

Language and literacy are important skills for a child to develop. Children experience language and literacy growth in everyday interactions from the moment they are born. These skills are developed by exposing children to different languages, reading books, or singing songs together. Through language and literacy, children begin to discover their voice and communicate, understand the meaning of letters, learn how to create words, and eventually are able to read words.

It is crucial that parents and early childhood educators support language and literacy skills early on as studies have shown that the brain undergoes tremendous growth during the first five years of life. Not only does the brain double in size in the first year, it also keeps growing to about 80% of adult size by the age of three and 90% to a fully-grown brain by age five. As a child's first teachers, parents and early childhood educators can help enrich those language and literacy skills in a variety of ways. Infants and toddlers learn new language skills through daily back-and-forth interactions. Talking to them daily can help them recognize syllables, words, and over time, sentences. The conversation can be as simple as "Mommy," "Daddy," "Blanket," or "Book." Singing nursery songs and playing children's music is another way to expose a young child to language. As an infant grows into a toddler, begin to use richer vocabulary and extend those conversations. For example, ask questions such as, "What color is the book?" or "How does the blanket feel?" By the time the child reaches the age of two, their vocabulary has expanded to approximately 50 words, often using three-word sentences.

Once children reach preschool, they can communicate using language, and reading and writing skills develop further. Reading with an adult is an excellent way for children to make connections and strengthen those skills. Pointing to words as you say them, spelling out a word from a picture book, or asking open-ended questions are some support methods. For example, "They are J-U-M-P-I-N-G," "What do you think the character of this book will do next?" or "What do you think is happening in this picture?" Making books accessible in the children's home and learning environments is an excellent method to encourage them to look at books independently. As their literacy skills become stronger, children will begin to make connections and practice their writing skills. For example, they may read a stop sign on the street, scribble in blank books, and attempt to recreate letters they are seeing. This can sometimes be seen in their dramatic play when children pretend to write ("menu," "receipt," etc.).

Most children have developed essential reading and writing skills at the school-age level, in addition to language skills. Language skills help with social skills, such as interacting with peers, problem-solving, creating friendships, and establishing healthy relationships with teachers and classmates. Literacy skills also support a child in becoming more curious and seeking a better understanding of the world around them. Language and literacy development is essential to a child's overall development. It helps support a child's ability to communicate verbally and in written form, listen to understand, and express their thoughts and feelings. Assisting children in developing early language and literacy skills strengthens their vocabulary, reading comprehension, and self-expression, preparing a child's school readiness success in the early years of their lives.

## Puppet Show

**What you need:** Hand puppets (can be homemade using socks, paper bags and markers, or felt) and a story book.

**What you do:** Create hand puppets using socks, paper bags, felt, or any craft supplies available. Involving the toddlers in creating the puppets may help them be more engaged in the activity and encourage their imagination. Once the puppets are created, sit with the infants and toddlers in a circle and use the puppets to tell a story. Incorporating everyday objects and materials will help strengthen the children's language and literacy skills. Throughout the puppet show, ask simple questions to gauge the children's comprehension of the story. The questions can be as simple as, "Where is the bus?" or "Do you see the bear?" Questions can also be asked about the characters or the setting in which the story is taking place. The children will demonstrate understanding by pointing to the objects that are being asked about, or responding verbally to the questions asked.

**Skills learned:** Infants and toddlers learn language skills and patterns as they are being read to, as well as vocabulary and comprehension when interacting with the storyteller.

**Activity stretcher:** Facial expressions and voice tone changes allow children to grasp the concept of social communication, helping them to later express themselves using facial expressions and vocabulary.

## The Wheels on the Bus

**What you need:** *The Wheels on the Bus* song and/or book.

**What you do:** Sit with the infants and toddlers in a circle singing *Wheels on The Bus* while making hand gestures for the movements mentioned in the song. For example, when the song describes how the wheels on the bus "go round and round," the adult can make a circular hand movement and encourage the children to mimic the hand gesture.

**Skills learned:** Infants and toddlers learn comprehension of text and sound with hand gestures by matching the hand movement to the action. They also learn that hand gestures can be used when communicating to illustrate ideas and add interest to spoken word.

**Activity stretcher:** Movements that are not already included in the song can be incorporated in the song so that the children learn additional hand gestures. Examples include pointing, stomping, high-fiving, or waving. Children can also practice gesturing the song without the spoken portion accompanying the gestures. The activity can also be stretched by incorporating hand gestures into other songs such as *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* and *The Itsy Bitsy Spider*.

## Making Books

**What you need:** Construction paper, markers, crayons, a stapler, and books.

**What you do:** Read a book of your choice to the children. Then, have the children recreate their own version of the story using the same storyline. This will be similar to a summary or story sequence. The children can create their own characters and setting.

To make the book:

1. Fold multiple pieces of construction paper in half and stack three or four pages to form a book.
2. Staple the pages together along the fold (or the spine) to create the book.
3. Give each child a book and provide them with markers, crayons, and magazines.
4. Tell the children they will be making their own book and talk to the children about the importance of reading books.
5. Offer the children the choice to either cut and paste images using the magazines provided or to draw pictures in their book to create their own story.
6. Ask the children questions about what they are drawing or what pictures from the magazines they are using. Additionally, ask the children questions about the storyline they are creating such as what happened first, then, next, and last.
7. Once the children are finished, encourage them to read their story to the class.

**Skills learned:** Preschoolers will learn how to create a physical book and use images to tell stories. In doing so, the children expand their fine motor and communication skills. Children also learn to be attentive to the story to follow the storyline.

### Activity stretcher:

1. Expand this activity by asking the children if they would like to put on a play with their storyline.
2. Encourage the children to act out the story with their peers.
3. Ask the children open-ended questions about the stories they have created such as, “What is happening?” “Where is the story taking place?” or “How is the character feeling?” When asking questions about the stories, remember to ask open-ended questions, which are questions that begin with who, what, when, where, why, and how.

## Reading Roleplay

**What you need:** Book of choice.

**What you do:** Inform the children that you will be reading a book together. Ask the children which book they would like to read, or choose the book beforehand. Ask the children to sit around you. Let the children know that they will be taking turns reading the book and that each child will take turns reading a page, a sentence, etc. You may ask for a volunteer to start reading the book, or you may begin the activity and then ask for a volunteer. As you or the child read, point to the words that are being read. In between turns, ask the children open-ended questions about the book to verify comprehension. “What/how is the character doing/feeling?” “Why do you think the character did that?” “What do you think will happen next?” The children can also ask their peers open-ended questions after their turn to read has finished. After the book is finished, let the children know they will be acting out the story. Ask the children to assign themselves to a character in the story to roleplay. Remind the children of the storyline and encourage them to remember what the characters in the story said or did.

**Skills learned:** Preschoolers will expand their communication, turn-taking, reading comprehension, memory, and imagination skills.

**Activity Stretcher:** You can share this activity with the families and encourage parents to use open-ended questions when reading with their children. Share suggestions for acting out the story and encourage parents to recreate the activity at home with their child(ren). Briefly explain to the parents how the activity was conducted. Encourage the parents to ask their child to explain the activity to them and recreate it at home to further support their communication and memory skills.

# Program Ideas for School-Age Children

## Treasure Maps

**What you need:** Paper or index cards, pencils, crayons, markers and/or colored pencils, newspapers and/or magazines, scissors, and tape.

**What you do:** Children can work in groups or individually to help create a treasure map. Provide children with magazines, newspapers, or printed images, or the children can make the drawings themselves. Have the children tape or draw an image on one side of the paper/index card and write a word or phrase that captures the meaning of the image on the other side. If there is an image that captures the child's attention, but is a word they are unfamiliar with, adults can assist with the pronunciation of word and can guide the child to look up the definition in a dictionary or online. Then, have one group of children hide the papers/index cards within the child care setting, and write a set of clues for finding the papers on the treasure map. The other group of children will use the map and clues to search for the paper/index card. Once a paper/index card is found, the children will read the word or phrase written on the back and make the connection to the image on the other side. The goal of this activity is for children to follow the map to find all of the hidden papers/index cards created by the children.

**Skills learned:** Children have the opportunity to follow directions, engage in language development, and learn the meaning of words they may be unfamiliar with. Children also practice communication skills throughout this activity.

**Activity stretcher:** This activity can be modified to support the developmental needs of each child in the group. Adults are encouraged to select magazines/newspapers with images for children to choose according to their age range. Additionally, the adult can participate by creating the treasure map that all children then use to work together to find the papers/index cards.

**Adapted from:** *Games for Literacy for School Age Children* by Joanna Polisena <https://education.seattlepi.com/games-literacy-school-age-children-1543.html>

## Paper Bag Dramatics

**What you need:** Paper or plastic bags and items available in the child care setting (dramatic play clothing, props, toys).

**What you do:** An adult will place 3-4 items in the paper bags. The children can work in groups or pairs. The groups will create a skit that includes all of the items in the bag. Each group will need to write, practice, and perform the play for their peers. Have the children decide who will write down the group's ideas prior to creating their skit. Make sure the children understand that their skit will need a beginning, middle, and an ending. Remind the children of group activity rules: only one person may speak at a time, attempt to resolve a disagreement prior to seeking an adult's advice, and speak with kindness. After all performances are finished, debrief by having the children reflect on the activity. What did your group do well? What was challenging for your group? What do you feel proud of? What do you want to remember next time you work with a group?

**Skills learned:** Team building, developing community, writing skills, planning, language development, and communication skills.

**Activity stretcher:** Younger children can participate in the skits created by the older children. Younger children can be included in the skits to act out different roles with direction from their peers, or they can help design/create props for the skits.

**Adapted from:** *Paper Bag Dramatics: A Fun Activity for Team Building and Developing Community*  
<https://www.elementarymatters.com/2017/08/paper-bag-dramatics-fun-activity-for.html>