



Early years curriculum materials

Language learning and communication

How children learn to use
written language

Examples of literacy learning in each of
the five learning contexts Prep to Year 2



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Introduction

In the early years, children get involved in the fascinating experience of learning how the print and electronic communication systems work to communicate, entertain and inform. Children will use and explore written, visual and multimodal texts and begin to understand and use the written English code in the five contexts for learning: focused learning and teaching and involvement in learning experiences in play, real-life situations, routines and transitions.

These learning experiences will be facilitated through speaking and listening. In the early years, learning about reading, viewing, writing and shaping are integrated and reciprocal experiences. Children learn about reading as they learn about writing, and vice versa.

Emerging understandings of reading and writing

By observing and interacting with adults and older children who read and write, children learn about literacy. Children in the Preparatory Year program will vary in their understandings about literate practices, depending on their interest in and prior experiences with reading, writing, viewing and shaping. Literate practices are essential components of the daily routine in any classroom and, in the early years, children need many opportunities to explore written and electronic texts and their uses.

There are two key and particular foundational understandings that underlie the construction of children's emerging understandings: what reading and writing are, and how they work.

Children must understand that reading and writing are purposeful activities and that people use written language to:

- communicate ideas and information
- transact goods and services
- entertain and persuade others.

Children must explore the concepts underlying written English before they are expected to decode words. It is important for them to know:

- that texts can have pictures, sounds and print, and that we can get meaning from them all
- that we differentiate the picture from the print when reading
- that English is read from left to right
- the meaning of terms such as word, letter, web page
- alphabetic knowledge: that speech can be turned into print; print can be turned into speech and that letters have names and represent sounds in language.

The function of print

As emergent readers, writers and viewers, children need to understand that print is not like pictures, but is comprised of letters that can be turned into speech sounds. Research has described a progression in the understandings that most children develop in arriving at an understanding of the function of print in books.

- The text is predictable from the illustration. Picture and print are not differentiated.
- Picture and print are differentiated, but the print is one unit and usually is the name of, or a sentence about, the picture.
- Children begin to focus on the print – they may recognise familiar letters. The meaning of the text is still predicted from the illustrations.
- Children search for a one-to-one correspondence between graphic and sound segments. For example, they learn the chorus in predictable texts read to them and can match word-to-word lines like "Brown Bear, Brown Bear, what do I see?"

These concepts develop during regular reading experiences where teachers and others discuss meaning, words and letters and demonstrate one-to-one correspondence by pointing to words in a predictable or meaningful phrase. Children are then motivated to investigate the way that the words and sentences convey meaning and the way that letters represent speech sounds.

Alphabetic knowledge

An important understanding for children is the alphabetic principle: that there is a systematic relationship between the letters of the alphabet and their sounds.

Children begin to learn the alphabetic principle when literate people transcribe their spoken words into written words, and explain out loud about the letters and sounds. Children learn more when involved in co-constructing texts and playing games involving the initial sounds of some familiar words. Children do not have to wait until all letter–sound relationships are learned to begin writing activities. Research has indicated that learning about written language through play and language experiences allows children to note that familiar words are written in a consistent order. In this situation, children are introduced to the concept of words and letters and the convention that English writing leaves spaces between words.

Learning the code

Progression for constructing meta-linguistic understandings about the letter–sound system of the English language in the early years.

After children understand that print is meaningful and purposeful, they learn that words can be broken into sound segments and that letters can represent single sounds —and that reading print can be pleasurable. Teachers help children construct understandings of the relationships between letters and sounds by a variety of methods.

1. At all times, teachers help children to construct and extend their oral language vocabulary and sentence structures. If children are proficient in oral language, this will help them use the linguistic code of English to read and write.
2. Children learn the alphabetic sequence by singing alphabet songs and by playing other alphabetic games.
3. *Phonological awareness* — the ability to segment words into phonemes — is an important foundation for literacy learning, and is highly correlated with general oral language proficiency and metalinguistic awareness. Phonological awareness is the foundation for learning letter–sound relationships. Hearing the syllables in words is easier for young children than hearing the sounds of individual letters. Research has found that the older children are, the easier it is for them to identify the syllables in spoken words. This is because, in everyday speech, the sound units of words are not heard in isolation. Phonological awareness is learnt through:
 - playing with rhymes and rhyming sounds which “tune up the ear” to the sounds in words and adds to children’s metalinguistic awareness, e.g. “Miss Mary Mack”
 - segmenting spoken words on different levels throughout the year — as syllables (pan/cake); onset and rime within syllables (p/an; c/an; f/an); the individual phonemes themselves (p/a/n)
4. *Phonemic awareness* requires children to develop a fine sensitivity to the individual sounds in words. Phonemic awareness is a component of phonological awareness and is constructed from many experiences of phonologically playing with and manipulating sounds in words, chants, songs and games.
 - Phonemic awareness generally begins with children playing and talking about alliteration, e.g. “big, brown bear” — all begin with the “b” sound. This is the time to start children learning the sounds to put with the names of letters in the alphabet.
 - The terms *phonological and phonemic awareness* are sometimes mistakenly used to talk about speech discrimination, which is the ability to tell the difference between words that have similar sound elements such as bail and pail. Performance on speech discrimination is not a strong predictor of success in reading, whereas phonological and phonemic awareness are.

5. Children also need to learn to distinguish letters from each other and to name them. This process of distinguishing letter shapes and naming them comes after learning the alphabet sequence. Learning these metalinguistic elements takes a considerable time, especially for children new to discussing and analysing words. There is no particular sequence required for teaching letter identification and related sounds. Children's interest in words that are used frequently in the classroom allows the teacher to focus on letters that are important to the children at the time.

6. *Phonics* refers to instruction in how the *sounds* of speech are represented by letters and spellings. Unless children have phonemic awareness, they are not able to understand and use what is taught in phonics lessons. Connecting letters and sounds is an important capability for children as they begin to work out words while reading and writing. However, so children learn when and *how* to use their understandings, explicit teaching of sound–letter relationships needs to be linked to purposeful acts of reading and writing.

7. Children will learn to read some words by sight if they are regularly involved in literacy experiences.

SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

Integrating literacy learning experiences into the Preparatory Year program, using the Language learning and communication learning statements

Context	Learning statement excerpts (Table 9, EYCG)	Learning experience and notes
<p>The <i>hardware shop</i></p> <p>Background (during a daily routine)</p> <p>A classroom was under construction in the school grounds. While they gathered on the mat at the beginning of the day some of the children had talked about what was happening. After discussion as part of their learning experiences that day, the teacher and children decided to include a visit to observe the carpenters. It was decided that everyone would bring a notepad and pencil to make notes on what they saw. Children could draw or write their observations.</p> <p>Real-life situation</p> <p>During their visit, the teacher asked questions to focus children’s observations on the tools and equipment the carpenters used, and measurements they took to make sure that pieces of the building fitted. Most children drew the item/s they were interested in. Some children added letters they knew to their record. One child who was already writing, just used words.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using spoken language (including home language or signed or augmentative communication) for a range of purposes • experimenting with emerging understandings of written, visual and multimodal texts to communicate meanings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exchanging information by providing and listening for ideas and information using explanations, descriptions and recollections to make meaning • discussing and using, with support, the conventions of speaking and listening (or signed or augmentative communication) used in informal and group settings, including turn taking, listening behaviour and following and giving instructions, explanations and descriptions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — the teacher reminded children how to listen and talk in a group discussion and modelled behaviours again • experimenting with conventional letters, speech sounds, words or symbols of augmentative communication to convey meaning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — children drew hammers, saws, nails, sawhorses etc. — two children wrote names beside drawings e.g. “s”, (saw) “hma” (hammer) — Ricky wrote “Ther was a nale gun and a sprit lev!”

Focused learning situation

At group time, the teacher and children discussed what they saw, and the teacher made a list of equipment that children had recorded. As she wrote the words on butcher's paper, she modelled writing:

- starting at the left-hand corner
- showing left-to-right progression
- talking about which letters and sounds some words started with, and asking children if they knew.

One child mentioned that Bob the Builder had a hammer and a saw. As she wrote it on the butcher's paper, the teacher took the opportunity to emphasise the alliteration in Bob's title. Children began to find other examples: Katy said "I'm K for Katy"; Sam said "I'm Sam the sawer". Other children came up with their examples, followed by general play with initial letters of their names. The teacher emphasised the sound of the first letter and wrote some examples on paper to put up in the room.

Transition

The teacher played a game with initial sounds to send children to prepare for going home, e.g. children with names beginning with M, find a friend and go for morning tea.

- exploring the patterns and conventions of spoken language
- using emerging understandings to predict and make meanings from a variety of written, visual and multimodal texts

- co-constructing and innovating on texts to explore the composing process
- constructing and co-constructing different types of texts for a range of personal and group purposes
- developing understandings of the link between spoken language and written language through collaborative experiences where ideas and experiences are discussed and written down
- using emerging understandings of some symbols, language patterns, conventions, and letter-sound relationships to predict, confirm or make meanings from a variety of written, visual and multimodal texts
- developing understandings of the relationship between letters and sounds during experiences with writing
- children found "b", "k" and "s" on the alphabet chart and practised the sound of each letter
- exploring the rhythm and rhyme of spoken language, including speech sounds, in a range of contexts

<p>Next day</p> <p>Routine</p> <p>When making plans next morning, a few children decided to set up a hardware shop to sell equipment. Other children decided that they would make things to sell in the hardware shop.</p> <p>Another group decided to build a classroom in block corner. The teacher pointed out the limited space available and scaffolded decision making about a compromise on the number of children that could build in the block corner. The decision was that the builders would help build the hardware shop with the blocks and other materials. The other group of children would make items to sell in the hardware shop. Some children chose to do other activities. The teacher modelled writing by creating signs for the hardware shop as the children co-constructed the play areas for the day.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• interacting with peers and familiar adults using, with support, the conventions associated with formal and informal group settings including attentive listening • using emerging understandings to predict and make meanings from a variety of written, visual and multimodal texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• exchanging information by providing, and listening for, ideas and information using explanations, descriptions and recollections to make meaning • using emerging understandings of some symbols, language patterns, conventions, and letter–sound relationships to predict, confirm or make meanings from a variety of written, visual and multimodal texts
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<p>Small group work</p> <p>Group 1. Builders with teacher aide</p> <p>The teacher aide worked with children to plan the building. They drew a plan and labelled the rooms. The aide included numeracy and literacy aspects and helped children to identify materials needed. Children proceeded to build.</p> <p>Group 2. The equipment makers with teacher</p> <p>The teacher used the list from the previous day which documented the equipment found in a hardware shop. The children suggested other items found in a hardware shop and discussed what they would start with and the materials available. Ricky, who often visits a hardware shop with his father, wanted to make a sign for the shop, and two others wanted to help. The teacher took the opportunity to ask children why shops have signs. The children moved to their chosen activity.</p> <p>Other children – four other children were not interested in the groups and proceed to self-selected activities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • experimenting with emerging understandings of written, visual and multimodal texts to communicate meanings • using emerging understandings to predict and make meanings from a variety of written, visual and multimodal texts • using spoken language (including home language or alternative augmentative communication) for a range of purposes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing understandings of the link between spoken language and written language through collaborative experiences where ideas and experiences are discussed and written down • constructing and co-constructing different types of texts for a range of personal and group purposes • using different types of texts for a range of personal and group purposes – e.g. list of equipment found in a hardware shop • learning new vocabulary and extending language structures in a range of contexts • during play, using their observations of real-life purposes and processes associated with reading and viewing • discussing why a particular text has been chosen for a particular situation • discussing why texts are constructed for different purposes
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<p>Play</p> <p>Children began to build the hardware shop. There were too many children so the teacher aide discussed options. Tamara suggested that she and her friends set up a coffee shop next door with dramatic play props.</p> <p>Other children began to make items to sell in the hardware shop. Some children become interested in the coffee shop and decided to make food. They used materials selected from the collage trolley and play dough to construct their food.</p> <p>Ricky and his friends worked on the sign. The teacher helped Ricky to work out words when needed. Other children were encouraged to write their own words. The teacher gave feedback on children's writing, encouraging their attempts to work out signs and labels, noting the sounds they were able to represent, and drawing children's attention to the aspects of their writing that were like the conventions of English writing.</p> <p>Children playing alone were choosing from patterning games, puzzles, using play dough to cut shapes, using a felt story to recreate the story of the Three Little Pigs, using the computer to play a game based on early literacy or numeracy, investigating aspects of science, using musical instruments, etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • experimenting with emerging understandings of written, visual and multimodal texts to communicate meanings • using emerging understandings to predict and make meanings from a variety of written, visual and multimodal texts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning new vocabulary and extending language structures in a range of contexts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • children used vocabulary about food for coffee shop • some children learn words related to tools • developing understandings of the link between spoken language and written language through collaborative experiences where ideas and experiences are discussed and written down • experimenting with conventional letters, speech sounds, words or symbols of augmentative communication to convey meaning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • two children copied words from the list and the teacher wrote a word that Tai wanted with dotted lines for him to follow • one child asked Ricky for help to write • Mona and Travis experimented with writing using a mix of random shapes and capital letters • developing understandings of the link between spoken language and written language through collaborative experiences where ideas and experiences are discussed and written down • sharing their representations and discussing why their personal symbol systems may not be understood by others
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<p>Possible further experiences</p> <p>Many further literacy experiences could follow from this beginning. Depending on children's responses to the learning experiences, the teacher could include many opportunities for children to learn more about communicating. Opportunities could include any of the following:</p> <p>Routines</p> <p>After lunch each day, the relieving teacher reads a book to the children to build their sense of story.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• using emerging understandings to predict and make meanings from a variety of written, visual and multimodal texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• exploring the meanings communicated through symbols and written, visual and multimodal texts• engaging with and responding to a variety of written, visual and multimodal texts• connecting their own experiences with the ideas and information in texts• investigating the concepts of books and print during experiences with reading and viewing
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<p>Play</p> <p>Outdoor experiences</p> <p>Children could continue making products to sell in the hardware shop at the carpentry bench. As well as providing assistance with measurement, design and fine motor skills, the teacher could discuss prices for the products.</p> <p>Focused learning and teaching</p> <p>The group making the products or the whole group could continue with a focused learning and teaching experience about writing and receiving bills. The teacher could find out what children know about bills/invoices and discuss the purpose of these texts and the text types. Collectively, the teacher and children could write a simple invoice to use in the hardware shop.</p> <p><i>This experience could lead to a later discussion on how to let people know what was for sale in the shop — catalogues, posters — and an analysis of the layout of hardware catalogues.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using spoken language (including home language or signed or augmentative communication) for a range of purposes • experimenting with emerging understandings of written, visual and multimodal texts to communicate meanings • using emerging understandings to predict and make meanings from a variety of written, visual and multimodal texts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning new vocabulary and extending language structures in a range of contexts • exchanging information by providing, and listening for, ideas and information using explanations, descriptions and recollections to make meaning • exploring how symbols and written and visual texts are used to communicate meanings • developing understandings of the link between spoken language and written language through collaborative experiences where ideas and experiences are discussed and written down • constructing and co-constructing different types of texts for a range of personal and group purposes • co-constructing and innovating on texts to explore the composing process, discussing why texts are constructed for different purposes • exploring the meanings communicated through symbols and written, visual and multimodal texts • engaging with and responding to a variety of written, visual and multimodal texts • connecting their own experiences with the ideas and information in texts • discussing why a particular text has been chosen for a particular situation • using different types of texts for a range of personal and group purposes
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Transitions

During transitions, the teacher could take the opportunity to include all children in learning the alphabetic sequence through singing an alphabet song. Depending on each child's understanding of the sequence, the teacher could send children to the toilet or to prepare to go home by asking children whose name begins with the next letter in a sequence to leave, e.g.

- *A,b,c ... whose name starts with the next letter? or*
- *Who knows what letter comes next? or*
- *All those whose name starts with ...*

This last question would be needed for the children still exploring letters and sounds.

Play

As the children pursue their construction of the hardware shop, coffee shop, the teacher could plan to further the children's understandings of the purposes for:

- using written and spoken language
- continuing to engage the interest of any children
- observing rather than participating in any of the shared experiences
- using teachable moments to extend children's understandings, capabilities and dispositions in the learning area of language learning and communication.

The opportunities are endless.

- exploring the rhythm and rhyme of spoken language, including speech sounds, in a range of contexts
- talking about language in groups and as individuals