

**New York State Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core:
A Resource Set for Teachers**
CREATING RICH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY ENVIRONMENTS FOR YOUNG LEARNERS



Contents:

PART I. TEACHER RESOURCES

1. Key Points about Creating Rich Language and Literacy Environments

This information can be the basis for a discussion between teacher groups, coaches, and instructional support personnel.

2. Planning Ahead: Set the Stage

This section provides specific ideas to help teachers plan ahead as they build a rich literacy environment to support oral language, phonological awareness, print awareness, and alphabet knowledge.

3. Make Time to Talk Language Building Tips

This tip sheet is designed to help remind teachers and other adults about creating opportunities for children to engage in the kind of talk that builds language and thinking skills.

4. Rich Literacy Environment Checklist

This checklist can be used by teachers or administrators to identify the key features in their classrooms that support a rich literacy classroom environment to promote early literacy learning.

5. Teacher Observation and Self-Reflection Exercise

This observation and reflection exercise provides an opportunity for teachers to observe, evaluate and reflect on the hands-on literacy materials and resources used by children in their classroom.

PART 2: ADMINISTRATOR TOOL AND REFERENCES

6. School-wide Reflection Worksheet: Program Improvement, Resources and Supports

The last section of this set includes a tool, School-wide Reflection Worksheet, which is designed for school leaders and teacher teams to reflect on the systems and supports that promote rich language and literacy environments that are aligned to the Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core.

PART 3. REFERENCES

7. Resource Set References

Support provided by:



NORTHEAST COMPREHENSIVE CENTER

1. Key Points about Creating Rich Language and Literacy Environments

Introduction

The classroom environment in the early years is not only important in terms of health and safety, it's also one of the most important instructional teaching tools a teacher can use! The environment is one of the ways teachers create dynamic learning experiences. Children construct knowledge actively by integrating new ideas and concepts into existing understandings. They build understanding by applying new ideas through routines, practice, discourse, experimentation, investigation and play. It is the classroom environment – the classroom organization, schedule, routines, emotional climate, layout, furnishings, resources and materials – that provides the hands-on experiences children need to learn bestⁱ. Throughout the program day, teachers play an essential role in creating experiences by intentionally designing and developing the classroom environment to support children's learning.

In this resource set, we will take a focused look at how to further enrich the environment to support the *Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core* in the Communication, Language, and Literacy domain.

Focusing on Rich Language and Literacy Environments

Early reading success is a strong predictor of academic success in later grades, and the early childhood years (birth through age 8) are critical ones for literacy development. After grade three, demands on the student change from "learning to read" to "reading to learn," as reading becomes a fundamental means to acquire new knowledge about all subjects.

Based on what we understand from research, literacy development begins long before children begin formal instruction in elementary school. It develops on a path where children acquire literacy skills in a variety of ways and at different ages through exposure and experiences. The

Through the environment, teachers:

- Send specific, concrete messages to children about what is expected and valued;
- Influence learning by the inclusion of specific materials and equipment;
- Support and extend curriculum and instruction;
- Build a sense of community;
- Create a welcoming and pleasing climate; and
- Attend to the health and safety of children in the group¹.

When teachers attend to all of these factors, they create an environment that is responsive to the way young children learn and develop across the domains of learning.

early years are also when children can foster interest and motivation that support literacy skills. Early behaviors such as looking at and handling books, engaging in expansive conversations, and handling writing and drawing materials are important parts of children's literacy development. Positive and responsive social interactions with caring adults and consistent exposure to varied literacy materials nourish literacy development. Language- and literacy-rich environments offer daily, extended conversations with adults about topics that are meaningful and of interest to children and expose children to multitudes of literacy materials.

Components of a Rich Literacy Environment

In a language- and literacy-rich environment, adults ensure that children engage in one-to-one conversations about everyday life-about people, events and activities that children find interesting. Environments include daily reading, talking, experimentation with written materials, book talk (characters, action and plot), and dramatic play. In this environment there are many opportunities for children to see how print is used for many purposes. Print and language become a functional part of daily play and practiceⁱⁱ.

In a rich literacy classroom, you will find:

- Arrangements and selection of materials that engage children's interest in exploration.
- Children's work and products displayed in the classroom.
- Libraries with an assortment of fiction and non-fiction age-appropriate books, which are displayed attractively, rotated often, connected to instructional themes, culturally minded, and accessible to children.
- Writing and text materials available in many different parts of the classroom; including authentic materials in play and learning centers (e.g., books about construction and large graph paper in the building/blocks center; coupons/menus/writing pads in sociodramatic play center).
- Alphabet materials, including posted letters, labels on key objects in the environment, alphabet manipulatives, and alphabet books.
- Text materials connected to children's linguistic and cultural backgrounds and interests.
- A wide range of materials useful for creative expression, e.g., art materials, dramatic play propsⁱⁱⁱ.

Teachers who develop rich literacy environments intentionally plan and facilitate language and literacy instruction that provides ample opportunities for extended discussions through key instructional strategies such as:

- Spending deliberate and recurring time in one-on-one conversations with children and creating opportunities for peer-to-peer talk (during structured and unstructured time);
- Using research-based book sharing strategies (e.g., interactive and dialogic reading)¹ with books of interest with children;
- Intentionally designing play and learning spaces that incorporate literacy activities;
- Demonstrating the uses of literacy throughout the day (e.g., modeling literacy behaviors, writing lists together, dictating children’s spoken words, charting information, reading for information); and
- Maintaining a joyful, playful atmosphere around literacy activities.

Conclusion

Teachers and administrators play a vital role in helping ensure that the preschool classroom is developmentally-appropriate by ensuring that the environment is full of opportunities to practice and play with language and literacy materials. For preschoolers, play is the context for learning – it is the route to experiencing the world, it connects the physical world with the world of ideas and symbols (including letters and numbers), and is the opportunity to build on their own experiences by interacting with adults and more experienced children.

Key Research that Supports the Importance of Talking with Young Children:

- When adults purposefully talk more with children using longer and more complex words, children develop larger and more robust vocabularies (Hart & Risley, 1999; Hoff & Naigles, 2002)
- When children have larger vocabularies, they become better readers in middle school (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998)
- When adults talk with children in a responsive and sensitive way, they encourage children’s social and emotional development (Ensor & Hughes, 2008; Harris, 2005)

From “Talking With Young Children: How Teachers Encourage Learning”

- Children with strong oral language and literacy experiences in the early years are more likely to be successful beginning readers and their achievement is more likely to persist (Sprira, Bracken, & Fischel, 2005)

¹ <http://dwwlibrary.wested.org/library/3-interactive-dialogic-reading>

2. Planning Ahead: Setting the Stage to Support Language and Literacy Development

Learning Centers in a Prekindergarten classroom are active spaces for practicing, creating, and exploring – all within the context of play.

Teachers create active spaces by:

- Ensuring adequate time, space, materials and flexible, heterogeneous grouping
- Developing rich content linked to themes (preparatory experiences, prompts, materials)
- Setting up environments for extended, focused play
- Providing a range of materials to meet various developmental levels and needs
- Engaging in play with children, scaffolding experiences, engaging shy or timid children, promoting curiosity, and extending language
- Providing for different types of play (functional, constructive, sociodramatic, games with

This section provides tips to help teachers plan ahead as they build a rich literacy environment to support oral language, phonological awareness, print awareness, and alphabet knowledge. Below are ideas for creating the physical environment for learning to support key language and literacy skills. These ideas should be nestled within short- and long-term sequences of experiences and skills, following a language model and curriculum to guide the introduction of experiences, words, and concepts.

Oral Language

Create spaces and make time for conversation. Arrange space to facilitate quiet conversation, making space for one-to-one (two comfortable pillows/chairs) and small group (table and couch) conversations. Set daily routines that allow for conversations with small groups of children and with individual children each day. Plan opportunities to interact with children for extended periods during: indoor/outdoor play, learning center time, and while engaging in activities.

Provide rich material for interactive conversation. Set up materials for play that will maximize the use of language as children play with each other and with adults. Create centers and provide items that shadow real-world settings (e.g., store, post office, home, restaurant, fire station). Provide authentic materials that give children lots to talk about and include key literacy props in each center (e.g., clipboard, notepad, drawing materials, maps, sign board, menus, etc.) Introduce new items to keep centers fresh, interesting, and connected to instructional themes.

Select organizing themes. Select themes with substance that provide ample opportunities to build experiences and centers over time (e.g., harvest rather than pumpkins). More robust themes provide more opportunity for rich language and discussions. Provide repeated opportunities for children to engage in the

same theme. Use the theme as a foundation for new vocabulary, writing opportunities and book sharing.

Plan materials to support shared book reading. Read the book you plan to share to identify new words you will want to point out. Identify in advance questions to ask the children (e.g., “what do you think will happen if...”, “have we ever seen this before...”, “can you tell about a time you felt the way this character feels...”). Think about props (such as hand puppets, felt board/pieces, flip chart) that may help you and the children tell the story.

Phonological Awareness

Build a collection of games, poems, music, props, finger plays, tongue twisters, and books with rhymes. Working with sounds should be fun for you and children. Use rhymes, jump rope jingles, songbooks, music, poems and games that require active listening. Music helps to support “feeling” and remembering the patterns of language: chant, tap your toes, use your hands, snap your fingers, bang a drum. Adding movement to games and rhymes helps to support the pattern of rhyme. Use safety mirrors to help children see how their lips, teeth, and tongue make specific sounds. Use plumbing pipe pieces so children can hear themselves speak.

Print Awareness

Present books and print materials in an appealing way. Display books and print materials around the classroom where they have a meaningful relationship to activities (e.g., a menu in the restaurant area, construction books in the building/blocks area, pet care books in the rescue center). Collect and display books that relate to current classroom themes. Feature a modest number of books and rotate books often where children have access to them. Be sure to include materials that represent and reflect the language and culture of the children in the class.

Use embedded opportunities to raise print awareness. Incorporate print awareness into daily routines and learning experiences. For example, during shared book reading, use a flipchart to dictate children’s responses and read back what you write while pointing to each word. Ask children about artwork they create and write what they say.

Incorporate printed material in play and learning centers. Incorporate a wide variety of authentic print items in play and learning centers. For example, organizing labels, charts with directions, placemats with names, related books, magazines etc.

Plan and incorporate activities that involve reading and writing. Some activities have high potential to involve reading and writing of several types – and others can be enhanced with literacy ideas. For example, if the class is making dough, the group can review the recipe

together, put a list of ingredients together, check supplies, develop a picture sequence of preparation steps, and then follow the steps.

Incorporate meaningful print into the classroom environment. Take advantage of opportunities to use labels in the classroom in functional ways. Post children's names to identify belongings, provide a reminder of the daily list of helpers, label pictures and photographs. Post a list of classroom rules that are partly in words and partly in pictures and display functional signs that identify quiet areas, remind about hand washing, or that show in word/picture format that steps for playing games.

Encourage all types of writing. Provide a variety of drawing and writing supplies and place them strategically in the classroom. Build writing opportunities into the daily schedule – for children to practice writing regardless of where they are in their development and for children to see you writing and dictating their words. Utilize technology supports when possible – as a teaching tool and to dictate children's stories.

Alphabetic Knowledge

Collect and provide letter forms in many different materials. The goal is to have children develop a solid memory for the letter symbol – recognizing the letter in different sizes and materials and in upper- and lower-case forms. Letters can be made from wood, foam, plastic, tiles, magnetic letters, letter stamps, sponges, cookie cutters, clay forms, felt board, alphabet displays and puzzles.

Create letter displays. Develop several different types of displays of letters at children's eye level. Write and post children's names. Post one or more sets of letters of the alphabet (A-Z) with related pictures familiar to children.

Build a collection of alphabet books. Organize alphabet books on a special shelf in the classroom. Use the books when you are teaching letter names and forms as well as in games that challenge children to find particular letters.

This tip sheet was adapted from material developed by RMC Research Corporation under a contract from the U.S. Department of Education's Even Start Family Literacy Program called, Early Childhood Language and Literacy in Action (July 2004)

3. Make Time to Talk Language Building Tips

We know that it's important to talk every day with each child, using the kind of talk that builds language and thinking skills. The phrase MAKE TIME TO TALK is to help you remember things you can do when talking with children to help them learn new vocabulary and how to use language to express their ideas and needs, and that helps them have fun with language.

M	Mealtimes are natural opportunities for individual and small group conversations with children. Let children guide the discussion topics while you expand ideas, and draw in all children.
A	Ask thought-provoking questions that encourage children to think – questions that involve description, analysis, prediction, imagining things that could happen.
K	Kneel or squat down to make eye contact with children as you talk with them; giving them your full attention.
E	Extend your conversation with children. Conversations should go back and forth with each person responding to the other speaker at least a few times.
T	Themes help children understand and remember the meanings of new words and information, especially when you build activities around a theme or project.
I	Involve each child in the group in individual, extended conversations every day – using their name often to promote a sense of belonging.
M	Make connections with books or stories the class is familiar with, recent classroom activities, and children's lives to help build meaning.
E	Expand on children's language by repeating it with extensions (adding descriptive words, using words correctly that the child used incorrectly by repeating their statement), adding to or building on children's ideas.
T	Tone of voice is important when talking with children. Listen to yourself from the child's perspective and make sure your tone and words are in sync.
O	Observe what children are doing and how they are feeling. Be responsive to children's interests and concerns in conversations to build social understanding and engage in problem solving.
T	Texts, such as books, posters, newspapers, and magazines provide shared topics to talk about. Read them with children, asking questions and discussing them as you go along.
A	Act out stories with the children, re-using words from books/stories you read aloud or activities from class.
L	Language should include rich, varied vocabulary in talking with children that build on classroom themes and experiences.
K	Keep the conversation going by pausing long enough for children to think something through, then ask questions, expand or comment.

This is an adaptation of Make Time to Talk, which was based on the National Institute for Literacy publication Learning to Talk and Listen (2009), and the National Early Literacy Panel Report (2009). This publication was produced under National Institute for Literacy Contract No. ED-04-CO-))41 for RMC Research Corporation. To download the original PDF, visit https://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/language_tipsheet.pdf.

4. Rich Literacy Environment Checklist

Use this checklist to identify the key features in your classroom that support a rich literacy classroom environment to promote early literacy learning.

Yes	No	Somewhat	
Engaging Reading Material and Book Sharing			
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Daily book sharing read-alouds provide opportunities for children to hear and see printed words (e.g., big-book sharing, teacher questions, pointing to words, calling out sounds, dictating children's thoughts)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Books in the reading/library area are rotated often, with new choices every two weeks or so; includes selections related to the instructional theme
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Books are at the child's level, organized, and of interest to children
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	The library area showcases varied texts at varied levels (e.g., informational texts, picture books, story books, poetry, wordless books, books made by children, books in languages spoken by children and their families)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Children have opportunities to tell or re-tell stories using sociodramatic play, pictures, flannel boards, or cards
Meaningful Print Awareness			
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Key objects are labeled through the classroom; writing is clear and uses appropriate upper and lower case lettering
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Artwork includes quotes from the children about their work and experiences
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Dictation is obtained by asking children open-ended questions and is on display
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Rebus charts and pictures illustrate common classroom routines (e.g., hand washing, daily schedule)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Children participate in making charts and graphs to learn concepts from instructional units
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Children learn letters with real, concrete objects that the children explore and interact with (e.g., magnetic letters, clay manipulatives, cookie cutters)
Exploring Writing			
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Children's attempts to write are acknowledged and celebrated at all times (no corrections should be made at this level)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Children engage in story-writing and journaling, as appropriate (e.g., writing, painting, drawing materials, magazine cut-out and pasting, teacher/aid dictation)
Integration within Learning Centers and Dramatic Play			
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	All classroom learning centers integrate authentic literacy materials and resources (e.g., writing materials); and provide specific opportunities for using language
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Socio-dramatic play areas include authentic literacy materials and resources (e.g., check books, receipts, appointment books, play money, labeled shelves/trays, signs, clipboards, message pads)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Technology/computer center includes opportunities for listening, following directions, use writing materials, include printer
Opportunities for Adult-Child Interactions			
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Teachers and other adults engage in frequent, extended conversations with children one-on-one throughout the day and across the curriculum
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Teachers and other adults model uses of literacy frequently, explaining what they are doing as they go

Teacher Observation and Self-Reflection Exercise (Activity 2)

Evaluate:

1. Did the literacy-related materials identified seem adequate within each observed learning center? Did the activities relate to the theme and instructional goals and did the materials available engage the children?
2. Did all children seem to understand how to use the materials?
3. In what ways were children supported to use the materials (e.g., adults engaged children in conversations, adult modeled how to use, modified or adapted for special needs or language needs, rebus chart showed activity steps)?

Reflect:

1. What materials could I add to the learning centers? What materials/resources might I need to rotate in and out of the learning centers to promote children's interest and use of literacy materials?
2. In what ways might I model how to use the literacy materials in the learning centers?

6. School-wide Reflection Worksheet

School-wide Reflection Worksheet Program Improvement, Resources and Supports: Language and Literacy Rich Environments				
	CURRENT STATUS			Next Steps
	Already in Place	N/A	Area to Develop	
<p>A. Program Leadership Principal/site manager:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identifies professional development, materials and other resources to support the development of rich language and literacy environments. 2. Ensures equitable access of materials and resources across all preschool classrooms. 3. Is familiar with what a language and literacy-rich environment in preschool looks and sounds like. 				
<p>B. Research-Based and Effective Curriculum and Instruction in Support of State and District Standards Principals/site managers ensure that:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All preschool staff receive training about how to build rich language and literacy environments. 2. Preschool staff have access and resources to select books and materials to support instruction. 3. The physical space supports children's a rich language and literacy environment, e.g., cozy spots, libraries, learning centers, resources, props, manipulatives, play materials. 				

	CURRENT STATUS			Next Steps
	Already in Place	N/A	Area to Develop	
<p>C. Supporting Teachers in the Classroom</p> <p>Principals/site managers ensure that:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teachers have opportunities and access to coaches or mentors to strengthen language and literacy environments, including how to use materials and resources, engage children, and set-up learning environments. 2. Teachers receive feedback about their implementation of practices and techniques that support language and literacy. 3. Paraprofessionals and volunteers are included in training and feedback opportunities. 				
<p>D. Engaging Families and Community</p> <p>Principals/site managers ensure that:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. School/preschool program has ongoing and reciprocal communication with parents about language and literacy. 5. School/preschool program provides information to families in ways they understand about language and literacy and ways they can support children’s development. 6. School/preschool program provides paid time for staff to learn about children’s interests and activities. 				

7. Resource Set References

Abraham, C., *Literacy: Creating a print-rich environment*. Texas Child Care/Fall 2003

Center for Early Literacy Learning, <http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/>

Christ, T., & X.C. Wang. (2010). *Research in Review. Bridging the vocabulary gap: What the research tells us about vocabulary instruction in early childhood*. *Young Children* 65 (4): 84-91. www.naeyc.org/yc/pastissues.

Roskos, K.A., J.F. Christie, & D.J. Richgels. (2003). *The essentials of early literacy instruction*. *Young Children* 58 (2): 52-60. Online: www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/200303.

Spira, E., Bracken, S., & Fischel, J. (2005). *Predicting improvement after first-grade reading difficulties: The effects of oral language, emergent literacy, and behavior skills*. *Developmental Psychology*, 41, 225-234.

Snow, C., Burns, S., Griffin, P., *Language and Literacy Environments in Preschools*. Reading Rockets. <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/language-and-literacy-environments-preschools>

Test, J., Cunningham, D, Lee, A. (2010). *Talking With Young Children: How Teachers Encourage Learning*. *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, Volume 38, Number 3.

The University of the State of New York. (1998). *Preschool planning guide: Building a foundation for development of language and literacy in the early years*. Albany, NY: The State Education Department.

The University of the State of New York. *New York State Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core*. Albany, NY: The State Education Department.

ⁱ Environment: Effective Environments in Prekindergarten through 3rd Grade: building a strong foundation for the common core learning standards. New York State Early Childhood Advisory Council. September 2014.

ⁱⁱ Jerlean Daniels, Theresa Clarke and Mark Ouellette. Issue Brief, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2000

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Education, Planning and Evaluation Service, *Building Strong Foundations for Early Learning: Guide to High-Quality Early Childhood Education Programs*, by M. Christine Dwyer, Robin Chait and Patricia McKee. Washington, DC: 2000.