



BEST PRACTICES  
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## Early Childhood Education

# Preschool Language and Literacy: A Child's Passport to Lifelong Learning



National Association of Elementary School Principals



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### About NAESP

The mission of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) is to lead in the advocacy and support for elementary and middle-level principals and other education leaders in their commitment for all children.

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### About BEST PRACTICES FOR BETTER SCHOOLS™

Best Practices for Better Schools™, an online publications series developed by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, is intended to strengthen the effectiveness of elementary and middle-level principals by providing information and insight about research-based practices and by offering guidance for implementing them in schools. This series of publications is intended to inform discussion, strategies, and implementation, not to imply endorsement of any specific approach by NAESP.

### About This White Paper

The content of this issue of Best Practices for Better Schools™ is excerpted with permission from [Doing What Works](#) (DWW), a website sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education. The goal of DWW is to create an online library of resources to help principals and other educators implement research-based instructional practice. DWW is led by the Department's [Office of Planning, Evaluation & Policy Development](#) (OPEPD), which relies on the [Institute of Education Sciences](#) (and occasionally other entities that adhere to standards similar to those of IES) to evaluate and recommend practices that are supported by rigorous research. Much of the DWW content is based on information from IES' [What Works Clearinghouse](#) (WWC), which evaluates research on practices and interventions to let the education community know what is likely to work.

NAESP was the only national education association awarded a grant to widely disseminate highlights of best-practice content from the [DWW website](#). Readers are encouraged to visit the website to view all of the resources related to this best practice and to share this online resource with colleagues, teachers, and other educators. No additional permission is required.

NAESP cares about the environment. This white paper is available from NAESP as an online document only. NAESP members and other readers are encouraged to share this document with colleagues.

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# Preschool Language and Literacy: A Child's Passport To Lifelong Learning

**PRINCIPALS KNOW** that a child entering elementary school without good language and literacy skills will always be playing catch-up. Extensive research supports this notion and shows the irrefutable connection between preschool language and literacy skills and future proficiency.

Much of that research can be found on the [Doing What Works](#) website, a resource administered by the U.S. Department of Education. The practices, strategies, and tools featured in this white paper are summarized with permission from the DWW website.

Elementary principals can use two research-based practices to improve instruction in foundational pre-reading skills and, by doing so, can support and train teachers:

- Teach phonological awareness skills as a foundation for learning sound-symbol relationships;
- Use interactive and dialogic reading to engage preschool children.

Summaries of both practices follow.

## **Teach Phonological Awareness**

Phonological awareness is the ability to detect and manipulate the sounds in words independent of word meaning. It improves school readiness skills and can be taught before children learn to read.

Teachers can help preschool children ages 3 to 5 by providing phonological awareness instruction that is systematic and explicit, integrated into daily activities (including planned individual and group instructional sessions), and tailored to children's learning needs at all developmental levels. Students benefit when teachers use clear pronunciation of sounds and provide feedback to correct errors, including having children produce correct responses. Phonological awareness instruction can be combined with letter knowledge training to help children learn alphabet letters and make the explicit link between letters and sounds, which facilitates the use of letter-sound knowledge to read and build words. Students who develop these critical skills are better prepared for learning how to read.

The following actions will help you better understand and implement the teaching of phonological awareness.

## **ACTIONS**

**Address the needs of preschoolers at all developmental levels by teaching sequentially along a skill continuum incorporating all stages of phonological awareness.**

Phonological awareness proceeds sequentially along a continuum of skills—beginning with sentence and syllable blending and segmenting and then proceeding to blending and segmenting individual phonemes in words. Teachers

need guidance about how to organize and sequence phonological awareness instruction so that children will develop more advanced phonological skills (e.g., those that involve deletion and substitution of sounds and linking of sounds and letters). Instructional and professional development programs based on a developmental continuum of phonological awareness skills help teachers with planning lessons and differentiating instruction.

**Use systematic, explicit instruction to teach segmentation and blending of sounds in words; begin by teaching blending and onset-rime relationships.**

Phonological awareness must be taught systematically, sequentially, and explicitly. Further, it must focus on identifying, detecting, deleting, segmenting, and blending segments of spoken words. Children must be able to blend and segment sounds before they can learn the relationship between sounds and letters in print.

**Integrate phonological awareness instruction into daily classroom activities, including individual and group (large and small) instructional sessions.**

Preschoolers, especially those who might be at risk for developing reading difficulties, need to be instructed in phonological awareness skills before they enter kindergarten. They can learn and practice these skills daily in any preschool setting and through a variety of activities, individually and during small and large groups. Because phonological awareness instruction demands a high degree of children's attention, it should be presented in short segments.

**Support teachers by providing modeling, coaching, and observation and include opportunities for practice and discussion.**

Professional development must be ongoing and include practical activities, such as helping teachers understand how to organize

and plan lessons using the developmental continuum, how to provide feedback to students, and how to assess and monitor children's progress. Teachers should practice and discuss instructional techniques and receive support and feedback from a coach or mentor.

**WHAT PRINCIPALS SAY**

Principals can see how these actions are implemented in schools and preschool settings by viewing these web-based interviews with teachers and specialists:

[Planning Instruction](#)

[Helping Teachers to Improve Practice and Monitor Progress](#)

**TOOLS**

The following tools are designed to help principals and teachers implement this best practice in their school. Each tool is a downloadable document that principals can adapt to serve their particular needs.

[Learning Together About Teaching Phonological Awareness](#): Includes helpful discussion questions to guide training sessions and staff development meetings.

[Learning Together About Integrating Phonological Awareness](#): Features activities to help plan a team meeting and show teachers how to create a planning chart for integrating instruction into daily activities.

[Reflecting on Instructional Practice](#): A self-reflection tool to help teachers identify and implement recommended practices.

[Creating Individual Professional Development Plans](#): A worksheet to help tailor professional development activities to the individual needs of teachers.

Teachers can help children develop language skills by engaging them before, during, and after reading the text through explicit interactive techniques.

[Phonological Awareness: Setting Goals and Planning Activities](#): A tool to work with teachers on setting goals, planning instruction, and setting weekly and daily lessons and activities.

### **Use Interactive and Dialogic Reading**

Preschool children, ages 3 to 5, develop early reading and language skills when teachers use interactive and dialogic reading strategies. In interactive reading, children talk with the teacher about the pictures and story; dialogic reading uses a more systematic method to scaffold adult-child language interaction around storybook reading.

Teachers can help children develop language skills by engaging them before, during, and after reading the text. This engagement can be through explicit interactive techniques such as asking children to point to the story title, predict what might happen next, and retell story events. Dialogic reading can be used to assess and support oral language and vocabulary development through multiple readings, during which the teacher helps the child become the storyteller by gradually using higher level questions to move the child beyond naming objects in pictures to thinking more about what is happening in the pictures, and how this relates to his or her own experiences.

The following actions will help you better understand and implement the teaching of interactive and dialogic reading.

#### **ACTIONS**

**Use systematic, explicit, interactive, and dialogic reading strategies to engage children in conversations about a book or story and to expand children's responses in a meaningful context.**

Teachers should use explicit questioning techniques to engage children in discussion, ultimately improving children's oral language

and other literacy skills. Teachers need to identify learning goals, select appropriate books, and plan ahead for interactive reading sessions with small groups. A strong foundation in interactive and dialogic reading techniques enables the teacher to be an active listener and questioner who helps increase children's participation, and these techniques also systematically help children become storytellers.

**Use books with large narrative print, a limited number of words per page, and illustrations throughout.**

Book selection is an important part of interactive reading. Teachers should select books with simple narrative plots, numerous illustrations, and limited words per page. Predictable, repetitive books help children learn the patterned language so they can then "read" them to their teacher, peers, or on their own.

**Conduct adult-mediated 10 to 15 minute reading sessions several days a week.**

Regular small-group reading sessions with an adult give preschoolers the instruction and practice they need to develop oral language skills. Because this practice encourages a high degree of children's attention and participation, small-group sessions work best.

**Train teachers on the dialogic reading method of assessing and supporting children's vocabulary and language development through scaffolding and prompts.**

Professional development and classroom modeling activities focused on dialogic reading give teachers opportunities to practice and discuss how to sequence questions and gradually use higher level prompts to improve classroom practice.

**Support teachers by providing modeling, coaching, and observation and include opportunities for practice and discussion.**

Professional development must be ongoing and include extensive practical activities such as helping teachers understand how to organize and plan lessons using the developmental continuum and progress monitoring data. Teachers should practice and discuss instructional techniques and receive support and feedback from a coach or mentor.

**WHAT PRINCIPALS SAY**

Principals can see how these actions are implemented in schools and preschool settings by viewing these web-based interviews with teachers and specialists:

[Using Interactive Reading Techniques](#)

[Dialogic Reading](#)

[Helping Teachers Improve Practice](#)

**TOOLS**

The following tools and templates are designed to help principals and teachers implement this best practice in their school. Each tool is a downloadable document that principals can adapt to serve their particular needs.

[Learning Together About Interactive and Dialogic Reading](#): Discussion questions to guide staff development meetings.

[Interactive and Dialogic Reading: Observing and Reflecting on Classroom Practice](#):

Checklist to help staff reflect on current practice, think about ways to improve reading strategies, and focus classroom observations and structure discussions during conferences.

[Designing Coaching and Mentoring Programs](#): A self-review to determine what

guidance and resources are needed to set up or improve an on-site support program for teachers.

[Starting Instructional Discussions Using a Visual Diagram](#): Tips for using a visual diagram about classroom practices as a tool to jumpstart conversations.

**Conclusion**

To ensure that preschool language and literacy instruction gets the attention it deserves, principals have access to solutions through NAESP and the Doing What Works website. These solutions (which include ideas, actions, best practices, tools, templates, and other resources) are outlined in this white paper. What's more, they are based on solid research and the best thinking currently available in the field. As more white papers in NAESP's Best Practices for Better Schools™ series are developed, principals will continue to find help in addressing critical issues in elementary and middle school education.

**Related Links**

[Doing What Works: Preschool Language and Literacy](#): Review the unabridged content related to this best practice.

[NAESP Early Childhood Task Force](#): A task force of practicing principals and experts are updating NAESP's professional standards on early childhood learning, recommending strategies to improve and align early childhood education and producing materials to prepare an effective workforce of early childhood educators.

["Project Eli: Improving Early Literacy Outcomes,"](#) *Principal*, May/June 2008. This article, from NAESP's members-only magazine, describes an early childhood literacy initiative with a six-year track record of success.

[“The Rewards of Reading.”](#) *Report to Parents*, NAESP’s members-only ready-to-use flyer that principals can copy and send home with their students.

[Early Reading First Program](#): U.S. Department of Education program helps prepare children to enter kindergarten with necessary skills to ensure academic success.

[HighScope Educational Research Foundation](#): Provides referenced research, literacy products and curriculum, and training materials on childhood language and literacy.

[Reach Out and Read](#): Nonprofit organization that promotes early literacy and school readiness nationwide by giving new books to children and advice to parents about the importance of reading aloud.

[National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\)](#): Nonprofit organization of early childhood educators and others dedicated to improving the quality of programs for children birth through grade three.

[National Center for Research on Early Childhood Education \(NCRECE\)](#): Organization conducts research, disseminates research findings, and conducts leadership activities to improve early

childhood education.

[National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center \(NECTAC\)](#): Agency works with state and local service systems to ensure that children with disabilities (birth through age 5) and their families receive supports and services.

[National Institute for Literacy](#): Federal agency provides leadership on literacy issues. A section of the website focuses on early childhood.

[National Institute of Child Health and Human Development \(NICHD\): Early Learning and School Readiness Program](#): Supports research that specifies the experiences children need from birth to age 8 to help them learn to read.

[Zero to Three](#): National nonprofit organization that supports professionals, policymakers, and parents in their efforts to improve the lives of infants and toddlers.