Promoting Language and Vocabulary Development for All Children

HEAD START CONTEXT FOR LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Selected Relevant Performance Standards:

The grantee’s approach to child development and education must:
- 1304.21(a)(1)(i) “be developmentally and linguistically appropriate, recognizing that children have individual rates of development as well as individual interests, temperaments, languages, cultural backgrounds, and learning styles”

- 1304.21(a)(4)(iii) “promoting language use and interaction among children and between children and adults”

- 1304.21(a)(4)(iv) “supporting emerging literacy and numeracy development through materials and activities according to the developmental level of each child”

The grantee and delegate agencies
- 1304.21(a)(3)(i)(E) “must support social and emotional development by supporting and respecting the home language, culture…”

Staff and consultants
- 1304.52(b)(4) “must be able to serve and effectively communicate, to the extent feasible, with children and families with no or limited English proficiency”
Child Outcomes
Framework Indicators:
Domain: Language Development

- Demonstrates increasing ability to attend to and understand conversations, stories, songs, and poems
- Shows progress in understanding and following simple and multiple-step directions
- *Understands and uses an increasingly complex and varied vocabulary
- *For non-English-speaking children, progresses in listening to and understanding English
- Develops increasing abilities to understand and use language to communicate information, experiences, ideas, feelings, opinions, needs, questions, and for other varied purposes
- Progresses in abilities to initiate and respond appropriately in conversation and discussions with peers and adults
- Progresses in clarity of pronunciation and towards speaking in sentences of increasing length and grammatical complexity
- *For non-English-speaking children, progresses in speaking English

*legislatively mandated

Relevant PRISM Questions:

- How does the grantee ensure that individualization addresses child interests, learning and development, temperament, language, cultural background, and learning style?
- How does the grantee individualize the program of child development to meet each child’s unique needs, as determined in consultation with the family?

Head Start Definition of Curriculum:

Written document (curriculum) that serves as a road map for implementing a quality child development and education program should include: GERMS

G goals
E experiences (-vs- activities)
R role of the adults
M materials consistent with the Head Start Performance Standards
S sound child development principles

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Research Review: Vocabulary and Language Development

Promoting young children’s vocabulary and language development is everyone’s responsibility.

• Age 0-5 is an optimal developmental phase for oral language and we know that this development continues over time. It is therefore crucial that children become exposed to multiple experiences and opportunities to engage in language-rich activities and interactions (Garcia, 1996).

• We know that by kindergarten a language gap exists for low-income children. This gap has been attributed to exposure to fewer and less sophisticated words during everyday conversations (Hart & Risley, 1995).

“Oral language is the foundation for literacy development” (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006, p.2).

• Children’s experiences with listening and speaking provide essential knowledge that supports reading (Pellegrini and Galda, 1994). Listening comprehension and oral language vocabulary are important components and strong predictors of later reading achievement (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006).

• Young children who lag in vocabulary development are more likely to experience reading failure later in school. Low-income children are especially vulnerable to a “Fourth-Grade Slump”, as understanding of what the child reads becomes essential for reading success (Chall & Jacobs, 2003, p. 14).

Children who are most at risk for later reading difficulties are those who did not develop adequate vocabulary and language skills in any language.

• The knowledge children gain through their first language helps them read, write, and speak in English faster than if they did not have a strong foundation in their home language (Cummins, 2000; Baker, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). The concepts, language skills, and literacy skills that children learn in their home language will transfer to their second language.

Children benefit from language and vocabulary experiences in their home language while being exposed to English.

• Children who learn English while remaining fluent in their home language are more able to benefit from their families strengths and assets (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Home language fluency supports “selective acculturation”, by which children can use resources and assets from both their home culture and U.S. culture to help them succeed.

• Both the child’s home language and second language nurture one another when the educational environment permits children access to both languages (Cummins, 2000; Baker, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

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Questions are an important tool for teachers to use. They help children develop vocabulary and language. As children develop their language skills, their ability to understand questions grows and they are able to respond to increasingly sophisticated questions.

1. The simplest type of questions, **“Yes/no” questions**, is appropriate for very young children and children who are just beginning to learn a new language.
   - “Are you ready to go outside?”
   - “Did you think the clown was funny?”
   - “Do you like Tamales?”

2. As children increase language skills, they can answer simple closed **“what” questions** that can be answered by one or a few words. “What’ questions can be answered by children under three and children who are beginning to understand and use a new language.
   - What is that?
   - What is the frog doing?
   - What do you hear?
   - What color is this?
   - What is it made of?

3. **Open ended-questions** require an elaborate answer and encourage the child to develop more complex thoughts and sentences. The easiest are those that relate to the **“here and now”**. Most children at about three years begin to be able to answer these questions. These questions are also helpful for children who are gaining skill in learning a new language.
   - What is happening?
   - What part did you like the best?
   - How did the butterfly get out?
   - What did you do first?
   - How did you do that?
   - What materials do you need?

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4. **Distancing questions** ask children to relate the ideas and words to experiences that they cannot currently see, those experiences that are in the past, in the future, or fictional. When adults tell stories about their childhood or when children tell what they did yesterday, they use **decontextualized language**. This type of language is the most beneficial to cognitive and literacy development because it requires children to think beyond the immediate situation. Questions that draw on children’s own experiences are an excellent way to help a child move from using “here and now” language to decontextualized language. Four and five year olds and for children who are facile in their second (or third…) language are able to answer these types of questions.

- When you went to the fair what did you see?
- What will happen next?
- How do you think she feels?
- Have you ever gone to the Dentist? What happened?
- What do you think would happen if..?
- Why do you think he did that?
- What are some other ways to use…?
A Six-Step Process for
Intentionally Promoting Vocabulary Development

Step 1:
As you develop lesson plans, identify opportunities to use new and unique words.
- A webbing tool (see Handout #X) can help to brainstorm ideas.
- Home visitors should develop the list of opportunities and unique words with families so that this effort can be carried out jointly.
- For infants and toddlers, and children with significant developmental delays, think about the experiences and words that will stretch the numbers of words that the child is exposed to.
- Think about family members and other people in the community who could contribute ideas, visit the class, and share experiences, photos, or items about your topic.
- The more “real” and interesting you can make the words, the more likely it is that children will remember and use them. Include photos, objects, and activities that make the words real. This is especially important for children with learning disabilities such as developmental delay and autism.

Step 2:
List new words that relate to the week’s activities that can be incorporated into daily conversations.
- In children’s books you will use, find new and interesting words within the text or that might describe the pictures or actions.
- Think about different ways and words to describe the activity, adding more unique words as the children’s vocabulary increases.
  - “The big red car moves slower than the little blue car.”
  - “The cedar trees have prickly needles instead of leaves.”
  - “The temperature of the water feels colder today than yesterday.”
- In multi-lingual groups, ask parents or staff who speak the children’s languages for unique words the children and families might use to describe the activities.
- Each adult in the child's life should use the words that are most familiar to them, to model appropriate pronunciation and use.
- All adults should be made aware of the different words in different languages to understand the child’s attempts to build and use his vocabulary.

Step 3:
List both closed- and open-ended questions that adults can use to encourage children to use descriptive and new words to talk about their experiences.
- Include a range of types of questions to allow for both success and growth in children at all developmental levels.
  - “Which ball do you want to use?”
  - “Do you remember what that was called?”
  - “What did the flying insect look like?”
  - “Why do you think the fish swim that way?”
  - “What do you think will happen when we combine the colors?”
A Six-Step Process for Intentionally Promoting Vocabulary Development (Continued)

**Step 4:**
Share the list of activities, new words, and questions with parents and other adults who are in the children's lives.

- Post the words around the room or on a bulletin board to remind adults to use them.
- Send home a page with information, key words, and suggested questions so that parents can support their children's learning (see Handout #X for a sample form).
- If you have children who receive speech services, share these words with the therapist who can support their use as well.
- For infants, toddlers, and children with developmental delays, let parents know new items that the child shows interest in or new words she is trying to say.

**Step 5:**
Use the words and questions during conversations with children.

- Model the use of the words in descriptions and conversations with children and adults.
  - “Today we saw an aquarium with multicolored fish.”
  - “I like using liquid glue for our collage, but you have to use the littlest droplets or it gets all over your hands!”
  - “The swallows are gathering twigs to build nests for their babies.”
- Use questions intentionally and appropriately.
  - Predicting what will happen
  - Reviewing what has happened
  - Guessing why or how something happens or is the way it is
  - For infants, toddlers, and children with limited or no communication skills, ask the questions and follow by waiting at least 5 seconds for a gesture, eye gaze, expression, or other body movement and then assign meaning to the response.
    - “Do you want to go outside?”
    - Wait at least 5 seconds to allow the child to respond.
    - “OK! I see you're wiggling around and ready to go!”

**Step 6:**
Talk to family members about how children are doing with the new words.

- When you see parents in passing, use the new words in conversation.
  - “Today we had fun with the baby doll and Maggie said ‘beebee’ while she carried it around!”
  - “Did Tomas tell you about the foliage we saw on our walk yesterday?”
  - “If you have time, please come see our photographs of the different kinds of birds we’ve been talking about, like ostriches, peacocks, flamingos, and emus!”
- Involve families in the activities.
  - “Did you and Ricky see any clouds on the way to school or on the way home? Were they fluffy or skinny? Were they dark or light? I hope we don’t have a thunderstorm!”
  - “Do you have boxes at home that Jennifer can use to build structures? Even if they are shoeboxes, cereal boxes, or microwave dinner boxes, or even if they're all different sizes, she can use them to create towers, bridges, and skyscrapers.”
- Ask parents if they have experiences to share.
  - “Tell Melody about any times you’ve visited a farm, seen farm animals, or if you’ve ever been around farm equipment, like tractors, combines, irrigation systems, etc.”
  - “Since we're talking about transportation, tell Mike about the different kinds of cars you’ve had and the kinds of vehicles other family members have, like semi-trucks, tractors, motorcycles, and bicycles, and if you or any family members have ever ridden a train, airplane, cabs, or bus.”

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Definition of Terms
Language and Literacy Development

Alphabetic principle refers to the concept that speech can be turned into print, print can be turned into speech, and letters represent the sounds in the language. This understanding is critical to learning to read in English and other alphabetic languages.

Contextualized language - which is tied to the present (for example- Tell me about what you are drawing). This is contrast to decontextualized language. (Dickinson & Tabors, 1991).

Culturally responsive - culturally responsive programs acknowledge that families have diverse backgrounds, language, beliefs, values, and experiences; they also acknowledge that families want to be involved in their children’s schooling and thus provide access to such opportunities (Madrigal, 2005). Culturally responsive programs can become instrumental in valuing parents’ teaching strategies, as well as building on existing networks, families’ primary language, and family literacy activities (Lareau, 1994; Madrigal, 2005; Shanahan, Mulhern, & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995), while at the same time empowering parents through the process of acquiring the cultural capital of the schools (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Cochran, 1988; Comer, 1984).

Decontextualized language is language that reflects past, future, or fictitious events (for example- What did you see when you went to the fair). Questions that encourage decontextualized language require children to represent ideas—a process that is important to the development of reading comprehension (Dickinson & Tabors, 1991).

Early literacy/Emergent literacy - children begin the process of learning literacy at home, before starting school. For example, children begin to explore the print that surrounds them on signs, cereal packages, and television advertisement (Clay, 1991; Purcell-Gates, 1996). They begin to write in scribbles and are also developing concepts about print (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Concepts such as what is right-side-up for a book, what on a page is print, and that print carries meaning are all essential to learning to read and write (Ferriero & Teberosky, 1982). This emergent or beginning literacy perspective suggests, “growth in this period of development occurs without the necessity for an overriding emphasis on formal instruction” (Teale, 1987, p. 47; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Instead, early literacy gradually emerges in everyday meaningful interactions and in the contexts of home and community.

Family - the social group in which the child is cared for and grows up in, be it nuclear, single parent, or extended (Hannon, 1998, p.122).

Family literacy - how children, parents, significant caregivers, and extended family use literacy at home and in the community. Literacy efforts or activities involving more than one generation. A family literacy program usually has three components, 1- literacy for children; 2- literacy for parents; 3- and instruction for adults on how to foster literacy in their children or other young relatives.
Definition of Terms
Language and Literacy Development (Continued)

**Home Language** - children’s primary language. Language spoken at home amongst family members

**Home literacy** - are naturally occurring literacy practices within the home, family, and community (Wasik, Dobbins, Herrmann, 2001, p. 445). These activities might include, for example, writing letters, making lists, reading directions, reading environmental print, or sharing stories, songs, and ideas (Paratore, 1995).

**Letter knowledge** - knowledge that letters represent a written form of communication

**Literacy** - activities and skills that communicate and represent the world which are associated directly and indirectly with the use of print and other symbolic media. Literacy includes reading, listening and telling oral stories, writing, creating and appreciating art, interpreting text, etc… This concept should not only include the definition of an individual skill set/abilities/knowledge, but also the linguistic and social aspects tied to this term.

**Phonemic Awareness** - the awareness of sounds (phonemes) that make up spoken words. Such awareness does not appear when young children learn to talk; the ability is not necessary for speaking and understanding spoken language. However, phonemic awareness is important for learning to read. In alphabetic languages, letters (and letter clusters) represent phonemes, and in order to learn the correspondences between letters and sounds, one must have some understanding of the notion that words are made up of phonemes.

**Phonological awareness** is a broad term that refers to the awareness of the sound structure of language in general. It means knowing that words are made up of smaller units of sounds, such as syllables and phonemes. Knowing that words are made up of smaller sounds helps young children in the early stages of reading and writing as they learn to match sounds in spoken words to written letters of the alphabet.

**Primary language** - the language that a person speaks best and is most comfortable speaking

**Sequential language development** - children acquiring a second language after age 3 and at birth or soon after birth

**Simultaneous language development** - Children acquiring more than one language before age 3
References


References (Continued)


Children explore their environment and build the foundations for language and vocabulary development by participating in shared learning experiences with adults.

The following strategies were adopted from the Head Start Leaders Guide to Positive Child Outcomes and Steps to Success: an Instructional Design for Early Literacy Mentor-Coaches in Head Start and Early Head Start.

Strategies for Promoting Beginning and Early Language and Vocabulary Development at Home

What parents/caregivers/family members can do at home to promote language/vocabulary development:

- Listen and talk with children
- Show interest in what a child says or asks
- Engage children in meaningful conversations
- Label and give names of things/objects in the environment
- Read and re-read stories that have rich vocabulary and uncommon words. Talking about what was read will boost vocabulary
- Encourage children to recount experiences and describe ideas and events that are important to them
- Use your home/primary language to build a foundation for language development
- Expand the child's vocabulary by using different words with the same meaning
- Engage in oral story-telling
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**What teachers/agency staff can do at school to promote language/vocabulary development:**

- Establish a language-rich environment
- Plan curriculum-related conversations and focus on building vocabulary
- Use new vocabulary in meaningful ways
- Draw on children's direct experiences
- Make communication fun by engaging children in language games
- Support the use of more complex language
- Build on children's background/home knowledge in ways that are meaningful
- Promote play activities around language experience such as dramatic play areas, materials, themes
  - Introduce new words, including the kinds of multi-syllable words that are not commonly used by preschoolers
  - Talk about a book before reading it. Ask the children to predict from the title or cover what the story will be about or what might happen next
  - Talk with children after reading the story. Ask them to retell the story or act it out. Encourage the talk about the characters and events. Answer their questions and respond to their comments

National Head Start Family Literacy Center
Goal: Build Children’s Vocabulary and Language Skills

New Words: ______________________________________

Open Ended Questions: ______________________________________

Large Group/Small Group
Outdoor Area
Discovery/Science Area
Art
Literacy Corner/Writing Center
Blocks Area
Table Toy/Manipulatives

Experience