

Preschoolers

AGES 3 AND 4



At ages 3 and 4, children are growing rapidly in their language use and in their knowledge of reading and writing. They are learning the meanings of many new words, and they are beginning to use words in more complicated sentences when they speak. They know more about books and print. They are eager to write. They may even be showing an interest in learning to read.

Many three- and four-year-old children attend day care centers or preschool for part or most of the day. The information in this section of the booklet will help you and your child, whether your child stays at home all day or attends a day care center or preschool.

WHAT TO DO AT HOME

Continue to talk and read with your child, as you did when he was an infant and toddler. Also, add some new and more challenging activities.

Talk and listen

- 1. When you do something together—eating, shopping, taking a walk, visiting a relative—talk about it.**
- 2. Take your child to new places and introduce him to new experiences.** Talk about the new, interesting, and unusual things that you see and do.
- 3. Teach your child the meaning of new words.** Say the names of things around the house. Label and talk about things in pictures. Explain, in simple ways, how to use familiar objects and how they work.

PARENT TALK

*“That’s a whale! It’s a great big animal, as big as a truck.
It lives in the ocean.”*

*“This is a vacuum cleaner. We use it to clean the floor.
See how it cleans up the spilled cereal?”*

- 4. Help your child to follow directions.** Use short, clear sentences to tell him what you want him to do.

PARENT TALK

“Give me your hand, please.”

“Please take off your mittens and put them on the table. Then I’d like for you to bring me your jacket so that I can hang it up.”

- 5. Play with words.** Have fun with tongue twisters such as “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers” and nonsense rhymes such as “Hey Diddle, Diddle,” as well as more modern nonsense rhymes.

Read together

- 1. Keep reading to your child.** Read her a lot of different kinds of books. Reread her favorite books, even if you get tired of them before she does.
- 2. Read predictable books.** Your child will begin to recognize the repeated words and phrases and have fun saying them with you.
- 3. Read poetry and other rhyming books to your child.** When reading a familiar rhyme, stop before a rhyming word and ask your child to provide the word.
- 4. Ask your child what she thinks will happen next in a story.** Get excited when she finds out whether her guess was right.
- 5. Talk about books.** Ask about favorite parts. Help your child relate the story to his own life. Answer his questions about characters or events.
- 6. Build a library, or book collection, for your child.** Look for books at bookstores, garage sales, used bookstores, and sales at the library. Suggest that people give books to your child as birthday gifts and on other special days.

Teach about print and letters

- 1. Help your child learn to recognize her name in print.** As she watches, print the letters of her name, saying each letter as you write it. Display her name in special places in your home. Encourage her to spell and write her name.
- 2. Point out words and letters everywhere you can.** Read street signs, traffic signs, billboards, and store signs. Point out certain letters in these signs. Ask your child to begin naming common signs and find some letters.
- 3. Teach your child the alphabet song.**
- 4. Share alphabet books with your child.** Some alphabet books have songs and games that you can learn together.
- 5. Put magnetic letters on your refrigerator or other smooth, safe metal surface.** Ask your child to name the letters as he plays with them.

6. **Play games using the alphabet.** Ask your child to find letters in books, magazines, newspapers, and other print.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN DAY CARE CENTERS AND PRESCHOOLS

If your child attends a day care center or preschool, look for these important characteristics of teachers, classrooms, and instruction.

Teachers

In quality day care centers and preschools, teachers:

- Keep a well-run, orderly classroom that also encourages children to participate in and enjoy learning
- Use many creative ways to help children learn language and learn the knowledge and skills that will help them become readers

Classrooms

In quality day care centers and preschools, classrooms have:

- Lots of books and magazines that children can handle and play with
- Areas for many different activities, such as art, science, housekeeping, writing, and perhaps computers
- Plenty of print on labels, signs, and posters
- Writing materials, including paper, pencils, crayons, and markers
- Magnetic letters, or letters made of foam, plastic, wood, or other durable material so children can pretend write and play

Instruction

In quality day care centers and preschools, teachers:

- Read aloud to children frequently, from many different kinds of books
- Talk with children throughout the day and listen carefully to what they say
- Play games such as “Simon Says” and “Mother, May I?” that require children to listen carefully
- Give children opportunities to build their knowledge by exploring their interests and ideas
- Help children learn the meanings of new words by naming colors, shapes, animals, familiar objects, and parts of the classroom
- Teach about the sounds of spoken language by reading aloud books with interesting sounds, chanting, and rhyming; by having children say or sing nursery rhymes and songs; and by playing word games
- Teach children about print by pointing out and using the print that is all around them
- Teach the letters of the alphabet
- Encourage children to scribble, draw, and try to write

WHAT CHILDREN SHOULD BE ABLE TO DO BY AGE 5

The following is a list of some accomplishments that you can expect for your child by age 5. This list is based on research in the fields of reading, early childhood education, and child development. Remember, though, that children don't develop and learn at the same pace and in the same way. Your child may be more advanced or need more help than others in her age group. You are, of course, the best judge of your child's abilities and needs. You should take the accomplishments as guidelines and not as hard-and-fast rules.

Spoken language

A five-year-old child:

- Understands and follows oral (or spoken) directions
- Uses new words and longer sentences when she speaks
- Recognizes the beginning sounds of words and sounds that rhyme
- Listens carefully when books are read aloud

Reading

A five-year-old child:

- Shows interest in books and reading
- Might try to read, calling attention to himself and showing pride in what he can do ("See, I can read this book!")
- Can follow the series of events in some stories
- Can connect what happens in books to her life and experiences
- Asks questions and makes comments that show he understands the book he is listening to

Print and letters

A five-year-old child:

- Knows the difference between print (words) and pictures and knows that print is what you read
- Recognizes print around him on signs, on television, on boxes, and many other places
- Understands that writing has a lot of different purposes (for example, signs tell where something is located, lists can be used for grocery shopping, directions can tell you how to put something together)
- Knows that each letter in the alphabet has a name
- Can name at least 10 letters in the alphabet, especially the ones in her name
- "Writes," or scribbles, messages

The main sources for this list of accomplishments are Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children and Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children. For more information about these sources, see Bibliography at the end of this booklet.

SOME HELPFUL TERMS TO KNOW

Day care providers and preschool teachers might use some of the following terms when talking to you about how your child is learning to read. You will find that many of these terms are used in this booklet.

- **alphabetic knowledge**—Knowing the names and shapes of the letters of the alphabet.
- **big books**—Oversized books that allow for the sharing of print and illustrations with children.
- **blending**—Putting together individual sounds to make spoken words.
- **developmental spelling**—The use of letter-sound relationship information to attempt to write words.
- **emergent literacy**—The view that literacy learning begins at birth and is encouraged through participation with adults in meaningful reading and writing activities.
- **environmental print**—Print that is a part of everyday life, such as signs, billboards, labels, and business logos.
- **experimental writing**—Efforts by young children to experiment with writing by creating pretend and real letters and by organizing scribbles and marks on paper.
- **invented spelling**—See developmental spelling.
- **literacy**—Includes all the activities involved in speaking, listening, reading, writing, and appreciating both spoken and written language.
- **phonemes**—The smallest parts of spoken language that combine to form words. For example, the word *hit* is made up of three phonemes (/h/ /i/ /t/) and differs by one phoneme from the words *pit*, *hip* and *hot*.
- **phonemic awareness**—The ability to notice and work with the individual sounds in spoken language.
- **phonological awareness**—The understanding that spoken language is made up of individual and separate sounds. In addition to phonemes, phonological awareness activities can involve work with rhymes, words, sentences, and syllables.
- **pretend reading**—Children’s attempts to “read” a book before they have learned to read. Usually children pretend read a familiar book that they have practically memorized.
- **print awareness**—Knowing about print and books and how they are used.
- **segmentation**—Taking spoken words apart sound by sound.
- **spoken language**—The language used in talking and listening; in contrast to written language, which is the language used in writing and reading.
- **syllable**—A word part that contains a vowel or, in spoken language, a vowel sound (*e-vent*, *news-pa-per*, *pret-ty*)
- **vocabulary**—The words we must know in order to communicate effectively.
Oral vocabulary refers to words that we use in speaking or recognize in listening.
Reading vocabulary refers to words we recognize or use in print.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, R. C., Hiebert, E. H., Scott, J. A., & Wilkinson, I. A. G. (1985). *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading*. Champaign, IL: Center for the Study of Reading; Washington, DC: National Institute of Education.
- Dickinson, D. K., & Tabors, P. O. (2001). *Beginning Literacy with Language: Young Children Learning at Home and School*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Gopnik, A., Meltzoff, A. N., & Kuhl, P. K. (2000). *The Scientist in the Crib*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.
- Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

RESOURCES FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

The following web sites can provide you with useful information about learning to read.

The Partnership for Reading. www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading

National Parent Information Network (NPIN). www.npin.org

National Institute for Literacy (NIFL). www.nifl.gov

No Child Left Behind web site describes the current education law and how it affects K-3 schools, parents, and children. www.ed.gov/nclb

Reading Rockets offers activities and ideas for building your child's reading skills at home. www.readingrockets.org/families

PBS Parents can help parents learn how children become readers and writers by helping them develop by talking, reading, and writing together every day. www.pbs.org/parents/readinglanguage/

The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans offers resources on helping the language development of infants and young children. www.yesican.gov/earlychildhood/index.html

The Head Start Information and Publication Center provides publications and other resources on literacy for parents of young children. www.headstartinfo.org

The American Federation of Teachers web site offers pages for parents on building strong partnerships with schools. www.aft.org/parents/index.htm

The National Education Association web site contains information on parent involvement in literacy and other topics. www.nea.org/parents/index.html

HIPPYUSA (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters) has a web site for parents to help them understand their roles as their children's first teacher. www.hippyusa.org.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children promotes excellence in early childhood education. www.naeyc.org/families/

Parents as Teachers National Center suggests ways for parents to interact with their children to develop early literacy. www.parentsasteachers.org

Resource list provided by the Parent Information and Resource Centers, U.S. Department of Education.

**If you have children attending kindergarten
or grades 1–3, look for the booklet
A Child Becomes a Reader: Kindergarten through Grade 3.
www.nifl.gov**

**To order copies of this booklet, contact the
National Institute for Literacy at EdPubs,
PO Box 1398, Jessup, MD 20794-1398.**

**Call 800-228-8813 or
e-mail edpubs@inet.ed.gov.**

**This booklet can also be downloaded at the
National Institute for Literacy web site, www.nifl.gov.**