



Best Practices

Reading and writing are lifelong skills, necessary for success in school and beyond. Through reading and writing we learn about the world, connect with others, and contribute opinions and ideas. Adults play an important role in developing children's skills in reading and writing and ultimately, in fostering their contributions to society. Educators can best develop these skills in young children by teaching through books and conversation, creating opportunities for children to build on what they have read by making connections across the curriculum, and integrating reading and writing into daily activities and routines.

Teach Through Books and Conversation

As Professor Villegas-Reimers says, learning how to read and write is key to our society. But children do not become literate automatically, they must be taught. Early childhood educators can teach children about the world and help them develop the skills they need for a solid foundation in reading and writing by engaging them with print and conversation. When adults open the world of print to children, it strengthens language skills, promotes important vocabulary growth, develops comprehension, and teaches print awareness.

- **Teach with books** that entertain, amuse, inform, and challenge young readers with new ideas, interesting vocabulary, or a new twist on an old idea.
- **Use books to expand children's understanding** of the world and topics that already interest them, as well as to introduce them to topics they are not yet familiar with.
- **Prompt children to be active readers** by asking them to contribute ideas, comments, and questions; learn new vocabulary; and demonstrate comprehension. Engage children with questions and model active reading before, during, and after reading.
- **Encourage conversation** that elicits what children know or want to find out.
- **Offer the space and the opportunity for children to read alone** or with others. Provide a quiet, comfortable space for readers to take time out to explore and enjoy a book on their own or with peers.

How do books help facilitate children's development as readers and writers?

- Through books, children can:
 - Develop print awareness.
 - Be exposed to new vocabulary.

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- Engage in conversation.
- Be introduced to new ideas.
- Make predictions.

How can educators facilitate conversation around books?

- Ask questions that prompt critical thinking before, during, and after reading to model active reading:
 - Find out what children already know. (*Where do we see water? What fruit or vegetable has seeds? What kind of flower is this?*)
 - Prompt children to share their own experiences. (*What do you wear on a snowy day?*)
 - Encourage children to tell something they want to find out. (*What would you like to know about how things grow?*)
 - Check comprehension. (*Why were Peter's socks wet?*)
 - Ask children to make predictions. (*What do you think will happen next?*)
 - Confirm children's predictions. (*Were we right? Did the snowman melt?*)
 - Help children understand new vocabulary. (*What does gigantic mean?*)
 - Form opinions. (*Did you like the giant? Why or why not?*)
 - Connect learning to a new idea. (*Plants need food, water, and sunlight to grow. What do people need?*)
- Encourage children to read and discuss books with a friend or group of friends.

How can reading expand children's interests and broaden their understanding of curriculum-related topics?

- Children can read about:
 - Things they already know about or are already interested in.
 - Places and events outside of their own experiences (e.g., dinosaurs, skyscrapers, rain forests, etc.)
 - Curriculum-related topics (e.g., plants, water, transportation)

How can the conversations before, during, and after reading help educators make the reading experience richer and deeper?

- Build on interests to expand the reading experience. Educators should notice when children are intrigued or excited by experiences they have or things they read, and provide more books about those topics.

Create Opportunities to Build on Reading

When children use the knowledge they have gained from reading or talking with others, they are more likely to understand and remember what they have learned. Educators can create opportunities across the curriculum for children to apply and build on what they've learned from books and conversations.

- **Select books with intention.** Choose books that reinforce key ideas in the curriculum, deepen children's understandings, or act as a springboard for curriculum-related activities throughout the day.
- **Utilize learning centers to extend and broaden the book experience.** Give children hands-on experiences and reinforce what they have learned through reading. For example, a book about seeds can be followed by a planting activity or an Art Center activity in which children draw representations of seeds or make seed art; a book about a famous artist or musician could be followed by an activity in which children listen to music.
- **Use writing to support reading.** When children write about (or dictate) what they've read, they make a personal connection to the content. For example, ask children to write about or draw a favorite book character, or to write about what happens next in the story.
- **Ask children to make reading choices.** When children make choices during reading, their decision-making abilities are reinforced. Ask children to choose the book they would like to read later that day. While reading a book about the desert, ask children whether they would like to live near the desert or the seashore and have them explain their answer.

How can educators create opportunities for children to use the knowledge they have learned from reading?

- Share books that reinforce key ideas in the curriculum, deepen children's knowledge and understanding, or can be a springboard for curriculum-related activities throughout the day.
- Use learning centers to extend and broaden the book experience. Offer activities across the curriculum that connect to themes in the book to give children hands-on experiences and reinforce what they have just learned through reading. For example, a book about

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water can be followed by ice painting, water table activities, or outdoor exploration of puddles or snow. A book about seeds can be followed by a planting activity.

- Create centers that reinforce vocabulary and concepts in books. Use labels, signs, and other environmental print.
- Have children write about what they have read. Writing reinforces reading. It encourages the reader to think about and react to the subject. Writing in response to reading can expand a child's understanding of the themes and ideas in the book.
- Offer decision-making opportunities after reading a book that further connects the reader with the subject. By deciding, for example, that they like snowy days better than rainy days, children place themselves in the experience.

How can educators use writing to support reading?

- Include writing in all areas of the learning environment. For example, children can make lists, wear name tags, write weather reports, compose notes to classmates, record things they see on a walk or field trip, describe a favorite activity, or write thank-you notes.
- Use activities to make vital connections between reading and writing. For example, children can:
 - Trace letters using sensory materials such as sandpaper, shaving cream, or finger paint.
 - Use a variety of media for writing, such as dry-erase boards, chalkboards, paints, magnetic boards, alphabet letters, crayons, or blank books.
 - Draw pictures or create artwork to respond to a story.
 - Use computer programs and age-appropriate software to help them write or draw stories of their own.
 - Record stories or words to be read aloud to the group.
 - Group-write a new ending to a familiar story.

Integrate Reading and Writing Throughout the Day

When developing children's reading and writing skills, educators can design their environment and curriculum to include constant interaction with print and print materials. Whether through formal or informal lessons, reading and writing should be integrated throughout every day.

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- **Flood the environment with print.** Wherever they look, children should see print and be prompted to connect words to things, people, and actions (e.g., labels, name tags and signs).
- **Utilize learning centers** to engage children with reading and writing across the curriculum. (e.g., prompt children to use their knowledge of environmental print by creating a “Post Office” or a “Restaurant” in the Pretend and Play Center).
- **Incorporate reading and writing into daily routines**, such as calendar activities and assigning daily responsibilities to children using name cards).
- **Make the ABC Center a regular routine.** In the center, children can learn letter recognition, alphabetical order, letter matching, and eventually, initial letter-sound correspondences.
- **Incorporate a “Question of the Day.”** This practice empowers children to consider an idea, express an opinion, and record their thoughts. For example, *Would you rather eat broccoli or peas? Why?* Or, *How many fruits and vegetables can you name that have seeds in them?*

How can reading and writing be integrated throughout the day, every day?

- Flood the environment with print. A literacy-rich environment invites constant interaction with print and print materials. Wherever they look, children should see print.
 - Use name tags whenever possible. They are a powerful tool to teach letter recognition, beginning sounds, and the important idea that print carries meaning.
 - Have printed material, such as books, magazines, and signs easily accessible and at eye level.
 - Name objects and areas in the learning environment (e.g., smocks, puzzles, quiet area, clocks, etc.).
 - Describe instructions or directions. (e.g., “Wash Your Hands” and “Line Up Here”).
 - Categorize items with labels in bins, on shelves, and so forth (e.g., “Books About Dogs,” “Extra Mittens,” and “Lost and Found”).
 - Hang signs in play areas (e.g., “Doctor’s Office,” “Post Office,” “Restaurant,” and “Movie Theater”).
- Plan materials and activities at learning centers to include reading and writing. For example, have children:
 - Write numbers at the Science and Math Center (such as estimations).

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- Draw a picture and write or dictate a caption in response to a story at the Writing Center.
- Record what happens on each day after planting grass seed at the Science and Math Center.
- Write the name and author of a book they like at the Library Center.
- Integrate reading and writing into daily routines. For example, children can:
 - Dictate and write a message of the day during meeting time.
 - Interact with words and numbers during calendar routines.
 - Sign in each day on chart paper.
 - Read the posted classroom rules.
- Make the ABC Center a daily routine. Tasks can include having children write their names, match upper- and lowercase letters, or put letters in alphabetical order.
- Incorporate a “Question of the Day.” Use a question to encourage children to consider an idea, express an opinion, and record their thoughts. *How many fruits and vegetables can you name that have seeds in them? Which is cuter—a puppy or a kitten? Why?*
- Work with names and name tags. You can assign daily responsibilities to each student using name tags and help children sound out, write, and spell their own names.
- Play letter games such as a memory game where children have to match the same letters, or a lower-case letter with its upper-case format.

Glossary

active reading: strategies readers need to help them understand the text and remain engaged

environmental print: print found in the everyday world, such as store and traffic signs, logos, menus, calendars, price tags, and so on

print awareness: the understanding that print is organized in a particular way (e.g., it is made up of letters, words, and spaces between words; it is read from left to right, and top to bottom; it carries a message)

View the self-paced video workshop at <http://resourcesforearlylearning.org/educators>.