

## What to Expect in Preschool: Literacy

The ability to read and write, to understand the subtleties of language, to think and reason clearly, and to communicate effectively with others is key to success in school and in life. Researchers have identified a window of time from birth to around age 8 as crucial for a child's development of literacy. Preschool teachers develop literacy by continually exposing children to oral and written language, and by building on prior knowledge and language experiences. Pictures, play, and the printed word combine with oral language to help your child understand the symbolic representation that underlies reading and writing. Her teacher will use a variety of fun, engaging strategies in the classroom to develop literacy:

**Reading aloud:** A small group of children cluster around their teacher in the reading corner, listening intently as she reads *The Cat in the Hat*. She holds up the book so they can see the illustrations and talk about them. The teacher asks questions about the story and the children make predictions about what will happen next. By actively participating in the story, preschoolers acquire skills that will promote future success in reading. They learn new vocabulary and gain an understanding of the way stories are structured. They also experience high-level thinking as they form connections between the story and what they know in life.

**Poetry:** Nursery rhymes, songs, and poetry are a key part of literacy development, says Bernice E. Cullinan, Ph.D., professor emerita at New York University and the author of more than 40 books on reading, including *Read To Me – Raising Kids Who Love to Read*. Listening to, and repeating, poetry is a wonderful way for children to learn phonemic awareness. That is the ability to notice and isolate the individual sounds, or phonemes, in words, like the "c" in cat or the "b" in bat — a key skill for future success in reading. Preschoolers first learn that speech is made up of sounds, syllables, and words indirectly from listening to stories, nursery rhymes, poetry, and conversations. They gain phonemic awareness, says Cullinan, by "playing with language" — by meowing like the cat in the story a teacher is reading, or making up nonsense rhymes. Rhyming games also help children think about sound and the structure of words.

**Storytelling:** Listening teaches story structure and helps children learn to predict outcomes, says Bill Gordh, an author, storyteller, and director of expressive arts at the Episcopal School in New York City. He finds children get caught up in the rhythm of his stories and understand them instinctively, without explanation. One advantage of storytelling (versus reading aloud from a book), according to Gordh, is that you can change the story depending on how the children respond. He believes children learn the meaning of the story by responding verbally and with physical gestures. When you tell a story, says Gordh, "it is just you and the children and language. The moment is unique. They have to remember the story because they can't go pick up a book and reread it."

**The printed word:** To understand how print works, preschoolers need to be surrounded by it — in books and magazines, in signs around the classroom, on bulletin boards, in labels on their clothes and possessions. They need to learn that written words correspond to spoken words, that words are composed of letters, and that sentences are made up of words with spaces between the words. They learn that in English we read from left to right and from the top to the bottom of the page. They are encouraged to incorporate the written word into their pretend play.

**The alphabet:** Alphabet books and puzzles help children learn the relationship between sounds and letters and give them practice recognizing and distinguishing letters.

**Writing and invented spelling:** Writing is a key part of early reading. Children learn to read by writing, says Cullinan. They practice using the symbols they associate with sounds as they write using "invented spelling." At preschool, your child will be encouraged to write captions for his pictures, to write stories about what he's drawn, and to tell stories based on his experiences and imaginations.

**Dramatic play:** Children exercise their imaginations, practice their communication skills, and learn the subtleties of spoken language in dramatic play and dress-up games.

**Computers:** A computer can be an important tool for children in learning to write. Because their small motor control is still developing, preschoolers often find it easier to find the letters they are looking for on the keyboard than to use a pencil to form them. The teacher will help them search for letters in the beginning and encourage them to read the words they are writing and then print them out.

### **Ten ways to help at home**

1. Read aloud to your child everyday. Pick books you like so your enthusiasm permeates the story. Make your child an active participant in the story by asking questions and encouraging her to predict what will happen next. Be sure to include nursery rhymes and poetry.
2. Make sure your child sees you reading. Let him know that it is important to you and that you enjoy it.
3. Have books readily available around the house, including sturdy, easy-to-grasp board books.
4. Take your child to the library and get him a library card. Go with him to the bookstore to select books.
5. Teach your child to recognize her name. Print it on the top of her drawings and on the door of her room.
6. Use TV responsibly. Limit the number of shows watched, choose shows that relate to books, and watch together so you can talk about what you see.
7. Give your child paper and crayons, or markers, and ask her to illustrate a letter to grandma and write captions under her pictures. Let her use invented spelling. Ask her to illustrate her stories and read them to you. Make holiday cards together.
8. Help your child to understand the role of print in the world by pointing out signs on the bus, labels on sneakers, and signs on fast food restaurants and movie theaters. Show him the importance of reading and writing in the tasks of daily life - involve him in making grocery and to-do lists. When you go to the store, let him find the tomato soup and Cheerios.
9. Expand your child's use of language by repeating his responses and elaborating on them. Cullinan suggests that if your child says she wants to go swimming, you could say, "Are you positive you want to go swimming now?" After your child answers, you could further expand the idea by saying, "Are you absolutely positive you want to go swimming right this very minute?"

10. If you have a computer at home, teach your child to type his name on it. Help him find the letters on the keyboard. Print out his name and hang it on his door. Consider software programs featuring his favorite storybook character.

## **Math**

On any given day, your child and his preschool pals divide cookies or pretzels into equal piles for snacks. They build bridges and tall towers with wooden blocks. They string beads into colorful patterns. They weigh the class rabbit and measure the length and width of its cage. They learn to balance a seesaw when one child is heavier than another. They discover which trucks are too big to fit in the toy garage and compare the number of shells they find at the beach.

Preschoolers do math even though they are not sitting at desks with workbooks or memorizing multiplication tables. Math is helping them to make sense of the world around them and teaching them to reason and problem-solve. It's not limited to a specific period or time of day, says Marilou Hyson, associate executive director for professional development at the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Instead it is a natural part of young children's play and daily activities. They explore mathematical concepts as they sort, classify, compare quantities, balance blocks, notice shapes, and find patterns.

Preschool teachers build on children's prior knowledge and capitalize on their spontaneous discoveries to further their understanding of mathematical concepts. As children build with blocks, their teacher introduces the concepts of higher, lower, in front of, behind, larger, smaller, equal, horizontal, vertical, parallel, odd, and even, says Long Island, New York, teacher Mary Jane Belt. When the class does an art project, such as putting feathers on the outline of a duck, the teacher might say the duck needs six feathers for his tail. One child puts on two feathers and a second child puts on three. The teacher then asks, "How many feathers does the duck have? Let's count them. Does he need more? How many?" When children are in the literacy area listening to a story, the teacher might ask: "How many elephants do you see on this page? How many do you see with their trunks in the air? How many have babies with them?"

**Numbers:** Children learn about numbers by counting objects and discussing the results. "You gave Chris six goldfish crackers. How many does Susie need?" Children count spaces on board games. They count the days until their birthdays. The teacher might say, "Yesterday there were twelve days until your birthday. How many days are there now?" Preschoolers read counting books and recite nursery rhymes with numbers.

**Geometry and spatial relations:** Children practice constructing shapes and discussing their properties. They see skinny triangles and fat triangles and upside-down triangles and gradually realize that they are all still triangles.

**Measurement:** Children compare the height of a block tower with the height of a desk or table. They measure each other and the distance from the kitchen corner to the water table. They learn that this block is too short to make a bridge over the road. Teachers reinforce children's findings by asking questions and making observations: "I wonder if this block is long enough to bridge the road. Let's try it."

**Patterns/geometry:** Children become aware of patterns in their clothes. They learn to recognize patterns of different colors and sizes in beads and blocks. They practice reproducing simple patterns by stringing beads and copying designs with colored blocks.

**Analyzing data:** Children sort objects by color, size and shape, count them, and record the data on graphs and charts. These charts might reflect the class pet's growth, the number of rainy days in February, how many bean plants have sprouted, or the number of children with a birthday in March.

### **How to help at home**

1. Show how math relates to daily life. Involve them in measuring ingredients when you cook or in figuring out if a container is big enough to hold their toy cars and trucks.
2. Play board games using dice or play money. Help your child count out the spaces to move his piece on the board. Play simple card games like Go Fish.
3. Count things at home and on the street: cars, books, toys, silverware. Count objects in book illustrations.
4. Call attention to different patterns and shapes: plaids, polka dots, paisleys, and triangular and rectangular shapes in the sidewalk.
5. Use terms such as above, beneath, level, larger, smaller, and equal, and words such as horizontal, vertical, perpendicular, and parallel, to describe things you see.
6. You might ask your child to bring you the smallest cookie or to find the book beneath the large table in the living room.
7. Take your child to the supermarket with you and involve her in comparing prices.
8. When you balance your checkbook or pay bills, explain to your child what you are doing.
9. Take your child to the bank with you and let him watch you count money from the ATM.
10. Weigh and measure your child and make a chart to record her growth.
11. Buy a set of hardwood blocks for your children to build with (look for a secondhand one if new ones are too pricey). The learning potential of blocks is unlimited; it will be one of the best investments you make.