Language & literacy in three- and four-year-olds

Preschoolers develop their ability to comprehend and tell stories, become more skilled conversationalists, and begin to understand the mechanics of written language. These skills are best nurtured when embedded in activities and play that reflect children’s interests, initiative, and curiosity. Preschoolers are eager to learn early reading and writing skills when they are clearly connected to a task that’s important to them.

Building oral language skills
What children are doing:
Preschoolers refine their communication skills during play. When they describe and explain, they use more and more complex vocabulary and sentence structure. These verbal skills provide a foundation of grammar, vocabulary, and story comprehension that will help later as they learn to read.

What caregivers can provide:
- Wordless books: books with illustrations that depict stories children can narrate.
- Photo sequences depicting a class event to encourage children to narrate it from memory.

What caregivers can say and do:
- After reading a familiar story, ask children to imagine a different ending and encourage them to tell their version.
- Ask children to describe things they’ve created or how they solved a problem. Encourage children to elaborate.

Understanding symbols
What children are doing:
Preschoolers begin to recognize that a word that is said out loud can be represented by symbols on a page. Young preschoolers first grasp this type of symbolic thinking by recognizing familiar brand logos and signs that include print.

What caregivers can provide:
- Materials with brand logos and labels that are familiar to children for dramatic play.
- Labels (picture and word) on storage containers for toys and materials.

What caregivers can say and do:
- Point out relevant written labels/symbols that children encounter during the day, such as the exit sign in the room.

Learning about words and letters
What children are doing:
Preschoolers learn that individual letters stand for the individual sounds that make up words (called the alphabetic principle) late in the preschool years. Many experiences can help children make connections between language sounds and printed words and letters. Start with their names and words that are the most relevant to children.

What caregivers can provide:
- Lots of opportunities for children to see their own written name.
- Books with predictable or repeating text to make connecting oral and written words easier.

What caregivers can say and do:
- Incorporate children’s written names into activities and routines.
- Ask children to describe pictures they’ve drawn and record their words below the picture.
Recognizing the uses of writing

What children are doing:

Threes and fours are becoming more aware of the ways that writing can be used to communicate. As children see more uses of writing, they are more motivated to learn how to write for themselves. Initially they use scribbles that resemble writing, but gradually incorporate actual letters, then words.

What caregivers can provide:

• Writing materials accessible to children throughout the day and throughout the room.

• For older preschoolers, print relevant word on cards and tape on a “word wall.”

What caregivers can say and do:

• Model everyday writing and talk about what is being written and why.

• Encourage children to write their names on their work, even if it’s only the first letter.

• Create a writing center. Keep it organized and well-stocked.

Recognizing the uses of reading

What children are doing:

Preschoolers become aware of many different reasons for reading. When children are surrounded by different kinds of text embedded in the activities they care about, they will naturally develop a desire to read for themselves.

What caregivers can provide:

• Different types of books that serve different purposes.

• Print-based props for pretend play, block play, and outdoor play.

• Printed step-by-step instructions for activities that combine pictures and words so children can independently “read” them.

What caregivers can say and do:

• The most important things are to model reading in many situations and intentionally talk about what is being read and why.

• When children ask fact-based questions, find the answers together rather than giving the answer.

Keep in mind... The process of learning to read and write is quite complex, involving many different but related skills. Children will not learn most of these skills during the preschool years, but it is helpful to understand the whole continuum to provide materials and experiences that support the emergence of skills.