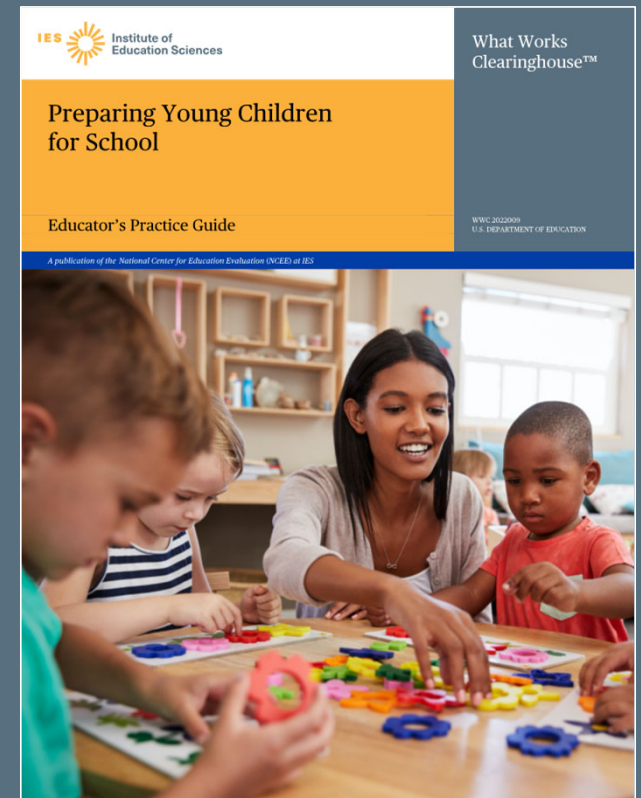


What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide on *Preparing Young Children for School*



Overarching Themes

- **The importance of intentional instruction**
 - Teachers should set up lessons to intentionally help children learn a skill or concept.
- **The importance of interaction and conversation**
 - Children can learn more from conversing with the teacher.
- **The importance of lessons building sequentially**
 - New learning should proceed in a deliberate and systematic order, from easy to more difficult skills and concepts.

Overarching Themes (continued)

- **The importance of scheduling time for intentional learning**
 - Develop a schedule in which intentional instruction time is devoted to social-emotional learning, executive function, mathematics, and literacy.
- **The importance of recognizing everyone's backgrounds and experiences**
 - Preschools should reflect and value the cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds of the children, teachers, and community.

Recommendation 1: Social-emotional Skills

Regularly provide intentional, engaging instruction and practice focused on social-emotional skills.

Level of Evidence: Strong

Recommendation 1: *Regularly provide intentional, engaging instruction and practice focused on social-emotional skills.*

How-to Step 1: Follow a curriculum that promotes incremental social-emotional learning.

How-to Step 2: Intentionally devote time to teach social-emotional skills in an engaging way.

How-to Step 3: Plan staged activities for children to practice social-emotional skills.

How-to Step 4: Take advantage of naturally occurring situations to reinforce and review social-emotional skills.

How-to Step 5: Inform parents, caregivers, and guardians about the social-emotional skills children are learning so skills can be practiced and reinforced at home.

Targeted social-emotional skills can include:

- Identifying and understanding one's feelings
- Accurately reading and comprehending emotional states in others
- Managing strong emotions and their expression constructively
- Regulating one's behavior
- Developing empathy for others
- Establishing and sustaining relationships

Source: Illinois Early Learning and Developmental Standards

How-to Step 1: *Follow a curriculum that promotes incremental social-emotional learning.*

- The curriculum should have a scope and sequence and address instruction in social-emotional skills incrementally.
- Start at a point in the sequence that is appropriate for the ages and developmental needs of the children in the classroom.
- Consider cultural differences in the ways children learn to express and regulate their emotions.

How-to Step 2: *Intentionally devote time to teach social-emotional skills in an engaging way.*

- Set aside 10–20 minutes to teach social-emotional skills 1–2 times per week.
- Offer time throughout the week to practice the skills (**see Steps 3 & 4**).
- Teach a new social-emotional lesson in a brief and engaging way to capture children’s attention.
- Stories, puppet shows, photographs, or brief role-plays expose children to many different experiences and interactions.
- Provide children with vocabulary and phrases they can use to manage their feelings and communicate with others.

How-to Step 3: *Plan staged activities for children to practice social-emotional skills.*

- Prepare staged activities that will provide structured opportunities for children to practice what they are learning, rather than waiting for learning opportunities that naturally occur during play time.
- Carefully plan and script staged activities in advance.
- Reinforce children's learning by providing them with feedback during the staged activities to help them recognize when they are correctly using their new social-emotional skills.

How-to Step 4: *Take advantage of naturally occurring situations to reinforce and review social-emotional skills.*

- Use naturally occurring situations to review, practice, and reinforce the target skills.
- Remind children prior to an activity about what they have learned, including how to manage emotions and interact with others.
- Monitor and reinforce children when the desired actions or words are seen.
- Encourage children to look for and recognize the desired behavior in others.

How-to Step 5: *Inform parents, caregivers, and guardians about the social-emotional skills children are learning so skills can be practiced and reinforced at home.*

- Send a brief note or email to parents, caregivers, and guardians informing them of the social-emotional skill that children are learning.
- Provide guidance in the note on what parents, caregivers, and guardians could do and say to help their children develop their social-emotional skills.
- Include the specific language or vocabulary that corresponds to the social-emotional skill.
- When possible, translate letters into the primary language spoken by the parents, caregivers, and guardians.

Recommendation 3: Mathematical Ideas and Skills

Provide intentional instruction to build children's understanding of mathematical ideas and skills.

Level of Evidence: Strong

Recommendation 3: *Provide intentional instruction to build children's understanding of mathematical ideas and skills.*

How-to Step 1: Provide small-group instruction to build children's foundational understanding of mathematics.

How-to Step 2: Extend mathematics instruction beyond basic skills to include more advanced mathematical ideas.

How-to Step 3: Build children's mathematical knowledge and skills in an incremental and sequential manner.

How-to Step 1: *Provide small-group instruction to build children's foundational understanding of mathematics.*

- The panel recommends working with a small group of children to provide intentional mathematics instruction, while the other children are engaged in activities at other centers or with a co-teacher or aide.
- Dedicate at least 15–20 minutes nearly every day to small-group mathematics instruction.
- Start by engaging in a brief conversation about the target mathematical idea or skill.

How-to Step 1: *Provide small-group instruction to build children's foundational understanding of mathematics. (continued)*

- Follow up with an engaging, interactive hands-on activity that has been chosen intentionally to help children apply that new idea or skill.
- Demonstrate how to carry out the activity and allow children to do the activity several times to get plenty of practice with the new idea or skill.

How-to Step 2: *Extend mathematics instruction beyond basic skills to include more advanced mathematical ideas.*

- Mathematics instruction at this age should extend beyond verbal counting, shape naming, and numeral identification. More advanced mathematical ideas include:
 - characteristics of shapes like sides, curves, and angles. For example, teachers can ask questions such as “How do you know this is a rectangle?”
 - concepts of measurement like height and length. For example, children can measure objects using classroom items such as blocks and say, “This toy is 3 blocks long.”
 - number relationships, which help children represent a quantity in multiple ways. For example, the quantity of 4 can be thought of as a set of 3 *and* 1 or 2 *sets of* 2.

How-to Step 3: *Build children's mathematical knowledge and skills in an incremental and sequential manner.*

- Children's knowledge of mathematical ideas and skills builds incrementally over time, following typical natural developmental progressions.
- Developmental progressions in mathematics are the order in which mathematical skills and understanding typically develop. For example, children learn to recognize and name shapes before they are able to combine or separate shapes to form new ones.

How-to Step 3: *Build children's mathematical knowledge and skills in an incremental and sequential manner. (continued)*

- Consider adopting a curriculum supplement that follows children's developmental progressions such as one that uses early mathematics learning trajectories
- Learning trajectories link instructional activities to specific points in developmental progressions. Instruction using learning trajectories provides an intentional sequence of mathematics instruction and activities.

How-to Step 3: *Build children's mathematical knowledge and skills in an incremental and sequential manner. (continued)*

- To figure out where children are in their developmental progression, observe children during mathematics lessons and during conversations about mathematics.
- Record observations about children's knowledge to refer back to and guide decisions about which activities to use next.

Recommendation 5: Vocabulary and Language

Intentionally plan activities to build children's vocabulary and language.

Level of Evidence: Strong

Recommendation 5: *Intentionally plan activities to build children's vocabulary and language.*

How-to Step 1: Choose 3–5 unique words to focus on each week and include review of those words in other weeks.

How-to Step 2: Introduce the words and their meanings.

How-to Step 3: Choose activities and materials that will offer children opportunities to practice using the target vocabulary words.

How-to Step 4: Engage in interactive conversations with children to reinforce or solidify understanding of vocabulary words.

How-to Step 1: *Choose 3–5 unique words to focus on each week and include review of those words in other weeks.*

- Look for words that will be useful to know because they occur frequently in books, conversations, or other academic contexts—even words that seem advanced, such as *illustrator*, *author*, *title*, *discuss*, and *similar*.
- Choose a group of words that relate to a topic or belong in a category. When possible, choose a topic the children are interested in.
- At the beginning of the year, choose words that are easy to depict in pictures or are easy to demonstrate.
- Over time, add in abstract language that is harder to depict in pictures, including abstract nouns and verbs, prepositions, glue words, or other words typically used in school that are not easy to visualize

What are glue words?

Glue words, also referred to as high-frequency words, are some of the most common and essential words in the English language.

They are the foundation of academic language and are often difficult to depict in pictures. When children don't know the meaning of glue words, sentences can be difficult to understand.

Some common glue words include *in, on, the, was, for, that, said, a, if, of, to, there, will, be, what, get, go, like, think, some, new, make, much, every, should, just, and, is, this, from, with, have, an, by, it, asked.*

How-to Step 2: *Introduce the words and their meanings.*

- Spend time directly discussing the word and what it means.
- Begin by explaining the meaning of the vocabulary word using words children already know.
- If using a book to introduce words, point to the relevant picture in the book and present a simple meaning that relates to what is happening in the book.
- In later book readings and experiences to which the word relates, pause to engage children in a conversation about the word and provide additional practice with its meaning.
- Ask children to share something related to the word or think about when they experienced the word.

How-to Step 3: *Choose activities and materials that will offer children opportunities to practice using the target vocabulary words.*

- Children need multiple opportunities to think about and practice the words they are learning.
- Set up opportunities for the words to come up in children's play.
- Consider leading children in acting out the word, possibly using figurines, puppets, or other props.
- As children interact with the activities and materials, look for ways to incorporate conversation about the target vocabulary.
- When possible, extend the conversation about the vocabulary word by asking children follow-up questions.



Example: *A child acting out the word **emerge**, by emerging from a tunnel.*



How-to Step 4: *Engage in interactive conversations with children to reinforce or solidify understanding of vocabulary words.*

- Look for ways throughout the day to reintroduce the target vocabulary words into conversations with children to provide additional opportunities for children to hear and use the words.
- Use questions strategically to prompt children to respond using the words they have learned.
- Add additional words into conversations when appropriate.
- Choose words that are relevant to the children, their lives, cultural backgrounds, and what is happening during the preschool day.

Recommendation 6: Letters and Sounds

Build children's knowledge of letters and sounds.

Level of Evidence: Strong

Recommendation 6: *Build children's knowledge of letters and sounds.*

How-to Step 1: Initially focus on listening for sounds in words.

How-to Step 2: Intentionally introduce a new letter and its sound.

How-to Step 3: Use materials and activities that allow children to practice identifying letters and their corresponding sounds.

How-to Step 4: Include print throughout the classroom to provide additional opportunities to discuss letters and their sounds.

How-to Step 1: *Initially focus on listening for sounds in words.*

- Point out words are made up of sounds like /b/ and -ike in *bike* and /b/ and -all in *ball*.
- Explain that some words start with the same sound, such as /l/ in *leg*, *leaf*, and *long*, and others have the same last sound, such as /t/ in *part*, *sit*, and *boot*.
- Explain that when words share the same blended end sound, they rhyme. or example, point out that the words *coat*, *boat*, and *moat* all end in the blended sound *-oat*.
- Tell children to listen for words that share the same beginning or end sound in a song, book, or poem with an alliteration or with words that rhyme. For example, have them clap when they hear words that end with *-at*.

How-to Step 1: *Initially focus on listening for sounds in words.* (continued)

- Continue to point out sounds in words or to ask children what sounds they hear, when the opportunity arises.
- Periodically include previously introduced sounds for review.

How-to Step 2: *Intentionally introduce a new letter and its sound.*

- Choose one letter and sound to focus on each week, in addition to pointing out letters in print in other parts of the classroom.
- Start with letters and sounds children are familiar with and add on other letters and sounds from there.
- Clearly explain the letter name and the sound the letter makes. Show children how to write the target letter.
- For letters that have more than one sound, explain that some letters make more than one sound, and tell children the sounds.

How-to Step 2: *Intentionally introduce a new letter and its sound.* (continued)

- Share additional words children are familiar with that start with the target letter.
- Strengthen children's association with new letters by connecting the letter to a memorable experience that starts with the same letter.
- Include discussion of previously learned letters and their sounds to help children learn to discriminate between the letters.

How-to Step 3: *Use materials and activities that allow children to practice identifying letters and their corresponding sounds.*

- Children need multiple and repeated exposures to letters and the sounds they make.
- Carefully choose activities and materials that can be used during small-group or whole-class activities or centers throughout the week to provide children with practice identifying and discussing the target letter and sound.
- Be sure to include previously learned letters for children to review.
- Games can be a fun way to review letters that were previously learned.

How-to Step 4: *Include print throughout the classroom to provide additional opportunities to discuss letters and their sounds.*

- Making print a regular part of the classroom will not only help familiarize children with letters, but also provide multiple opportunities for teachers to discuss letters and the sounds they make.
 - Use labels throughout the classroom.
 - Use children's names throughout the classroom.
 - Write out the daily schedule.
 - Bring print materials into dramatic play.
 - Set up a reading library or quiet space for children to explore print independently.

Recommendation 7: Shared Book Reading

Use shared book reading to develop children's language, knowledge of print features, and knowledge of the world.

Level of Evidence: Strong

Recommendation 7: *Use shared book reading to develop children's language, knowledge of print features, and knowledge of the world.*

How-to Step 1: Select a variety of informational and narrative books that are appropriate for 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds.

How-to Step 2: Prior to the lesson, plan the purpose for reading the book and determine when to discuss certain topics with children.

How-to Step 3: Prepare children for listening to and discussing the content of the book before reading the book aloud.

How-to Step 4: Engage in conversations with the children while reading the book.

How-to Step 5: Align literacy activities with the focus of the shared book reading.

How-to Step 1: *Select a variety of informational and narrative books that are appropriate for 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds.*

- Choose books that touch on topics of interest to children or that relate to something they may have experienced, such as books about making friends with a new child who just moved to their block or playing make-believe.
- Ensure that children regularly see people like themselves in the books that are read, as well as people from other cultures.
- Choose books that align with the focus of the literacy lesson for the day or week, such as books with print features or books that include words with the target letter, or books that have interesting or large print.

How-to Step 1: *Select a variety of informational and narrative books that are appropriate for 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds. (continued)*

- Consider reading informational books that cover topics relevant to the material recently read about in narrative books.

Informational books are nonfiction or expository books that inform the reader about a specific topic and include accurate facts.

Narrative books are written accounts of a connected series of events. They can include both fiction, such as novels and short stories, as well as nonfiction, such as memoirs, biographies, and news stories

How-to Step 2: *Prior to the lesson, plan the purpose for reading the book and determine when to discuss certain topics with children.*

- Plan a different focus for each time a book is read.
- Review the book ahead of time to determine when to pause to:
 - discuss vocabulary;
 - print features like font changes, speech bubbles, or letters; or
 - questions or prompts related to the content of the book.
- Write what to point out or what to ask on sticky notes and place them on the book.
- Ensure that the stopping points during reading are spread out enough so as not to interfere with the children's understanding of the book.

How-to Step 3: *Prepare children for listening to and discussing the content of the book before reading the book aloud.*

- When children know something about the topic of the book, they can accurately connect the information in the book to something they know, have heard about, or have experienced.
- Start by asking children what they already know about the topic of the book.
- Discuss connections between what they know and what the book is about.
- Invite children to share their thoughts on the topic.

How-to Step 3: *Prepare children for listening to and discussing the content of the book before reading the book aloud. (continued)*

- Listen to what children share to decide whether they have enough knowledge about the topic to understand and connect with the book.
- When children do not have enough knowledge, present information that might help familiarize them with the topic and engage in a multi-turn conversation to prepare children to better understand what the book is about.

How-to Step 4: *Engage in conversations with the children while reading the book.*

- While reading, stop periodically at the stopping points determined in Step 2 to encourage children to discuss a word, a letter, or an interesting picture.
- Ask questions that encourage multi-word answers and multi-turn conversations.
- Ask children to justify their answers.
- When children have a question about the book, walk them through looking back in the book to find the answer.

How-to Step 4: *Engage in conversations with the children while reading the book. (continued)*

- If children can answer simpler questions, begin asking increasingly complex questions. Teachers can ask children questions that encourage children
 - to use vocabulary words or
 - to make connections about what happened in the book or what they have experienced.
- This might include questions that ask
 - why a character did something,
 - what the character might be feeling, what might happen next, or
 - what experiences the children have that are similar.

How-to Step 5: *Align literacy activities with the focus of the shared book reading.*

- Interactive small-group activities provide children opportunities to use or rehearse what they learned from the book.
- When the focus is discussing the content of the book, set up activities related to understanding the story or the information presented in the book.
- Consider using puppets, figurines, or role-play to act out a story.
- If children need help remembering the book, give them hints.

How-to Step 5: *Align literacy activities with the focus of the shared book reading. (continued)*

- After reading a book multiple times, leave the book in the classroom library or at a center aligned with the content of the book.
 - This allows children to look through the book independently and say what they remember about the story.

Questions?

This presentation contains a few examples from the practice guide.

The full practice guide and supporting materials provide more details and are available on the What Works Clearinghouse website (<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/29>).

Submit questions and requests via email to the WWC Help Desk at Contact.WWC@ed.gov.

Thank you