

Language and literacy development include a variety of skills acquired from infancy through adulthood. Speaking, reading, and writing are some language and literacy components. Verbal language is one of the skills that develops during the first five years of a child's life. Exposing infants to language by singing, speaking, or reading to them from birth helps to develop and strengthen the verbal language skill. This skill serves as the foundation for their phonological awareness and their print concept, which has already begun to expand by the time the child reaches the preschool age. As adults, we can incorporate a variety of language and literacy activities in the environment to support children's development. It is important for adults to be mindful of children's ages and developmental stages; we must remember to change and modify literacy and communication activities for their age and abilities. By playing music throughout the day and simultaneously explaining how words are made up of sound, we create a space for younger children to build phonological awareness. Taking the time to incorporate creative writing can also be a great way to help older children improve their writing skills.

Infants begin learning language and literacy skills as early as birth when they are spoken to by adults. Infants begin understanding spoken language and later learn to produce it themselves. They use their expressive language skills to communicate by making sounds, using gestures, and speaking. Babbling and cooing are two forms of verbal expression observed in infants. Hand waving or clapping are examples of hand gestures, another form of communication we often see in infants. We may later notice that they imitate sounds previously heard from an adult, such as singing nursery rhymes. By the time the child reaches the age of two, their vocabulary has expanded to approximately 50 words, often using three-word sentences.

In the preschool years, children are able to communicate using language. We also begin to see a higher interest in books and music during this stage. Participation in literacy activities like looking through books and listening to stories leads to continued engagement with and interest in literacy. Children who are read to more often and from an earlier age develop a greater interest in literacy. During the preschool years, we also begin to see children express themselves using complete sentences with past and future tense. They use such communication for various purposes, such as to describe and request. Preschool-age children begin to speak clearly enough to be understood by familiar and unfamiliar adults. Many preschool-age children can go as far as narrating a story or event with great detail.

By the time children enter the school-age stage, they have a wide understanding of communication. Reading and writing become more frequent and part of their daily life. Conversations are more detailed, and their understanding and interest in music increases. During the school-age years, children expand the vocabulary they use to communicate verbally. In this stage, children can learn from and understand in-depth conversations. Language and literacy in school-age children can be incorporated into all learning areas. For example, using word problems in math questions is a great way to expand their minds when problem-solving. Reading scripts and lyrics during performing arts effectively incorporates language and literacy.

Children with developed communication skills are more likely to do well in school and adulthood. Additionally, language and literacy development helps children from birth to adult life better express themselves verbally and in written form. Therefore, implementing language and literacy activities as early as possible will provide lifelong benefits to children.

Adapted from: *California Preschool Curriculum Framework*, by the California Department of Education (Sacramento, 2010).  
*Infant/Toddler Learning & Development Foundation*, by the California Department of Education (Sacramento, 2009).

## Rhyming Names

**What you need:** No materials are required.

**What you do:** When interacting with children one-on-one, create a short rhyme using the child's name, such as "Madeline Had a Little Lamb" or "Robert Rocking with a Rocket." Use rhymes to highlight the children's positive characteristics. For example:

(child's name) is a happy boy. His smile is full of light and joy.

(child's name) is a happy girl. She loves to dance and loves to twirl.

(child's name), now you're small. One day you'll be big and tall.

(child's name) with their eyes so bright, they're like a little shining light.

**Skills learned:** These rhymes not only cue the child that you are talking to them, they also help the child learn about rhyming sounds.

**Activity Stretcher:** Use rhymes to give directions. For instance: "There's milk in your cup. Let's drink it up!" or "It's time to play on this bright sunny day."

## Picture Wall

**What you need:** Magazines, catalogs, greeting cards, old calendars, scissors (adult-use only), tape, and contact paper.

**What you do:** Choose a theme each month or each season. Cut out pictures that relate to the theme and cover them with contact paper to make them more durable. Some examples of themes and related pictures are transportation (cars, bikes, motorcycles, boats), animals (cows, dogs, cats, horses, birds), and clothing (shirts, pants, coats, shoes). After you have gathered pictures, attach them to the wall at the child's eye level. Talk with the children about the details of the pictures.

**Skills learned:** Use this activity to teach vocabulary and encourage oral language with infants and young toddlers. In addition, the child will be learning descriptive words, sounds, and themes.

**Activity Stretcher:** Describe what you see in the pictures, for example:

"Look at the green and white shirt the boy is wearing. Do you see it?" or "The cows say 'moo' and they live on the farm. What other animals live on the farm? Yellow ducks do, and they go 'quack.'"

## Pointing and Naming

**What you need:** 3-4 different objects, such as picture cards, books, toys, color blocks, baby-safe mirror, etc.

**What you do:** Sit with your child in your lap and the materials nearby. Point at one of the objects and name the item. For example, if you choose to use picture cards with an image of a ball, point at the card and say "Ball" to the baby. Repeat it to the baby a few times to teach the name of the image on the card. You can also use an actual soft ball and give it to the baby to hold and feel. You may teach the child to point, using the hand-over-hand technique. For example, if the child seems interested in a particular object, take their hand and gently guide it so that the pointer finger is extended toward the ball. Say, "Look. That is a red ball!" Read a book together and point at illustrations and name them. Or, as you hold the child in your arms, point to pictures on the wall. Be sure to label what you see. "Look at the picture of a sun! It is yellow." (Put your finger directly on the sun in the picture.) When introducing this activity, point at objects within close range, such as body parts. You can use a baby-safe, shatter-proof mirror for the baby to see their own reflection. As you hold their hand, point at their own body parts, and let them know what part they are pointing at (e.g. "This is your head. This is your belly. This is your leg."). Then progress to objects further away. Be sure that when you point to an object, the child looks at the object with you. You may wish to exaggerate the movement of your head toward the object of interest. For example, as you look out a window, point and say, "Look, there's a dog outside. Silly dog!"

**Skills learned:** By pointing, you teach your child to match your gaze and to point at other things that may interest them. When your child points, you are more likely to talk about what they are pointing at, and when you talk, you help your child learn language. Pointing is a sign that your child is developing certain communication and social skills.

**Activity stretcher:** After repeating this activity a few times, you can ask the infant or toddler, "Where is the red ball?", "Can you show me the red car?", "Where is the picture wall with the yellow sun?", "Where are your eyes, mouth, and nose?" Allow your child time to find the item you are asking about.

**Reference:** *The Encyclopedia of Infant and Toddlers Activities* Edited by Kathy Charner, Maureen Murphy, and Charlie Clark.

## Playing Robot

**What you need:** No materials are required.

**What you do:** This game is for a small group of preschoolers, about three to five children. The adult will be the robot. Children will take turns describing to the robot (adult) what actions they should take and what movements they should make to complete simple tasks. The robot can only do what they are told, so the children will be encouraged to be descriptive, detailed, and creative in their instructions. For example, “Walk three steps,” “sit at the table,” “build a house using blocks.” To encourage further use of language and creativity, instead of “build a house using blocks,” prompt the children to provide even more detail, such as “use your left hand to place the red block in the center of the table, then use your right hand to place the blue block on top of the red block.” The goal of this game is to have children utilize words in their vocabulary to ask the “robot” to complete the requested tasks, imagining the level of detail that a robot might need to hear in order to correctly follow the direction. For fun, you can take a direction literally to demonstrate how words can be interpreted in different ways. For example, if the child says “walk three steps,” you could go to a staircase and take three steps up. The child would then need to change their direction to “move one leg in front of the other three times,” for example, to achieve the desired result.

**Skills learned:** Preschoolers begin to learn to communicate with others in social situations and utilize a variety of communication skills including describing, requesting, commenting, and giving directions. They also learn perspective-taking, as they attempt to understand the needs of the robot when providing instructions.

**Activity stretcher:** To encourage older preschoolers to use more descriptive words and expand their vocabulary, have the children request that the robot completes tasks that contain two steps in one request like “Find the green crayon and draw grass.” It can be explained to children that a two-step task will contain the word *and* in the middle.

## Design Your Own Picture Books

**What you need:** Photos from recent activity, scissors, glue, and cardstock.

**What you do:** During a recent activity like gardening, a field trip, outdoor play, or dress up in dramatic play, take pictures of children engaged in these different activities. Upon completing the activity, print pictures cut them out, and glue them to the cardstock. Bind the cardstock together (not permanently). Younger preschoolers can picture read and point out what is happening in each picture. Encourage younger preschoolers to use three to four-word sentences and ask open-ended questions to encourage conversation. As preschoolers advance in their communication development, you can ask them to create a story using the picture book and present the book in their narrative to a small group of peers. Ask children a variety of questions about the pictures like “What would happen if?” “What do you think will come next?” and “What do you think the children in the picture are talking about?”

**Skills learned:** Children use language to learn to construct short narratives using pictures and descriptive words. Older preschoolers will develop the ability to retell a sequence of events in conversation with others. Use this time to introduce new and varied descriptive words like “huge,” “tall,” and “wide” instead of “big.”

**Activity stretcher:** To expand this activity, you can unbind the book and ask the children to change the sequence of the pictures to create a new story. Ask children to create their own story using pictures drawn by them. Encourage conversation when children are telling stories.

## Polar Bears and Tornadoes

**What you need:** A piece of paper and a pencil, crayon, or marker.

**What you do:** To begin, draw a picture of a thermometer on the left side of the paper, and label the bottom of the thermometer as the *calm* section and the top section as *excited*. Next, on the right side of the thermometer, draw a polar bear at the bottom and a tornado at the top. Ask if the child feels calm like a chilled polar bear or unable to relax like a rapidly excited tornado. When the child is feeling over-energized, brainstorm together about what can be done to feel calmer like a polar bear; for example, taking a moment to breathe and count to ten or to breathe in through their nose and out through their mouth. Try playing this game at different times of the day and help the child describe their feelings.

**Skills learned:** Introduces descriptive words to help guide the child to express their feelings and self-reflect when they have too much energy. Helps children identify preferred calming strategies to self-regulate or to feel comfortable asking for help from a trusted adult.

**Activity stretcher:** To stretch this activity, have the child continue to brainstorm ways they can feel like a calm polar bear throughout the day. You and the child can write down a few ideas, and they can come back and review their notes when they need help to calm down and feel like a polar bear. Additionally, you can create a space for children to visit when they would like to return to a calm state. This space can be Antarctica/chill themed to remind the children that the goal is to feel as calm as a polar bear in chill(y) and relaxed Antarctica.

## Make a Board Game

**What you need:** A long sheet of white construction paper, pencils, pens or markers of various colors, index cards, and game pieces (checkers, over-sized buttons, etc.).

**What you do:** In this activity, children will create a board game. Ask children to choose a theme such as a magical forest, theme park, or back in the time of the dinosaurs. Sketch a path and divide it into squares (10-12 squares recommended). Then the children can draw on the paper, add labels to the squares, and make a deck of index cards with directions. For example, "Take a ride on the roller coaster, move three spaces," "You got lost in the forest, skip a turn," "The dinosaur is taking a bath in the lake, move one space back." Children will take turns moving their game pieces to match the index card directions. You can also encourage the children to create a poster board that provides instructions on how to play the game.

**Skills learned:** Children practice team building, literacy, and communication skills.

**Activity stretcher:** Ask open-ended questions about the board game to encourage and extend conversations.

Adults can also adapt this activity based on the developmental needs of different age groups. Children can use pictures in the squares, or they may use crayons or colored pencils to draw pictures instead of writing. When the board game is finished, add it to your child care home rotational material. As time goes on, the children can add to the game or make their own board game.

## Adapted from:

<https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/learning-at-home/games-skillbuilders/social-emotional-activities-for-children>

<https://blog.brookespublishing.com/15-fun-ways-to-build-language-literacy-skills-in-young-learners/>