

INTRODUCTION

Alphabet knowledge means understanding that letters are symbols which represent sounds and that letters can be combined together to create written words. A symbol is an object, word, gesture, sound, or image that stands for something else. Early on, infants start to learn that symbols can be used to communicate meaning. As they engage in everyday social interactions with adults, infants begin to assign meaning to their experiences.¹ A special blanket or soft toy can mean emotional security and comfort for an infant; a nod of the head signifies approval; and a logo or picture on a food box can promise a favorite treat.

Children with disabilities who are [dual language learners](#) (DLLs) can and do learn two writing systems.² Languages may differ in letters and sounds but the basic idea that print is speech written down is similar for all languages.

ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE, EARLY WRITING, DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS, AND CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES: WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Young children with disabilities who are DLLs can learn print-related skills, such as alphabet knowledge and name writing, in inclusive preschool settings, when given appropriate instructional support and communication tools.³

Education staff (e.g., teachers, home visitors, family childcare providers) and families help infants and toddlers learn that print has meaning by using graphic symbols in everyday activities in children's home languages and in English.⁴ Preschoolers with disabilities benefit from more structured activities that focus on letters and sounds, especially when provided in a home language, such as Spanish, that uses an alphabetic system. These learning activities are most effective when educators monitor children's progress on a regular basis and adjust instruction accordingly.⁵



- 1 Joanne Knapp-Philo, Angela Notari-Syverson, and Kimberly K. Stice. 2005. "Tools of Literacy for Infants and Toddlers." In *Young Exceptional Children monograph series no. 7: Supporting Early Literacy Development in Young Children*, ed. Eva M. Horn & Hazel Jones (Missoula, MT: Division for Early Childhood, 2005), 43–58.
- 2 Alisha K. Wackerle-Hollman, Lillian K. Durán, and Alejandra Miranda. "Early Literacy Skill Growth in Spanish-Speaking Children With and at Risk for Disabilities in Early Childhood." *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 40, no. 1 (May 2020):, 24–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0271121420906469>.
- 3 Evette Edmister, Amy Staples, Beth Huber, and Jennifer Walz Garrett. "Creating Writing Opportunities for Young Children." *Young Exceptional Children* 16, no. 3 (January 2013): 24–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1096250612473128>; Wackerle-Hollman, Durán, and Alejandra Miranda, "Early Literacy Skill Growth," 24–38.
- 4 Knapp-Philo, Notari-Syverson, and Stice, "Tools of Literacy," 45–58.
- 5 Wackerle-Hollman, Durán, and Alejandra Miranda, "Early Literacy Skill Growth," 24–38.

Print-focused conversations. Interventions where education staff engage young children in conversations about features of words, names of letters, and concepts can significantly boost alphabet knowledge for children with disabilities. Discussing letters and words while reading books aloud has been especially effective in increasing alphabet knowledge for children with disabilities.⁶



Adult-mediated early writing. Children with disabilities are likely to need explicit and deliberate adult mediation to engage in emergent writing. Education staff can make writing easier by modifying tools. They can encourage children to write by making comments about children’s drawings, suggesting topics, asking questions, and providing feedback.⁷ Children are often most interested in learning letters contained in their names.⁸ Education staff can use simple strategies to promote children’s writing of their names for different purposes and using a variety of tools, such as pencils, crayons, magic markers, magnetic letters, and stickers. Learning to write can be a challenging task for some children. Adults can celebrate small accomplishments with the child and share positive and share positive feedback to build confidence and help the child persist in the task.

WHY ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE AND EARLY WRITING ARE IMPORTANT FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES WHO ARE DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Alphabet knowledge provides a structure to connect letters to sounds, which is important for all reading and writing. Children with disabilities and children who are DLLs often need frequent and explicit instruction to engage in print-related activities in the classroom or in the home.⁹ Knowing that print and other graphic symbols have meaning may be especially important for children with severe communication impairments who often rely on pictures, signs, printed words, and visual icons as primary communication tools.¹⁰



WHAT CAN PROGRAMS DO?

Education staff can use the Framework for Effective Practice and an individualized tiered approach described in the Introduction to the Big 5 For All: Highly Individualized Teaching Supplement document, to plan instructional strategies that support learning for all children, and then more individualized and intensive supports for individual children. When implementing activities, staff also need to regularly monitor how well a child is responding to the supports provided. They can use this information to adjust the amount and types of supports, depending on the child’s progress.

6 Laura. M. Justice, Jessica A.R. Logan, Joan N. Kaderavek, and Jaelyn M. Dynia. “Print-Focused Read-Alouds in Early Childhood Special Education Programs.” *Exceptional Children* 81, no. 3 (January 2015): 292–311. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402914563693>.
7 Edmister et al., “Creating Writing Opportunities,” 24–35.
8 Sonia. Q. Cabell, Laura M. Justice, Tricia A. Zucker, and Anita S. McGinty, “Emergent Name-Writing Abilities of Preschool-Age Children With Language Impairment.” *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools* 40, no. 1 (January 2009): 53–66, [https://doi.org/10.1044/0161-1461\(2008/07-0052\)](https://doi.org/10.1044/0161-1461(2008/07-0052)).
9 (Cabell et al., “Emergent Name Writing Abilities,” 53–66; Wackerle-Hollman, Durán, and Miranda, “Early Literacy Skill Growth,” 24–38.
10 Susan S. Johnston, and Catherine Nelson. “Using Graphic Symbols to Teach Children With Autism to Enter Into Playgroups.” *Intervention in School and Clinic* 52, no. 2 (March 17 2016): 85–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451216636060>.

SELECTING GOALS: BEHAVIORS AND SKILLS THAT SUPPORT ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE AND EARLY WRITING

Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF) goals associated with alphabet knowledge and early writing appear in the Language and Literacy central domain and Emergent Literacy subdomain under the Language and Communication domain for infants and toddlers. For preschoolers, consult the Literacy domain and Print and Alphabet Knowledge and Writing subdomains.

Goals for infants and toddlers include recognizing pictures and some symbols, signs, or words, and making marks and using them to represent objects or actions. Goals for preschoolers include demonstrating and understanding functions and conventions of print, identifying letters of the alphabet, producing correct sounds associated with letters, and writing for a variety of purposes, using increasingly sophisticated marks.

Education staff and families can use these goals to promote children's alphabet knowledge and early writing in English and in the home language. A broader goal may need to be broken down into smaller, clearly defined steps. This makes it easier to see how well a child is progressing for each individual step and adjust types of support as needed.



INDIVIDUALIZING INSTRUCTION: PARTNERING WITH FAMILIES

Education staff partner with families to promote specific, print-focused interactions with their child in the home and community.¹¹ Emergent literacy instruction is most effective when given both in English and the home language.¹² If staff do not speak the same languages as children, they need to work closely with families to understand and integrate children's home languages at school, and support families in promoting children's skills in the home language. They can discuss ways for families to model reading and writing in the home language, draw children's attention to signs and labels in the community, and point out features of letters and characters when scripts in the home language differ from English.



TEACHING STRATEGIES: FOUNDATIONAL PRACTICES

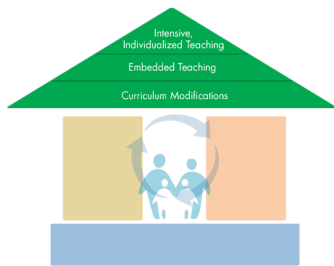
Effective practices for supporting alphabet knowledge and early writing for all children include exploring and talking about letter shapes, then modelling and encouraging drawing and writing.



11 Cabell et al., "Emergent Name Writing Abilities," 53–66; Justice et al., "Print-Focused Read-Alouds," 292–311.
12 Wackerle-Hollman, Durán, and Miranda, "Early Literacy Skill Growth," 24–38.

Please refer to the [Planned Language Approach \(PLA\) Big 5 Resource on Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing](#) for examples of specific ways to support alphabet knowledge and early writing with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

TEACHING STRATEGIES: HIGHLY INDIVIDUALIZED TEACHING AND LEARNING



Curriculum modifications. Education staff can make some simple changes to the print environment, materials, and interactions to increase children's participation in print and writing activities. Children with significant disabilities may need access to assistive technologies and communication tools to actively participate in writing activities. For ideas on what you can do when a child may need more support and ways to engage in interactions that promote alphabet knowledge and early writing, take a look at [Curriculum Modifications: An Introduction](#).

Examples of modifications to help children learn about written symbols, letters, and words include:

- **Materials.** Use glue and fabrics to create tactile images and letters that children can feel and trace with their fingers. Use tactile picture books and create labels in braille.
- **Visual cues.** Provide models of graphic symbols and letters.
- **Child interests.** Teach letters in a child's name and in names of favorite people and things.
- **Adult support.** Describe shapes of symbols, letters, and words.
- **Special equipment.** Use magnifiers and multi-media digital technologies to enlarge pictures and letters and add sounds and verbal descriptions.



Examples of modifications to help children express themselves through drawing and writing include:

- **Furniture.** Use adaptive seating or positioning to make sure children are comfortable and stable when drawing or writing.
- **Materials.** Use tape or Velcro to stabilize paper for drawing or writing. Make writing tools easier to manipulate. Add large foam grips or wrap masking tape around crayons, markers, and brushes so they're easier to hold. Use letter stamps or magnetic letters.
- **Peer support.** Have children work in small groups so peers, siblings, or friends can model early writing and play together with alphabet toys and books.
- **Adult support.** Give meaningful encouragement and praise to all children's efforts at drawing and writing.
- **Special equipment.** Use assistive technologies and picture communication systems to facilitate children's communication and writing.

Research has studied the use of individualized practices in classroom settings, but home visitors can help families use similar practices at home. They can work with families to identify and try curriculum modifications and help families plan for offering children more opportunities for practicing skills at home. They can also model strategies and assist families in implementing specialized instruction at home and during group socializations.

Curriculum Modifications in Action: Yadana

Natalie, a home visitor, explains to Gawa and Arkar the importance of promoting their 10-month-old daughter Yadana's early literacy development. Yadana has a mild visual impairment, and she will need environmental modifications and adult support to promote her awareness and interest in print. Yadana's learning goal is to recognize pictures and some symbols, signs, or words using her senses and tactile exploration. Natalie encouraged Gawa and Arkar to talk with Yadana about their own everyday literacy practices in Burmese, their home language, and assured them that skills Yadana learned in Burmese would transfer to English later in school. She also encouraged them to help Yadana explore print using her hands. She talked with Gawa about making texture books with simple, homemade materials; adding glue and fabric to pictures; printing logos and labels in large print on high-contrast backgrounds; and making symbol and letter shapes using hard cardboard and playdough. Nanda, Yadana's older brother could help out, too!

Embedded teaching. Some children may not readily meet their goals, even when provided with modifications and adaptations during regular activities and routines. They may need more systematic learning opportunities to help them make progress. Education staff can work with families and service providers in planning ways to embed instruction on individual literacy learning objectives more frequently into daily activities.

Education staff can use an [activity matrix](#) to plan for how a child's specific learning objective will be addressed in an activity.

Staff also need to plan specific [teaching loops](#)—what they will say or do, the kind of support they will provide to help the child be successful, how they expect the child to respond, and what kind of feedback they will provide to the child.

Education staff can plan how to include literacy props and materials into daily activities and routines, and provide instructional support through modeling, role play, and conversations.¹³

Home visitors can help families create simple activity matrices that identify times during the day that offer opportunities to promote their child's learning goal. They can explain and demonstrate how to use teaching loops and provide feedback on the family's use of strategies.

Embedded Teaching in Action: Feng

Jordan had placed labels throughout his family child care center with all the children's names. He wrote their names in their home language, including those with different writing systems such as Chinese, as well as in English. He also placed labels and put out print materials in English throughout his family child care center. Four-year-old Feng was making good progress on his individual learning goal of writing his name in English and in Chinese, especially since Jordan had taped paper on tables and put grips on pencils and markers to make them easier to hold. Feng had still been reluctant to write, but Jordan carefully planned opportunities for Feng to practice writing his name in Chinese and in English during specific activities in the day. Feng's mother, Liling, agreed to help Feng write his name in Chinese on the class sign-in sheet each day, using an example and providing hints on drawing the strokes. Jordan also selected two more times of the day to support Feng's writing in English. Jordan would ask Feng to write his name in English on his artwork and help Feng decide which letter comes next. He would provide alphabet toys during small group play and prompt Feng to find letters in his name, then practice naming each letter and corresponding sound. He planned to collect data weekly on Feng's progress.

¹³ Laura M. Justice, and Paige C. Pullen, "Promising Interventions for Promoting Emergent Literacy Skills: Three Evidence-Based Approaches." *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 23, no. 3 (July 2003): 99–113, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02711214030230030101>.

Intensive, Individualized Teaching. Children with significant cognitive and communication disabilities may need more individualized and intensive teaching in English and the child’s home language. Education staff may continue to use modifications that promote engagement and embedded teaching to offer increased learning opportunities at school and at home. They also may need to use a more specialized teaching strategy to help the child make progress on a learning goal or objective. Print-focused conversations, and adult-monitored writing activities can help children improve their alphabet knowledge and early writing skills at school and at home.¹⁴

Intensive, Individualized Teaching in Action: Hugo

Renee’s toddler room was full of opportunities for children to interact with print. Renee and her assistant, Paola, had posted photos, children’s art, and labels in English and Spanish on walls and furniture. They also placed all sorts of literacy materials in play centers — alphabet books and toys, writing materials, and everyday items with printed letters and words. Thirty-four-month-old Hugo, however, had shown little interest in print, despite the alphabet blocks, toy trucks with logos, big letters, and pictures of labeled buildings in Hugo’s favorite place to play, the block area. Hugo had been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and had a significant language delay. One of his learning goals was to show interest in written forms of language, like signs, letters, and words in Spanish and English, the two languages his family spoke at home. It was important to both Renee and Hugo’s parents, Kiara and Juan Carlos, that Hugo learn to use graphic symbols to communicate. To provide Hugo with more frequent opportunities to interact with print beyond the block area, Renee and Paola used an activity matrix to identify additional times during the day when Paola, who spoke both Spanish and English, would draw Hugo’s attention to graphic symbols, letters, and words during small group activities. After two weeks, they met with Kiara and Chantal, Hugo’s early interventionist, to share their concerns about Hugo’s lack of progress. Chantal suggested a more intensive approach where Paola would work individually with Hugo each day and use specific prompts to direct Hugo’s attention to features of print in books and on objects and toys. She would also model answers to questions and provide Hugo with specific feedback on his responses. Kiara expressed interest in trying these strategies, with support from Chantal, during her regular home visits.

SUMMARY

Young children with disabilities who are DLLs can and do learn print-related skills, such as alphabet knowledge and name writing in more than one writing system, when given appropriate instructional support and communication tools. Key practices include engaging young children in conversations about print and features of letters and words and providing explicit and deliberate adult mediation to engage in emergent writing. Education staff need to work closely with families to understand and integrate children’s written home languages at school, and then support families in providing instruction in the home language at home.

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¹⁴ Cabell et al., “Emergent Name Writing Abilities,” 53–66; Wackerle-Hollman, Durán, and Miranda, “Early Literacy Skill Growth,” 24–38.

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