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The ABC's of “Ready to Learn”

by Jan Richter

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Many parents and policy leaders agree that quality childcare and preschool are important for young children, so they come to kindergarten ready to learn. But few can explain what “quality” looks like as well as Sue Bredekamp, a child development expert who helped develop the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s standards for developmentally appropriate practices for young children’s programs.



Bredekamp is currently the Director of Research at the Council for Professional Recognition. She talked with Connect for Kids about what it takes to ensure young children become good learners and readers.

Five Fingers

Bredekamp says that understanding the way young children learn is easy—as easy as counting the fingers on one hand. Each finger represents a behavior that a good teacher will engage in with children every day:

The thumb represents talking. Just as the thumb is key to using our hands, talking is fundamental to learning, especially for literacy. It is through language that babies and toddlers build their relationships with others and build the foundation for learning to think, communicate, read and write.

Next is the pointer finger. That stands for play. Play is the natural activity of children, and is essential to their learning about their world. Play teaches children physics—what drops, what breaks, what doesn’t—and civics: “Through play they acquire the social skills for making friends, solving problems, giving voice to their ideas,” says Bredekamp.

The index finger represents reading. But with preschoolers, says Bredekamp, the story in the book is just the beginning of what reading is about. “It’s the conversation that surrounds the book reading that makes the difference: ‘Why do you think that happened? Why didn’t Peter Rabbit’s mother want him to go into the garden? Have you ever done anything naughty? What happened?’ You need to have a conversation about what’s in the story, what’s between the lines in the story, and what’s beyond the story.”

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The ring finger is writing. Like reading, writing is a broadly defined activity in a preschool setting: it means a teacher writing a story or journal entry to a child's dictation, it means helping a child use words and pictures to tell a story, it means simply teaching a child to write the letters in her name.

Finally, the little finger is helping children understand the "code"—making the link between sounds and letters. This, says Bredekamp, is one of the later skills to come in.

Supporting all these activities, says Bredekamp, there should be a rich curriculum supported by a wealth of classroom materials for play and exploration. "There has to be content. Kids learn about stuff, about the world, from what's in the classroom and in the curriculum."

Beyond the Five Fingers

Bredekamp's image of a hand reminds us what needs to come first in creating a preschool program that engages young children's minds and bodies: language and play.

The hard part, says Bredekamp, is offering opportunities for language and play activities that will build on the cognitive and social skills each child brings into the classroom—skills that will vary widely from child to child, and even from day to day.

"The trick is to offer activities that are achievable but challenging for each child, so children can enhance their cognitive and social skills," says Bredekamp. Doing this, she suggests, requires understanding the concept of developmentally appropriate activities, which are sometimes misunderstood as activities that are easy for children to do.

"Developmentally appropriate is an important concept in early learning. A developmentally appropriate expectation should be on the cutting edge of what a child can accomplish—not too easy, but not so difficult as to be frustrating," says Bredekamp. "For instance you might expect a toddler to pick up a book and turn the pages but you wouldn't expect them to follow the print. You might expect a four-year-old to differentiate between the print and the picture, but not to decode words."

But even these expectations, says Bredekamp, need to be tailored for individual children. "We have learned that while there are typical sequences of acquiring language or motor skills, not all children follow them. Most babies start by cooing, then babbling, then one-word sentences but some children don't follow this sequence. Most children learn to crawl, pull up, cruise and walk, but some babies never crawl."

So a good preschool program will be one that makes room for different levels of achievement, physical ability, and social savvy. It will also be one that encourages the development of skills that have been shown to predict later literacy.

"Young children who know a lot of words, that know the

alphabet, know that print has meaning and that you go from left to right, from top to bottom—these are all predictive of successful young readers,” says Bredekamp.

Preschool is also a key time for building a strong set of social and behavioral skills that will make it easier for children to succeed academically as they move on to elementary school.

“Being able to pay attention, to regulate emotions, to persist at a task— these have a huge impact on a child’s academic success,” Bredekamp notes. “Kids who can’t regulate their own behaviors to conform to classroom expectations have a lot harder time learning in school.”

Don’t Downplay Play

Bredekamp warns against underestimating the critical importance of play in the preschool years. “If you take away play, you take away the most important way that kids have to develop the most important skills they need in later years—the social and cognitive skills they need to become readers and lifelong learners,” says Bredekamp.

“Play is the foundation for children’s symbolic representation—the understanding that one thing stands for another. Reading is based on symbolic representation, so this aspect of play is key for children becoming readers.”

Play is also essential in helping kids flex their social muscles. “It is through play that children make friends, negotiate social problem solving, handle a conflict. If you take away the opportunity for play you take away the most important context for children to learn to regulate their emotions appropriately, develop language, develop social skills.”

Bredekamp notes that children begin to engage in social imaginative play as toddlers, and their capacity and enjoyment of this kind of play peaks during the preschool years, from 3 to 6. These are prime years for children as dramatists, storytellers, creators.

The other key element of play is that it is directed by children, not teachers. A good preschool teacher will learn a lot by observing children at play, and can put that knowledge to work to benefit individual kids. “If we limit opportunities for children to engage in self-directed play with each other we lose the opportunity to see which kids are good players or not. We lose the chance to help those kids who need some extra help become better able to negotiate their wants and needs with others, to manage their frustrations and aggression,” says Bredekamp.

Bredekamp worries that as formal testing becomes more common in preschools, the preschool curriculum will become too narrow and children will lose out on time for integrating play and learning, as teachers spend more time preparing these youngest learners for short-answer tests. Head Start programs are now required to administer formal assessment tests twice each year to

children as young as three.

Quality for All—a Tough Sell

Bredenkamp believes that making quality preschool programs accessible to low-income children is the key to any serious effort to make sure all children enter kindergarten ready to learn.

But, “There’s little public will to make sure quality child care and preschool programs are available for low-income kids, even though there is a wealth of research that quality programs can have a positive impact on the cognitive and language development of low-income kids,” says Bredenkamp.

By contrast, there really isn’t much research into the value of preschool for middle- and upper-income children. Yet middle-class parents have shown that they understand the importance of quality early learning by seeking out good programs even when they are quite expensive, says Bredenkamp.

As a result, she says, a larger percentage of middle-income children attend preschool than low-income children—a reality that makes it even less likely that all children will enter the kindergarten having achieved similar levels of school readiness.

Resources:

- [The National Association for the Education of Young Children Web site](#)
- [Connect for Kids Child Care and Early Development topic pages](#)

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Jan Richter is the advocacy director for Connect for Kids.

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