



FOR HSLDA'S

# PRESCHOOL PARENTS

Seven ways to  
build literacy **50**

Literacy in the  
great outdoors **51**

EXCLUSIVE ONLINE SUPPLEMENT

# Seven ways to build your child's early literacy

LEGOs are scattered all over the kitchen table, surrounding a half-completed construction. A colorful, gooey, finger-painted picture is hung up on the refrigerator. A basket of books awaits quiet reading time. And my son is happily bounding on the trampoline while singing the ABC song or chanting, “One, two, buckle my shoe. . . .”

This is what preschool looked like in our homeschool last year. At times, well-meaning friends, relatives, or other parents would inquire why my son wasn't in a formal preschool or already being taught to read. I responded (albeit timidly at times), “I believe play is a child's most important work.”

In fact, what may look like child's play is actually important, brain-building work! Decades of research in early childhood development have shown the importance of letting children grow up in a language-rich environment. This includes reading to them, playing games with them, engaging them in dramatic play, and letting them try various hands-on activities. All this may look like fun and games—but it also helps young children to develop the attention, concentration, memory, organization, and other cognitive functions that are necessary for literacy.

## The goals

Rest assured, you can help your child's literacy development in your home preschool naturally by talking with her throughout the day in meaningful conversations, reading to and with her, and teaching her about sounds

in ways that are fun! Parents don't need to give way to the pressure of the “earlier is better” philosophy. Your preschooler does not need hours of boring letter and phonetic drills—or workbooks—to learn. Instead, take time to allow basic building blocks for literacy skill development to fall into place and really “cement,” because they are just that—building blocks. Developing this strong foundation before your child even learns to read and write is crucial for your child's future literacy.

Here's what a strong foundation for literacy looks like:

- ▶ **Receptive & expressive language skills**, such as
  - Listening
  - Understanding
  - Speaking

“Play is often talked about as if it is a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.”

—Fred Rogers



by **FAITH BERENS**

*HSLDA Special Needs consultant*



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- ▶ **Phonemic (speech/sound) awareness skills**
- ▶ **Visual processing skills**
  - Looking
  - Attending, focusing
  - Watching, tracking
  - Visual discrimination
- ▶ **Fine motor skills**, such as a solid pincer grip needed for drawing and writing

With your time, encouragement, and support, your child will also come to understand the connection between letters on a page and spoken sounds. But in order for this to happen, she'll need plenty of experience with:

- ▶ **Pictures and objects**—how you can use words to talk about objects, people, and actions
- ▶ **Sounds**—how words can rhyme, begin and end with the same sounds, be broken up into parts (for example, syllables), be formed by blending different sounds, and so on

» continue reading on page 52



COURTESY OF RACHEL RAMEY

## Pre-literacy in the great outdoors

Summer is here, and you might be wondering, “How do I implement Faith’s great ideas for building pre-literacy skills when my little wiggle worm just wants to be outside now—digging in the dirt, running, jumping, climbing, and exploring?”

It’s not as hard as you might think. I’ve discovered lots of ways to nurture preschoolers’ pre-reading skills through their outdoor adventures.

Of course, some activities are easy to transfer outside—games like I Spy, Red Light/Green Light, and Mother May I. And don’t forget singing! My preschoolers loved songs that require movement—and moving while singing the lyrics helped them make physical connections with the meaning of words and phrases such as *deep*, *wide*, *jumping up*, *turning around*, *riding a horse*, *hopping down the bunny trail*, and *falling down like the London Bridge*.

And don’t overlook the delightful learning experiences your preschooler can encounter outdoors.

For example, if you go on vacation, think about how hands-on adventures can build those pre-literacy skills.

- ▶ Develop your child’s visual processing skills through a scavenger hunt on the beach. (Of course, remember “safety first.”)
- ▶ Expand your child’s ability to describe, contrast and compare while exploring the flora and fauna at a national park.
- ▶ Enlarge your child’s vocabulary and language skills through new experiences and fun family activities—making sure to involve purposeful verbal interaction—such as boating or canoeing, visiting a theme park, or building a campfire.

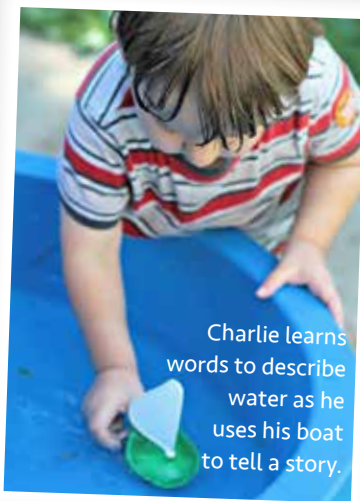
Back at home, helping with gardening gives kids a chance to learn about the concept of sequence (order in storytelling) and reinforces their naming

» continue reading on page 52



by VICKI BENTLEY

HSLDA Toddlers to Tweens consultant



Charlie learns words to describe water as he uses his boat to tell a story.

COURTESY OF REBEKAH MCBRIDE



New tactile experiences offer learning opportunities.

» continue reading from page 51

ability and visual processing (shapes, colors, objects, and actions) in a new setting.

Outdoor steps can be magical places: steps leading up to the porch or down from the deck may become wonderful settings for dramatic play, storytelling, or re-enacting. You might suddenly find yourself on a ship sailing the high seas, in an airplane whooshing around the world, in a hospital bed being treated by a tiny doctor, or in a horse-drawn wagon racing away from The Bad Guys.

Colorful sidewalk chalk on a walkway or driveway allows your preschooler to draw and tell stories or experiment with letters, shapes, and squiggles while strengthening his “pincer grip” for writing with a pencil or crayon.



Sophia experiences gravity and friction!

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Finally, relaxing together on the front porch swing or back deck steps together is a perfect time to ask your child questions that helps him practice his communication skills as he tells you what happened that day, when, how, and in what order. Or he may ask *you* questions that lead you to relate a great family story.

I hope this issue gives you plenty of great ideas for getting your child ready for reading—without it feeling like work at all. Enjoy the journey together!



Vicki's daughter Rebekah reads to her sons.

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» continue reading from page 51

▶ **Letters and words**—their shapes, the sounds they represent, and their names

By establishing these basic skills, your child will be primed for the formal aspects of literacy instruction.

### Getting practical

So what does all this look like for you and your preschooler? Here are seven fun and developmentally appropriate ways to build your child's early literacy foundation.

**1. Read aloud.** This may be the most significant contribution you can make to developing your child's language and early literacy skills. By modeling the act of reading, you will spark your child's interest in and love of books. Looking at wordless picture books and encouraging your child to tell a story about the pictures is an engaging and encouraging way to develop the foundation for literacy. Learning to predict what comes next in a story is also an important element for learning to anticipate words as children begin to read, as well as an important skill for later reading comprehension. Reading nursery rhymes and other text with predictable patterns encourages the development of phonemic awareness skills—which, along with letter knowledge, the National Reading Panel calls one of the two best predictors of reading success in young children.

**2. Have fun playing with language.** Learning simple rhymes and finger plays together, such as the autumn favorite “Way up High in the Apple Tree,” helps bolster language skills. Share poetry, silly songs, and chants.

**3. Provide repeat practice with object naming.** Did you know that rapid automatic naming of objects is an important preliminary skill for becoming a fluent reader? How quickly and automatically a child can name objects, shapes, colors, and letters, is now being used to identify reading difficulties early on. Using flash cards with pictures of objects has shown promise as an effective remediation practice for students who struggle with naming speed skill. Playing card games such as Blink and Spot It with your child will help develop their naming, sorting and categorizing, labeling, describing, and comparing/contrasting language skills.

**4. Provide hands-on experiences with water beads, rice, sand, and/or water.** These sensory experiences are soothing and stimulating, and also hold many possibilities for conver-

sation. Give your child the opportunity to investigate different-sized containers, explore and describe natural materials, and discover new sounds and textures. Such experiences can help to truly open up communication.

**5. Encourage dramatic play.** Dramatic and puppetry play can be very helpful ways to assist young children in learning to express feelings that might otherwise be hard to verbalize. Try setting up a pet shop, grocery store, post office, or play kitchen. You don't need to spend a lot of money (if any) on fancy toys and materials. With a little imagination, large boxes can serve for an examination table, counter, stove, or refrigerator. You can cut a window in a large box to make a puppet theater. Keep simple puppets (such as socks, paper bags, or stick puppets) on hand for retelling and acting out familiar stories like fables, fairy tales, or historical events.

**6. Make arts and crafts that are connected to the books you read aloud.** Provide materials for your child to make a piece of artwork or a simple craft that is related to book you have read aloud. For instance, the childhood favorite book *White Snow, Bright Snow* may be a great springboard to inspire a

**BOOKS ABOUT READING ALOUD:**

- ▶ *A Family Program for Reading Aloud* by Rosalie Slater
- ▶ *Honey for a Child's Heart* by Gladys Hunt
- ▶ *Hand That Rocks the Cradle* by Nathaniel Bluedorn
- ▶ *How to Grow a Young Reader* by Kathryn Linkskoog and Ranelda Mack Hunsicker
- ▶ *How to Raise a Reader* by Elane K. McEwan
- ▶ *Read for the Heart* by Sarah Clarkson

**PRESCHOOL CURRICULUM RESOURCES:**

- ▶ Playing Skillfully Preschool curriculum ([thehomegrownpreschooler.com](http://thehomegrownpreschooler.com))
- ▶ *The Home Grown Preschooler*, by Kathi H. Lee and Lesli Richards
- ▶ *Mommy Teach Me* by Barbara Curtis ([hsllda.org/store](http://hsllda.org/store))
- ▶ *Slow and Steady, Get Me Ready* by June Oberlander ([hsllda.org/store](http://hsllda.org/store))
- ▶ *All aboard the Animal Train*, a new preschool program from My Father's World for 2- and 3-year-olds
- ▶ Cheryl Swope's *Simply Classical curriculum* for very young children with special needs, ([memoriapress.com/curriculum/special-needs/simply-classical-curriculum-level](http://memoriapress.com/curriculum/special-needs/simply-classical-curriculum-level))
- ▶ Heather Haupt's blog ([heatherhaupt.com](http://heatherhaupt.com))
- ▶ *Before Five in a Row*, a preschool curriculum with a literature and thematic unit-based approach ([fiveinarow.com](http://fiveinarow.com))
- ▶ *Little Hands to Heaven* preschool curriculum ([heartofdakota.com](http://heartofdakota.com))
- ▶ *Walks on the Wildside: A guide for promoting motor skills in children* by Jean A. Wetherilt

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winter painting. You can make encouraging descriptions of what you see your child creating in order to build confidence. Say things like, “I see you used a lot of blue in your picture,” or “That looks like you really worked hard on your painting. . . . I like all the different shapes you made.” To encourage language skills, ask your child to describe what she is drawing or shaping: “Can you tell me about what you are making?”

7.

**Write—or draw and tell—about experiences, field trips, and books.** Writing and reading are reciprocal processes—each contributes to the other. It’s good to maintain a generous supply of plain and colored paper with drawing and writing supplies, such as crayons, washable markers, sturdy pencils, magazine pictures, and stickers; keep them in a spot that’s convenient and quiet, like a small table and chair tucked

into a corner of the kitchen. Offer to write your child’s explanation of a picture he’s drawn. If he is beginning to scribble, form squiggly letters, or record sounds he hears in words he’s trying to spell, praise his attempts. These are all valuable early writing behaviors which will help to build reading skills.

If all of this seems too simple to be true, don’t fret. Enjoy your child’s journey to reading and remember that play is a child’s most important work. The best things you can do to develop your preschooler’s literacy skills are reading aloud to him and to letting him play! ■



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HERE FOR  
YOU!

## TIPS FOR YOUR PRESCHOOLER

### How to tell if there are “cracks” in a child’s literacy skill foundation

By ages 3–4, your child should be able to do most of the following things:

- ▶ Tell you what action is going on in a picture book—for example: running, barking, eating
- ▶ Use all of the necessary words to make a complete sentence—for example, “I’m going to bed” rather than “I go bed”
- ▶ Listen to an adult read to her on a regular basis
- ▶ Remember a previously read book when shown its cover
- ▶ Show or tell the difference between the front and back of the book, and hold it the right way up
- ▶ Name simple objects represented in books
- ▶ Concentrate on and respond to print, such as the letters in names, signs, etc.
- ▶ Scribble to make shapes that look like letters
- ▶ String similar-sounding words together—for example, “cat, bat, hat”
- ▶ Repeat at least parts of nursery rhymes

Seek help or advice if *most of the time* your child has trouble with three or more of the above activities. It might be a symptom of a treatable processing disorder. According to Bill Honig, author of *Teaching Our Children to Read*, “auditory processing and/or memory processing difficulties can be found in an estimated 20% of all children.” These difficulties can be the root causes of reading problems. For information about psychoeducational evaluations, see Krisa Winn’s article on page 36 of the Third Quarter 2015 *Court Report*.

#### Programs that can assist in developing the cognitive skills mentioned above include:

- ▶ NILD’s SEARCH program
- ▶ Dr. Erika Warren’s materials
- ▶ Jungle Memory
- ▶ BrainWare Safari
- ▶ Equipping Minds by Carol Brown ([equippingminds.com](http://equippingminds.com))

#### Programs to develop auditory processing skills, decoding:

- ▶ *Earobics*, available through Amazon
- ▶ Fast ForWord, available through Gemm Learning
- ▶ Sound Therapy ([soundtherapyinternational.com](http://soundtherapyinternational.com))
- ▶ *Phonemic Awareness in Young Children* by Marilyn Jager Adams
- ▶ *Sounds Abound* by Lingui Systems ([linguisystems.com](http://linguisystems.com))
- ▶ *Road to the Code: A Phonological Awareness Program for Young Children*
- ▶ Language Tune-Up Kit
- ▶ LiPS, available via Lindamood Bell Clinics

#### Preschool/toddler apps:

- ▶ Scout’s ABC Garden by LeapFrog
- ▶ The Trip—Little Critter Reading Adventure
- ▶ PlayTales

#### Websites with literacy learning games:

- ▶ Starfall ([starfall.com](http://starfall.com))
- ▶ PBS Kids ([pbskids.org](http://pbskids.org))

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