# What does 20 years of research say about teaching language and literacy in preschool?

The REL Southeast research team summarized 20 years of research to identify instructional practices that best support the language and literacy development of preschool students. The systematic review included 109 rigorous studies that evaluated 132 language and literacy interventions. The review reported the overall impacts on students' language and literacy performance before entering kindergarten.

**20 years**

**1997**        **2017**

## How should schools or districts decide which instructional materials and strategies to use?

When making decisions, it is important to match the instructional objectives with student needs. In addition, determining required resources is fundamental for successful implementation.

Details about each intervention and how each was implemented in different settings can be found in the systematic review report. Click on the report cover or here for more information.

*Click on the circles below to learn more about each instructional area.*

# What does 20 years of research say about teaching language and literacy in preschool?

## Supporting Language Development in Preschool

Language is the foundation of thinking and learning. Almost all interventions reviewed in the report included some language related instructional activities and some even taught language exclusively. The report identifies some effective instructional strategies and common misunderstandings when supporting preschoolers' language development.

### We love interactive book reading! Read to them with tons of WH-questions!

Most of the interventions that taught language included interactive book reading as part of the instructional activities. In general, interactive book reading is an effective way to teach language. Specifically, evidence shows that asking questions before, during, and after interactive book reading can enhance the impact on language performance.

While reading a story, teachers may provide opportunities for students to find the main idea, connect text to students' life experiences, draw inferences beyond the text, make predictions, recall the story, or retell the story. Teachers may also introduce new vocabulary by labeling or identifying, defining, using word maps to generate synonyms and antonyms, or by providing examples and non-examples.

### Small group activities support language development

One way to increase interactive instructional opportunities in your classroom is to carry out small group activities. When teaching language, students perform better when the intervention occurs in one-on-one or small group settings. Small groups allow students to receive more intensive instruction and allow teachers to have a more precise evaluation of student performance. Among interventions that taught language exclusively, the research team explored the impact of varying group size. Specifically, the review found that language-focused instruction had greater impact in groups smaller than six students than those occurred in whole group settings.

# What does 20 years of research say about teaching language and literacy in preschool?

## Supporting Language Development in Preschool *(continued)*

### Is teaching language enough to prepare preschoolers for reading and writing?

Researchers have been putting efforts into answering this question. Evidence shows that using programs that solely teach language as primary curriculum does NOT produce the same impact on language performance as delivering language-focused instructional practices (such as interactive book reading) as part of the daily classroom routine. In fact, we found that teaching language exclusively is NOT likely to improve student performance in phonological awareness, print knowledge, decoding, or writing.

### What else can be done to teach language effectively?

When talking with students, teachers can support expressive language development by modeling, extending, recasting, asking open-ended questions, or playing interactive games. An example of extending students' language is to repeat what a student says, and then add a few more words to extend the sentence. A recast is used to correct a student's incorrect phrase by rephrasing the sentence. For example, a student might say, "Him need juice." The teacher could respond with, "Does he need juice?"

For more information, please go to the other resources section for other strategies to promote language development in your classroom.

# What does 20 years of research say about teaching language and literacy in preschool?

## Supporting Phonological Awareness Development in Preschool

Phonological awareness involves being able to recognize and manipulate the sounds within spoken words. Research has shown that phonological awareness is fundamental for understanding the alphabetic principle and reading success. More than half of the interventions included in the report taught phonological awareness and the results demonstrated that students had better phonological awareness outcomes than those who did not receive the interventions.

### Does phonological awareness have to be taught to be learned?

A small number of studies reviewed in the report evaluated the impacts on phonological awareness without teaching it. Some of these interventions included teaching letter names, letter sounds, or letter writing, but did not teach phonological awareness. The results showed that students are NOT likely to develop phonological awareness without being taught.

More importantly, the evidence further reveals that teaching phonological awareness and print knowledge not only benefited the development of them both but also improved decoding and early writing, even when neither of the latter skills were taught!

### What are effective strategies to teach phonological awareness?

We found that interventions including a combination of exercises such as identification, matching, blending, counting, segmentation, or production can improve student performance. In addition to formal instructional practices in classroom, teachers can also embed these activities in the daily routine, such as during transitions, because phonological awareness activities can be done without using any print materials.

To identify a sound in a word, teachers may ask students to identify the initial phoneme* or rime unit in an orally presented word or in a word depicted in a picture. A matching task is when students match or sort words that share a common sound or rime. Students may also practice blending sounds into words or segmenting words into sounds. An example of production is asking the student to say the word that remains when "cil" is removed from "pencil."

For more information, please go to the [other resources](#) section for other strategies to promote phonological awareness in your classroom.



> Say the word that remains after we remove "cil" from "pencil."

> Pen

\* The smallest unit of sound in spoken language.

# What does 20 years of research say about teaching language and literacy in preschool?

## Supporting Print Knowledge Development in Preschool

Print knowledge is another building block in preparing students to become good readers and writers. More than half of the interventions included in the report taught print knowledge. Specifically, most taught letter names or sounds, and some taught concepts about print. It is worth noting that no intervention taught print knowledge exclusively. Print knowledge instruction frequently co-occurred with language and/or phonological awareness instruction.

### Does order matter when teaching letter names and sounds?

Most students enter preschool having some knowledge of the alphabet. Regardless, teachers should still plan to teach all 26 letter names and their sounds. Of the studies included in the report, only a few examined teaching letter names/sounds sequentially, and little evidence supports one instructional order over another. In fact, teaching either letter name or letter sounds or both, all produce similar improvement in letter knowledge.

### Is teaching letter names and letter sounds enough to prepare preschoolers for reading and writing?

Of all the interventions that taught print knowledge, some did not teach phonological awareness. We compared the impacts of these interventions with those that taught both. The results showed that interventions that taught both print knowledge and phonological awareness improved print knowledge performance, while interventions that taught print knowledge without teaching phonological awareness did NOT. Teachers can introduce letter names and sounds while also providing phonological awareness activities. There is no need to delay teaching print knowledge until after phonological awareness instruction or vice-versa.

### What are other effective strategies to teach print knowledge?

Another component of print knowledge is concepts about print which includes the understanding that print carries meaning, and how a book "works." Some interventions introduced concepts about print by using print referencing during shared book reading. Teachers may direct students' attention to print by explicitly commenting on, asking questions about, pointing to, and tracking text that is being read.

For more information, please go to the other resources section for other strategies to promote print knowledge in your classroom.

# What does 20 years of research say about teaching language and literacy in preschool?

## Supporting Decoding Development in Preschool

Decoding is the ability to understand letter-sound correspondence and to decipher new words by sounding them out. To determine the impact of different decoding focused instructional components, an intervention was identified as teaching decoding when it focused on manipulating sounds within printed words or translating a word from print to speech sounds. When these tasks were taught without printed words present, the interventions were identified as teaching phonological awareness instead of decoding.

### Is it too early to teach decoding in preschool?

In this report, only a few interventions taught decoding and most included some phonological awareness or print knowledge instructional components. That being said, we found an overall positive impact on decoding, especially when phonological awareness and/or print knowledge were also taught. It is worth noting that the positive impact on decoding occurred even when only phonological awareness and print knowledge were taught. Teachers of this age group are encouraged to devote most of their attention to phonological awareness and print knowledge instruction which can lead to improved performance in decoding. More research is needed to explore the benefits of decoding instruction in preschool, and on how to best differentiate instruction for children with different levels of phonological awareness and print knowledge.

### What are other effective strategies to teach decoding?

Teachers may emphasize the relationship between the individual sounds in our spoken language and the letter we use to represent them in our written language. Learning how the 26 letters are used to represent the roughly 44 sounds in our spoken language allows students to unlock the code of our written language.

For more information, please go to the other resources section for other strategies to promote decoding in your classroom.

# What does 20 years of research say about teaching language and literacy in preschool?

## Supporting Early Writing Development in Preschool

Early writing is supportive of students' later literacy development. Preschoolers might start exploring writing with drawing, marking, or scribbling letter-like shapes. In addition, early writing also involves the understanding of general conventions such as English print going from left to right on a page, and how written language works (for example, speech can be represented by individual sounds, which can be written down using letters). Preschoolers' exploration with writing can demonstrate their knowledge of the English writing system.

### Is it too early to teach writing in preschool?

In this report, most interventions that taught writing included some phonological awareness or print knowledge instructional components. Some studies evaluated the impact on writing even when the intervention did not teach writing. The evidence shows that teaching writing solely is not likely to improve writing performance. However, when interventions also included phonological awareness and print knowledge, we found a positive impact on writing even when writing was not taught. Teachers are encouraged to include writing in their overall instructional program, while also emphasizing language, phonological awareness, and print knowledge.

### What else can be done to support preschoolers' writing development?

Writing time is considered an important activity in many preschool classrooms. Yet, it might be challenging to offer explicit writing instruction when your students have diverse experiences in writing. Besides playing with sounds in the words and introducing letters, teachers may demonstrate writing those taught letters or words, and encourage students to copy, trace, or even spell them when teachers see fit. Inviting students to write their names is another way to foster early writing skills. Writing instruction that address composition can help students make the connection between oral language and written language.

For more information, please go to the other resources section for other strategies to promote early writing in your classroom.

## What does 20 years of research say about teaching language and literacy in preschool?

# Other resources

### Language

[Snapshot series: Foundations in Emergent Literacy Instruction infographic](#) Vocabulary and Oral Language

[Professional Learning Community: Emergent Literacy](#) Module 3 and 4

[WWC Shared Book Reading intervention report](#)

[WWC Dialogic Reading intervention report](#)

[Joyful Reading and Creative Expression with Young Children: Planning Tips and Tools](#) video

[A Teaching Routine for Academic Vocabulary in Grades PreK-1](#) video

[Supporting Dual Language Learners in the PreK Classroom](#) blog

### Phonological Awareness

[Snapshot series: Foundations in Emergent Literacy Instruction infographic](#) Phonological Awareness

[Professional Learning Community: Emergent Literacy](#) Module 2

[WWC Phonological Awareness Training intervention report](#)

[WWC Phonological Awareness Training plus Letter Knowledge Training intervention report](#)

[FCRR Student Center Activities PreK](#) Phonological Awareness

### Print Knowledge

[Snapshot series: Foundations in Emergent Literacy Instruction infographic](#) Print Knowledge

[Professional Learning Community: Emergent Literacy](#) Module 1

[FCRR Student Center Activities PreK](#) Alphabet Knowledge

### Decoding

[FCRR Student Center Activities PreK](#) Letter-Sound Correspondence

### Early Writing

[Joyful Reading and Creative Expression with Young Children: Planning Tips and Tools](#) video

[FCRR Student Center Activities PreK](#) Emergent Writing