

Special Issues in Kindergarten

Kindergarten is the time when, for most students, formal reading instruction begins. Learning to read, however, starts at home before children ever enter school. Through conversations with adults, word play, songs, rhymes, and exposure to books, children acquire a well-developed oral vocabulary, a good understanding of the sound patterns of language, some basic knowledge of print concepts, and motivation to learn, all of which help them develop into successful readers.

Success in school in the early grades is vitally important (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). We know that children who get off to a good start rarely struggle, while those who fall behind tend to stay behind throughout their school years (National Research Council, 1999). And we know that effective reading instruction will help prevent students from struggling.

Kindergarten teachers face special challenges, whether they are implementing Reading First in a full-day or a half-day program. This issue of the *Reading First Notebook* will focus on topics specific to kindergarten, including instructional issues (e.g., vocabulary, phonemic awareness, phonics, and comprehension), assessment, and ideas for transitioning from preschool to kindergarten. We hope this information will help you address concerns that kindergarten students and teachers currently face.

Despite this focus, this issue of the *Reading First Notebook* is not for kindergarten teachers only! Every teacher needs to be informed about the issues related to early reading instruction in general as well as the specific matters teachers are dealing with at all grade levels. In upcoming issues, the *Reading First Notebook* will focus on topics specific to first, second, and third grade. Stay tuned for even more grade-specific information!

References:

Burns, M., Griffin, P., & Snow, C. (Eds.). (1999). *Starting out right: A guide to promoting children's reading success*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Ramey, C. T., & Ramey, S. L. (2004). Early learning and school readiness: Can early intervention make a difference? *Journal of Developmental Psychology, 50*(4), 471–491.

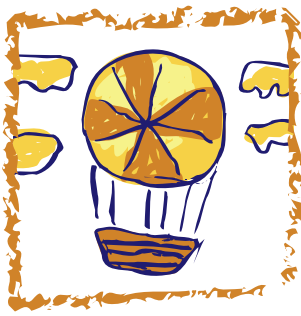
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Reading First Levels of Participation As of 1/25/06

1,559 district awards representing
5,221 schools have been made.





Research Spotlight on Vocabulary

In 1995, Betty Hart and Todd Risley wrote *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*. This book describes a decades-

long research study that reveals the powerful impact a child's environment can play in his or her vocabulary development.

In this ambitious study, 42 families with 1- and 2-year-old children were observed for 1 hour each month over a span of 2 1/2 years. Observers recorded and transcribed everything that was done by the children, to the children, and around the children.

The participating families were categorized according to income and education level. Thirteen of the families were categorized as professional, 23 were categorized as working class and 6 were categorized as on welfare.¹ The families varied by race. The children varied by gender, birth order, and number of siblings.

The authors were surprised by what the data revealed about interactions between parents and their language-learning children. Key findings included the following:

- Children of parents from working-class families have half as many language experiences as children of professional parents. Children of parents on welfare had one third the language experiences as children of professional parents.



- In a 5,200-hour year, these differences translate to 11.2 million words for a child of professional parents, 6.5 million words for a child of working-class parents, and only 3.2 million words for children of parents on welfare. Not only did children of parents on welfare have smaller vocabularies than children of both working-class and professional parents, but also their vocabulary growth was slower, indicating an ever-widening gap between the groups.
- The recorded vocabulary size of the *parents* on welfare was smaller than the recorded vocabulary size of the *children* from the professional families.
- Children of professional parents heard an average of six affirmative messages for each prohibitive message while children in welfare families heard twice as many prohibitive messages than affirmative messages. Parent-initiated interactions that begin with “Don’t,” “Stop,” or “Quit” had a dampening effect on development.
- The measures of accomplishments at age 3 predicted measures of language skill at age 9–10.

Hart and Risley state the following:

Estimating the magnitude of the differences in children's cumulative experience before the age of 3 gives an indication of how big the problem is. Estimating the hours of intervention needed to equalize children's early experience makes clear the enormity of the effort that would be required to change children's lives. And the longer the effort is put off, the less possible the change becomes . . . [We] see the risk to our nation and its children that makes intervention more urgent than ever. (p. 203)

Extrapolated over many years, differences in the sheer number of words, the rate of vocabulary growth, and the number of encouraging remarks vs. discouraging remarks heard by children in these families are remarkable. Quality vocabulary instruction in kindergarten and each subsequent school year is imperative in order to equalize opportunities for all children.

Reference:

Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing.

¹ The categories “professional,” “working class,” and “welfare” were those identified and used by Hart and Risley as they discussed their findings.



Kindergarten Assessment

Educators need to frequently assess the reading skills of their students in order to make informed decisions about reading instruction. This is true in any

grade, but it is especially true in the early grades, where students can develop literacy knowledge and skills very quickly. Educators of young students should assess their students' knowledge and skills quite often to ensure instruction is focused on what they need to learn today and not on what they needed to learn 6 weeks ago.

As important as early reading assessment is, teachers should assess young children with caution. Some approaches to assessment are not appropriate for kindergarten-aged children. It may be more convenient for the teacher to administer an assessment in a group setting, but ideally, very young children should almost always be assessed individually. While older students might feel comfortable in a controlled assessment setting, younger children demand more flexibility on the part of the person giving the assessment. While older children can focus on the assessment with ease, younger children get distracted, bored, or tired very easily.

With very young children, assessments may be somewhat less reliable, so scores should be interpreted accordingly. A child that scores poorly on an assessment might have been bored or distracted or simply confused by the task he or she is being asked to perform. The same child taking the same assessment another day may perform quite well. Data from any one assessment is useful, but teachers should remember that it is just one source. Repeated formal and informal assessment will help establish a more valid and complete profile of the child's literacy knowledge and skills. Young children entering school should be given a screening assessment to determine if they are at risk of reading difficulties, and student progress should be monitored regularly. Those students who are most at risk should frequently be given progress-monitoring assessments to ensure they are getting high-quality reading instruc-

tion focused on their learning needs and designed to accelerate their development of reading skills.

Educators should understand appropriate procedures and approaches for gathering assessment data with young children, and they should also be efficient with their assessment, focusing their attention on the key knowledge and skills that research has shown to be highly related to reading success. The following five areas are key to the development of literacy success:



Phoneme Awareness

The best predictor of reading success is phoneme awareness demonstrated by phoneme counting or segmentation (Hulme et al., 2002). Kindergarten students should be able to count the number of phonemes in a spoken word or say a word with a clear pause between each phoneme.

Letter Knowledge

Another good predictor of reading success is knowledge of the letters of the alphabet. Students should be able to identify them quickly and accurately, either by name or by an associated phoneme (Invernizzi, Meier, Swank, & Juel, 1997).

Vocabulary

Young students at risk of reading failure usually have weaker oral vocabularies than their peers and are more likely to have difficulty developing reading skills (Biemiller, 2003). According to Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002), teachers should

especially focus assessment on the child's knowledge of "Tier 2" words (e.g., *attention, fortune, baunt, mumble, envy, delight*), which are words commonly used in school but rarely used outside of school.¹

Language Comprehension

Reading comprehension skills are grounded in early language comprehension skills. Even as early as kindergarten, teachers should be mindful of students' oral language comprehension skills (Olofsson & Niedersoe, 1999). When reading out loud to students, teachers should occasionally stop and check students' comprehension of the passage with a few questions (e.g., "Why do you think he did that?" or "What do you think will happen next?").

Writing

Students in kindergarten should be able to follow conventions of writing, write using real letters of the alphabet, and demonstrate letter-sound knowledge by using appropriate letters to represent sounds in words (Torgesen & Davis, 1996).

Teachers who focus on assessment and instruction in these areas will be establishing a strong foundation for future literacy growth in their students.

References:

- Beck, I., McKeown, M., & Kucan, L. (2002). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction*. New York: Guilford.
- Biemiller, A. (2003). Vocabulary: Needed if more children are to read well. *Reading Psychology, 24*(3-4), 323-335.
- Hulme, C., Hatcher, P. J., Nation, K., Brown, A., Adams, J., & Stuart, G. (2002). Phoneme awareness is a better predictor of early reading skill than onset-rime awareness. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 82*(1), 2-28.
- Invernizzi, M., Meier, J. D., Swank, L., & Juel, C. (1997). *PALS: Phonological awareness literacy screening*. Charlottesville, VA: University Printing Services.
- Olofsson, A., & Niedersoe, J. (1999). Early language development and kindergarten phonological awareness as predictors of reading problems: From 3 to 11 years of age. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 32*(5), 464-472.
- Torgesen, J. K., & Davis, C. (1996). Individual differences variables that predict responses to training in phonological awareness. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 63*, 1-21.

¹ Beck et al. categorize vocabulary into three tiers. Tier 1 words are common and rarely need instruction, Tier 2 words are high-frequency words that are common across a variety of domains, and Tier 3 words are low-frequency words that occur in a limited number of domains.



Phonemic Awareness and Phonics Instruction in Kindergarten

Along with language comprehension, learning to read is based on a student's ability to hear and manipulate sounds in words and to map those sounds to letters in order to decode.

Research has linked a student's awareness of small units of sounds in words (phonemic awareness) to reading achievement (Juel, 1991; National Reading Panel, 2000). In addition, children who are able to use what they know about letter-sound relationships (phonics) to identify words learn to read more easily and become more proficient readers (Hoover & Gough, 1990).

Many kindergartners enter school with some phonemic awareness, especially if they have spent time singing songs and chanting rhymes at home or in preschool or

daycare. Additionally, some students may also have a rudimentary grasp of phonics. For example, Joel may know that his name begins with the letter *J*. However, many students will arrive in kindergarten without these skills. These students will need specific, clear instruction in order to catch up to their peers. Explicit instruction need not be dull drills or worksheets. These skills can be taught and practiced by playing games and making learning activities fun. This aspect is important, especially for kindergartners, whose attention spans can be limited.

Fun activities to teach/practice phonemic awareness include the following:

- Read rhymes chorally
- Sing songs that contain rhymes
- Make or practice alliterations (“Jumpy Jack and Jazzy Jill jingled Joyful Jenny’s jumbled jewelry”)
- Count the number of syllables or phonemes in a word by clapping, snapping, stacking, or jumping
- Sort picture cards by initial, middle, or final sound or by number of syllables
- Slide a button or coin across the table for each word sound or syllable
- Play “Guess the Word” by slowly blending or segmenting mystery words
- Play “Sound of the Day” by providing reinforcement each time the sound is used or identified



Fun activities to teach/practice phonics include the following:

- Read alphabet books
- Make a class alphabet book
- Use letter tiles/cards/placards to make words
- Use whiteboards to make words
- Match letter and picture puzzle pieces
- Play bingo, concentration, hopscotch, or other known games
- Sort picture/word cards

Writing is an activity that promotes kindergartners’ letter knowledge, print concepts, and possibly phoneme awareness (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999). When students spell

words as they hear the sounds, they have the opportunity to practice mapping sounds to letters to make words.

The report from the National Reading Panel suggests that short periods of instruction in phoneme awareness — from 5 to 18 hours total instruction and lesson length not exceeding 25 minutes—is effective. On the other hand, skills in phonics typically take years to build. Explicit instruction begins in kindergarten and carries on through first grade and often into second grade, especially for children who struggle. It is important to provide instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics to kindergartners in fun and active ways that suit their interests and abilities while preserving their motivation to learn.

References:

Burns, S. M., Griffin, P., & Snow, C. E. (Eds.). (1999). *Starting out right: A guide to promoting children’s reading success*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Juel, C. (1991). Beginning reading. In R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. B. Mosenthal, & P. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 2, pp. 759–788). New York: Longman.

Hoover, W., & Gough, P. (1990). The simple view of reading. *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 2, 127–160.

National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Some Examples of Phonemic Awareness Activities

- Isolation:** Say the first sound of the word *song*; say the middle sound of *hop*; say the last sound of *stick*.
- Deletion:** Say the word *pies* without the first sound.
- Addition:** Say the word you have when you add the sound /s/ to the beginning of the word *top*.
- Segmentation:** Say how many sounds there are in the word *build*.
- Blending:** Say the word that these sounds make: /s/ /l/ /i/ /p/.
- Categorization:** Say the word that does not belong in this group of words: *pig, pack, top, put*.

Reference:

Hoover, W. A. (2002). The importance of phonemic awareness in learning to read. *SEDL Letter*, 14(3), 9–12.

Let's Learn the Lingo!

In early reading instruction there are many potentially confusing terms that are used regularly. It is important to understand these terms and to know when they are relevant to each student's instruction. Here is a list of definitions that will help eliminate some misunderstandings.

Phonetics: The process used by linguists to describe the speech sounds in natural language; in particular, the production and physical properties of the sounds and how they are perceived

Phonics: The understanding of the predictable relationship between phonemes (sounds of spoken language) and graphemes (the letters and spellings that represent those sounds in written language). Research has shown the most effective approach for teaching phonics is explicit and systematic instruction.

Phonological Decoding: The process of deriving a reasonable pronunciation for a printed sequence of letters based on knowledge of the spelling-sound correspondences

Phonology: The rule system in specific languages that deals with the systems, sequences, and patterns of sounds that occur in words in that language. Different languages have different rule systems, and speakers of different languages can have difficulty with the phonologies of unfamiliar languages. For example, in many Asian languages, there is no distinction between the /r/ sound and the /l/ sound, so the speakers of these languages may have difficulty hearing the difference between *rock* and *lock*.

Rime: A technical, linguistic term that describes the part of the syllable that contains the vowel and the phonemes that follow it

Onset	Rime
	at
fl	at
spl	at

Words like *strain* and *reign* and *half* and *laugh* contain the same rime (sound after the vowel) even though they have different spellings.

Phonological Awareness: A general term for the awareness of any of the phonological characteristics of language, including syllables, initial sounds, rimes, and phonemes

Phoneme (or Phonemic) Awareness: A term for the awareness of small units of sound in words. Phonemes are the

building blocks of words. For example the word *fat* comprises the phonemes /f/ /a/ /t/.

Phonological awareness and *phonemic awareness* are terms that are often confused with each other. Phonological awareness comprises a broad awareness of sounds. It includes the ability to notice similarities and differences in word sounds, to hear rhymes, to count syllables, and to listen for onsets, rimes, and be aware of phonemes. Phoneme awareness is a specific awareness that each word is composed of individual sounds that make that word unique and different from other words. Phoneme awareness often develops through work with more general phonological awareness activities (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Nevertheless, for many children, phoneme awareness must be taught explicitly.

It is sometimes helpful to think of phonological awareness as an umbrella term that hovers over the more specific terms:

Phonological Awareness

- Rhyme Awareness
- Word Awareness
- Syllable Awareness
- Onset-rime Awareness
- Phoneme Awareness

Phonological awareness in general has not been shown to directly help children develop reading skills. It is phoneme awareness that helps children learn to read. Phonological awareness activities can, however, be used as a scaffold to develop phoneme awareness.

Although they can be confusing, understanding these terms and being able to articulate their meanings and implications is important for educators.

References:

Hoover, W. A. (2002). The importance of phonemic awareness in learning to read. *SEDL Letter*, 14(3), 9–12.

Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.



Why Read Aloud?

Reading aloud to kindergarten students offers multiple opportunities for learning.

Read-alouds in kindergarten provide an excellent way to incorporate many literacy skills into a fun activity that young children truly enjoy. The benefits of reading aloud include the following (Rog, 2001):

- Opportunities for teachers to assess and teach comprehension skills and to model fluent and prosodic reading
- Vocabulary development
- Exposure to story structure and storybook language
- Development of print concepts
- Increased interest in books and desire to read

Comprehension skills can be modeled and assessed during a read-aloud. For example, the teacher can model the skill of predicting by “thinking aloud,” saying, “This character loves to run, but she has no shoes. I predict that one of her wishes will be a pair of sneakers.” The teacher can also quickly assess that same skill by asking students to predict what may happen next and have them provide justification for that prediction.

Vocabulary can be developed by discussing (providing a definition, giving an example, sharing encounters) words before, during, and after reading a story aloud to students. The words selected to discuss should be those that are used frequently, have great instructional potential, and will enhance conceptual understanding. Additionally, words that the students are interested in and curious about should be addressed.

Reading aloud exposes students to what might be unfamiliar storybook language and story structure. It also provides exposure to valuable information about how print works (directionality, function, design).

By reading aloud, the teacher demonstrates fluent, expressive reading that makes the story understandable and enjoyable to students. Students become involved and interested in the story and are motivated to learn to read. In his book *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, Jim Trelease says, “Reading aloud is a commercial for reading.”

Teachers can read aloud picture books, “big books,” non-fiction, or even chapter books. Reading aloud “big books” provides a way for students to discuss the pictures and observe subtle aspects and implications of the print. Marilyn Adams (1990) suggests that the sharing of big books provides a “way of delighting the children both in texts and in their own capacity to explore and learn from and about texts” (p. 370).

The read-aloud should be an interactive event in which the teacher and children openly discuss the characters, plot, vocabulary, predictions, connections, and more.

As valuable as read-alouds are, they do not comprise a complete reading program. Kindergarteners also need many more literacy experiences, including explicit instruction and practice in phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency.

References:

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- Rog, L. J. (2001). *Early literacy instruction in kindergarten*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Trelease, J. (1985). *The read-aloud handbook*. New York: Penguin.





Moving On Up: Transitioning From Early Reading First to Reading First

A Tennessee school district helps students transition from attending Early Reading First programs to Reading First programs.

Janet Barnard, the elementary education supervisor for the Claiborne County School District in east Tennessee, wants to help students transitioning from Early Reading First programs to Reading First programs. She has developed a plan that incorporates curricular and assessment alignment, collaboration, and transitional activities. This plan has resulted in many benefits.

The district currently has one Early Reading First funded program that feeds into two schools receiving Reading First funds. To promote curricular alignment, the preK version of the same core reading program used in the Reading First schools was selected for use in the Early Reading First program. Assessment is also aligned. The Early Reading First assessment battery includes tools that are aligned with the assessment tool used by Reading First and non-Reading First schools in the district. The state of Tennessee utilizes an observation tool to evaluate the effectiveness of Reading First programs.

Subsequently, the instrument has been adapted for use in the Early Reading First programs to assess preschool classrooms and teachers. This alignment plan offers a cohesive curricular and assessment system and a consistent method to evaluate effectiveness in both Early Reading First and Reading First programs.

Organized transition activities are also an important element in providing a smooth transfer for preschool children from Early Reading First into Reading First classrooms. The district conducts transitional activities to benefit parents, teachers, and students. An informational meeting that informs parents about the kindergarten school day, curriculum, and supplies is held at the end of the preschool year. Additionally, the kindergarten teachers are presented with the end-of-the-year student assessment results so they will have a good understanding of the ability levels of the preschoolers coming in. Preschoolers themselves are given a tour of their new school to help make their transition smooth.

Children are also presented with a backpack filled with necessary kindergarten school supplies.

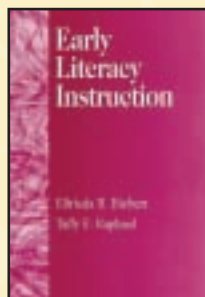
Literacy leaders participate in ongoing training and are encouraged to collaborate and coordinate with other programs and services to promote alignment. The district has formed an Early Childhood/Family Literacy Council that includes members from area daycares and preschools (including Head Start), teachers, principals, supervisors, and community partners. The council provides another venue for collaboration and coordination among preschool programs and the school district.

Feedback from parents, teachers, principals, daycare providers, and community members confirms that the collaboration between Early Reading First and Reading First programs is paying off in improved test scores and happy, well-prepared students who are eager to begin kindergarten.

For more information on Claiborne County School District's Early Reading First and Reading First progress, please contact Dr. Janet Barnard at the Claiborne County School District.



Resources



***Early Literacy Instruction* (1998)**
Elfrieda Hiebert and Taffy Raphael

This book touches on topics related to early literacy instruction, including methods for promoting literacy in young children, what those literacies consist of, the critical processes of reading and writing in early literacy classrooms, assessments in early literacy classrooms, strategies for making program connections, and ways to integrate children's home literacy into the classroom.



***Starting Out Right* (1999)**
The National Research Council

This resource includes information on aspects of literacy that children from birth through age 4 should be developing in order to become successful readers. It outlines what must be accomplished in kindergarten through grade 3 in order to continue this success. The book also details what can be done to assist students experiencing reading difficulties.

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