning happens when children

- hear and respond to language;
- are involved in back-and-forth conversations;
- are interested; and
- hear different words in meaningful ways.<sup>8, 9, 18</sup>

In this introduction to the Big 5 for All you'll find resources organized by the five key skills that lead to later school success for all children. Early education staff and families can explore any of the five skills to

- understand research about each area;
- learn how development progresses from birth to age five;
- learn support strategies; and
- see examples in different early learning settings.

Additional materials included in the Big 5 for All section of the Planned Language Approach are

- Strategies for Parents and Families, which offer specific ways to support children's learning in each of the five key language and literacy areas at home and in the community,
- Joan Talks About the Big 5 Series, which discusses, from the perspective of a kindergartener, Joan, how each of the Big 5 skills are connected to each other. This series can be used for professional development, coaching, and peer-to-peer learning and
- Assessment of the Big 5, which provides a list of resources to assess children's progress in the development of the Big 5 language and literacy skills.



## A COORDINATED APPROACH FOR ALL

The Big 5 should be part of teaching every day because communication, language, and literacy are the foundation for children’s learning. Teaching the Big 5 is part of a coordinated approach for serving all children, including children who are dual language learners (DLLs).<sup>2,5,11,13</sup> It is included as part of the Head Start Program Performance Standards related to education and child development program services under the teaching and learning environment.

Head Start Program Performance Standard §1302.101(b) states, “At the beginning of each program year, and on an ongoing basis throughout the year, a program must design and implement program-wide coordinated approaches that ensure the full and effective participation of children who are dual language learners and their families...”

High-quality language and literacy practices support all children’s development. In addition, some teaching practices are especially important to support the development of children who are DLLs.<sup>3,4,10</sup> Children follow similar learning paths, which is why the Big 5 is important for all. Early education staff plan culturally and linguistically responsive learning experiences daily. Early education staff serve as good language models and support children’s home languages, as well as English. Home visitors provide Big 5 supports for parents to promote their child’s bilingualism.

Children who are DLLs and have a disability, or a suspected delay, may need different types of supports that help them communicate effectively. They may need support in their home language, in English, in sign language, or in other ways. In a coordinated approach, education staff make appropriate modifications and adaptations to ensure full and effective participation for children with disabilities or suspected delays.



## ALIGNMENT TO THE HEAD START EARLY LEARNING OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK

The Big 5 aligns with the Language and Literacy domain of the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (HSELOF). For infants and toddlers, Language and Communication is the HSELOF domain that covers the Big 5. They are just beginning to use new words and phrases to communicate at this age.

For preschoolers, the Big 5 appear in the Literacy and Language and Communication domains. The difference for preschoolers is that they have greater expressive language skills and understanding of the sounds and symbols in print.

Early language and literacy skills are important to all the other HSELOF domains. To read more, visit the [interactive HSELOF](#).

## ALIGNING THE HSELOF WITH THE BIG 5

AGE GROUP	HSELOF LANGUAGE AND LITERACY CENTRAL DOMAIN	HSELOF SUB-DOMAINS	THE BIG 5	
 INFANT/ TODDLER DOMAINS	 LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION	Attending and Understanding	<b>1.</b> Background Knowledge	<b>2.</b> Oral Language and Vocabulary
		Communicating and Speaking		
		Vocabulary	<b>3.</b> Book Knowledge and Print Concepts	
		Emergent Literacy	<b>4.</b> Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing	

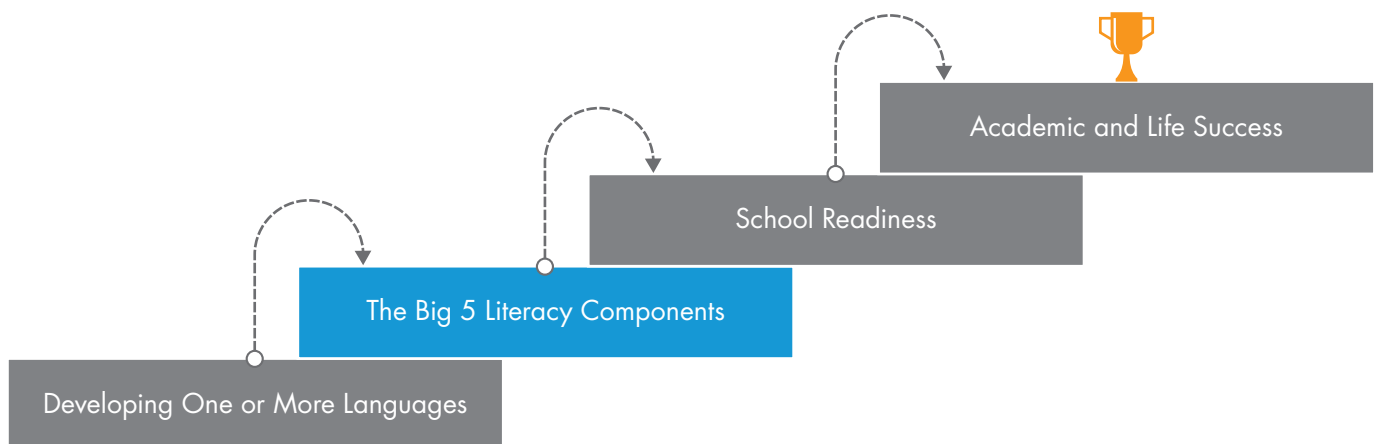
AGE GROUP	HSELOF LANGUAGE AND LITERACY CENTRAL DOMAIN	HSELOF SUB-DOMAINS	THE BIG 5	
● PRESCHOOLER DOMAINS	● LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION	Attending and Understanding	<b>1.</b> Background Knowledge	<b>2.</b> Oral Language and Vocabulary
		Communicating and Speaking		
		Vocabulary		
	● LITERACY	Print and Alphabet Knowledge	<b>3.</b> Book Knowledge and Print Concepts	
		Comprehension and Text Structure		
		Print and Alphabet Knowledge	<b>4.</b> Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing	
		Writing		
		Phonological Awareness	<b>5.</b> Phonological Awareness	

The Big 5 can be taught and encouraged in all types of programs, including Head Start or child care centers, home-based programs, and family child care programs. The Big 5 may also be aligned with state early learning and development standards.



### THE BIG 5: WHY ARE THEY A BIG DEAL?

Language is the foundation for literacy and learning that helps a child be ready for school. Children who start kindergarten with large vocabularies will likely read better. Those with smaller vocabularies may struggle.<sup>12</sup> Developing strong vocabulary and early literacy skills in a language other than English also leads to better English learning.<sup>1</sup> The more children know about each of the Big 5—in English or in their home language—the more likely they are to be strong and enthusiastic readers.<sup>6, 11</sup>



---

## THE BIG 5 LITERACY COMPONENTS

The table below provides a brief description of each of the Big 5 skills. The activities to promote the concept, and the behaviors children engage in will vary based on children’s age and abilities. For strategies and tips, be sure to review the additional Big 5 resources.



### 1 BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

From birth, children have daily experiences with people, objects, and places that they store in their memory. Over time, these memories become more complex. This background knowledge is the base for future learning. Children gain background knowledge through their wide and varied interactions with people. Background knowledge includes scientific awareness; cultural norms and expectations; and other information about the world. Background knowledge expands as children connect new learning to background knowledge.<sup>14</sup>



### 2 ORAL LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY

Oral language is often divided into receptive and expressive language. Children develop receptive language as they begin to understand a language’s meaning, even before they can express it themselves. They develop expressive language as they are able to use the sounds, words, and sentences of their language. A key aspect of oral language development is acquiring vocabulary.<sup>7</sup> Children also use oral language when they participate in extended, complex conversations such as telling a story or sharing a memory.<sup>19</sup>



### 3 BOOK KNOWLEDGE AND PRINT CONCEPTS

When children experience written language in their day-to-day lives, they begin to understand that print has meaning. Print is speech written down.<sup>16</sup> When adults read books to children, they also learn about how books work. Environmental print—which includes street signs, advertisements, logos, and other writing found in a child’s everyday environment—is the first way young children gather meaning from print. Children develop print concepts when they begin to understand how written language works.



### 4 ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE AND EARLY WRITING

As children develop alphabet knowledge, they learn to recognize and name upper and lowercase letters. They also learn that there are sounds associated with each letter. Children’s early writing progresses from making marks and scribbling, to drawing, and eventually to forming letters. Children’s developing writing reflects their understanding of how written language works.<sup>15, 17</sup>



### 5 PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

Phonological awareness is the ability to focus on and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words. Children develop phonological awareness as they learn to recognize that language can be broken into words, syllables, and smaller sounds. Children are demonstrating phonological awareness when they manipulate sounds by identifying, segmenting, blending, and substituting sounds.<sup>16</sup> Activities such as repeating sounds, making up nonsense words, or saying simple rhymes will develop this skill.



---

## REFERENCES:

1. Ackerman, Debra and Zoila Tazi. "Enhancing Young Hispanic Dual Language Learners' Achievement: Exploring Strategies and Addressing Challenges." *Policy Information Report, ETS Research Report No. RR-15-01*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2015. [http://www.ets.org/research/policy\\_research\\_reports/publications/report/2015/jtsf](http://www.ets.org/research/policy_research_reports/publications/report/2015/jtsf)
2. Castro, D.C., Espinosa, L.M., and Paez, M.M. (2011). Defining and measuring quality in early childhood practices that promote dual language learners' development and learning. In M. Zaslow, I. Martinez-Beck, K. Tout, and T. Halle (Eds.), *Quality measurement in early childhood settings* (pp. 257-280). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
3. Conboy, Barbara, Rechele Brooks, Andrew N. Meltzoff, and Patricia K Kuhl. "Social Interaction in Infants' Learning of Second-Language Phonetics: An Exploration of Brain-Behavior Relations." *Developmental Neuropsychology*, 40(4): 216- 229.
4. Conboy, Barbara and Patricia K. Kuhl. "Impact of Second-Language Experience in Infancy: Brain Measures of First- and Second-Language Speech Perception." *Developmental Science*, 14(2): 242-248.
5. Dickinson, David and Michelle V. Porche. "Relation Between Language Experiences in Preschool Classrooms and Children's Kindergarten and Fourth-Grade Language and Reading Abilities." *Child Development* 82: 870-886. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2011.01576.x
6. Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS. "Developing early literacy: Report of the national early literacy panel (NA)." 2010. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
7. Harris, Justin, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek. "Lessons from the Crib to the Classroom: How Children Really Learn Vocabulary." In S. B. Neuman & D. K. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of Early Literacy Research* (Vol. 3): 49-65.
8. Hirsh-Pasek, Kathy and Roberta Michnick Golinkoff. "How babies talk: Six principles of early language development." In S.L. Odom, E.P. Pungello, & N. Gardner-Neblett (Eds.), *Infants, Toddlers, and Families in Poverty: Research Implications for Early Child Care* (pp.77-100). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
9. Konishi, Haruka, Junko Kanero, Max R. Freeman, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek. "Six Principles of Language Development: Implications for Second Language Learners." *Developmental Neuropsychology*, 39(5): 404-420. [doi.org/10.1080/87565641.2014.931961](https://doi.org/10.1080/87565641.2014.931961)
10. McCabe, Allyssa, Marc A. Bornstein, Alison Wishard Guerra, Yana Kuohirko, Mariela Paez, Catherine S. Tamis-Lemonda, Carolyn Brokmeyer Cates, Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Gigliana Melzi, Lulu Song, Roberta Golinkoff, Erika Hoff, and Alan Mendelsohn. "Multilingual Children: Beyond Myths and Toward Best Practices." *Society for Research in Child Development*, 2013.
11. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*. (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2017), 385. [doi.org/10.17226/24677](https://doi.org/10.17226/24677)
12. National Research Council. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 1998). [doi.org/10.17226/6023](https://doi.org/10.17226/6023)
13. Neuman, Susan B., and Tanya Wright. "The Magic of Words: Teaching Vocabulary in the Early Childhood Classroom." *American Educator*, 38(2) (2014): 4 - 13.
14. Neuman, Susan B., Tanya Kaefer, and Ashley M. Pinkham. (Eds.) (2012). *Knowledge Development in Early Childhood: Sources of Learning and Classroom Implications*. New York: The Guilford Press.
15. Rowe, Deborah Wells and Carin Neitzel. "Interest and Agency in 2- and 3-year-olds' Participation in Emergent Writing." *Reading Research Quarterly*, 45(2): 169-195.
16. Schickedanz, Judith and Molly F. Collins. *So Much More Than the ABCs: The Early Phases of Reading and Writing*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2013.
17. Shagoury, Ruth. "Language to Language: Nurturing Writing Development in Multilingual Classrooms." *Young Children*, 64(2): 52-57.
18. Shanahan, Timothy and Christopher Lonigan. "The Role of Early Oral Language in Literacy Development." *Language Magazine*, 12(2): 24-27. <https://www.languagemagazine.com/5100-2/>
19. Wasik, B. H. and B.A. Newman. "Teaching and Learning to Read." In O. A. Barbarin & B. H. Wasik (Eds.), *Handbook of Child Development and Early Education: Research to Practice*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

---

This document was developed with funds from Grant #90HC00120100 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, and the Office of Child Care by the National Center for Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning. This resource may be duplicated for noncommercial uses without permission.