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As Easy as ABC: Facilitating Early Literacy Enrichment Experiences

Laura is the lead teacher of the 4- and 5-year-old class at Littlewood Academy, an inclusive preschool setting. She has a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and serves 12 children in a half-day preschool class. She is supported by Sheila, a bilingual paraprofessional. The class consists of five monolingual English speakers, four children for whom Spanish is the first language, one for whom Hmong is the home language, and two children whose home language is Mandarin. Ryan, whose native language is English, has been diagnosed with fragile X syndrome and Maria, a native Spanish speaker, has global developmental delays of unknown etiology.

Michael and Catina Sampson are the parents of 18-month-old Janesha. Michael works from the home providing technical support for a major software company, whereas Catina works in the city as an investment banker. Both have master's degrees from a respected state university. Janesha was born with a cleft lip and palate, which were initially repaired within weeks of her birth; she has had subsequent follow-up surgeries. Both Michael and Catina's extended families live within close proximity and interact often with the family. Janesha receives home-based services from the state's early intervention program, which includes developmental and speech-language therapies.

Margaret and Alicia work in the 3-year-old room at Childstop, a large child care facility. They have 16 children in their care; most arrive by 7:30 a.m. and are picked up at about 5:30 p.m. Margaret has received basic child safety training at the local community college and is working toward her Child Development Associate certification. Alicia is a high school graduate. Although the children in their care have a range of abilities, Seth, Pablo, and Yasmin each have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) addressing needs in language and social development. Jennie, an early childhood special education teacher in the local school district, provides weekly services to these three children in their child care setting. Her services are both direct with the children and consultative in that she supports Margaret and Alicia in strategies that will facilitate these children's ongoing development.

Many individuals who work with young children between birth and age 8 assume that literacy activities must be planned and executed as elaborate, formal lessons. The increasing pressure seeping through national accountability measures and the renewed focus on early literacy is trickling down to this age group (White House, n.d.). The Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children promote the use of play and developmentally appropriate practices to enrich young children's development (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005). The International Reading Association advocates supporting the development of "those characteristics of children from birth through age 5 that are most closely linked to later achievement in literacy: oral language development, phonological/phonemic awareness (PA), alphabetic knowledge, print knowledge, and invented spelling" (International Reading Association, 2004, p. 2). Child care providers, family members, and educators such as those described in our opening vignettes can be supported to use daily activities to develop the emergent literacy of the children in their care. The purpose of this article is to describe how language and literacy activities can be applied by families, child care providers, early interventionists, and early childhood special educators throughout everyday activities and in multiple settings where young children work and play. We begin with a brief discussion of three basic components for enhancing emergent literacy opportunities. Next we describe three key developmental areas (i.e., oral language, concepts of print, and PA) for enhancing later literacy success. Finally, within each of these three developmental areas, we provide the reader with examples of strategies that have been shown to be effective in facilitating children's learning.

ABCs of Enhancing Emergent Literacy Opportunities

Recognizing emergent literacy opportunities can be as easy as "ABC" by incorporating three basic components: *A* for aware adults, *B* for bundles of books, and *C* for addressing children's challenges. Regardless of setting or child characteristics, these components provide support for early literacy development by underscoring the perspective that all children can benefit within natural environments when caregivers and educators recognize the simplicity of facilitating literacy development. The strategies we describe below all build on children's natural curiosity and excitement to progress to higher levels of development. Although these strategies are natural, incorporating the three ABC components optimizes opportunities for facilitating emergent literacy.

Aware Adults

An adult who is proficient in facilitating emergent literacy is cognizant of child development and the progression of early literacy development. With this basic information, the aware adult will see opportunities in daily activities for promoting children's exposure to literacy. Within each of the opening vignettes, each adult is able to expand and elaborate on language and literacy opportunities within differing contexts. To accomplish this, it is crucial for the components of early literacy to become second nature to these adults. The basic skills of literacy development described later in this article provide a starting point from which adults can proceed.

Bundles of Books

Access to print in the form of books, labels, lists, and environmental print is crucial to enhancing children's awareness of written language (Clay, 1991). Caregivers can ensure access to these materials by pointing them out to young children. Modeling reading is fundamental to encouraging literacy in natural settings through the use of environmental print such as menus, cereal boxes, and classroom artifacts. These activities help children see the connection between reading and their daily activities.

Children's Challenges

Early childhood educators readily acknowledge that children develop along a wide continuum (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Sandall et al., 2005). Developmental ranges are complicated by issues of language, special needs, and the variety of quality found in early childhood settings. Regardless of a child's current developmental status or cultural/linguistic background, with knowledgeable adults and access to print, caregivers are able to overcome many emergent literacy challenges.

Summary

These ABCs all contribute to developing an environment that recognizes and supports the role of emergent literacy in the everyday lives of children. In combination with positive, interactive strategies and daily activities such as those we describe here, these components lend themselves to the natural progression of children's literacy growth, ensuring that all children can become participants in the world of literacy.

Regardless of a child's current developmental status or cultural/linguistic background, with knowledgeable adults and access to print, caregivers are able to overcome many emergent literacy challenges.

Supporting Children's Early Literacy Development

Although the field of early literacy development has various perspectives that may confuse practitioners and parents in early childhood settings, we are taking the view that early literacy is developmental in nature and apply the work of experts interested in the developmental nature of emergent readers and writers (Clay, 1991; Daniel, Clark, & Ouellette, 2004). Within this perspective, three key domains of emergent literacy development have been identified: oral language, concepts of print, and PA. Adults in children's daily environments can facilitate and support children's development in each of these domains. To demonstrate how the development of these skills can be supported through daily interactions in multiple settings, we will outline their various components and then demonstrate applications for the teachers at Littlewood Academy, the Sampson family, and the caregivers at Childstop presented in our opening vignettes.

Table 1
Oral Language Development

Age	Skill
Birth–3 months	Makes pleasure sounds (cooing, gooing)
4–6 months	Babbling sounds more speech-like with many different sounds
7–12 months	Uses speech or noncrying sounds to get and keep attention
	Has 1 or 2 words ("bye-bye," "dada," "mama"), although they may not be clear
1–2 years	Says more words every month
	Puts two words together ("more cookie," "no juice," "mommy book")
2–3 years	Uses two- to three-word "sentences" to talk about and ask for things
	Often asks for or directs attention to objects by naming them
3–4 years	Talks about activities at school or at friends' homes
	Uses a lot of sentences that have four or more words
4–5 years	Uses sentences that give lots of details (e.g., "I like to read my books")
	Uses the same grammar as the rest of the family

Note. Adapted with permission from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (n.d.).

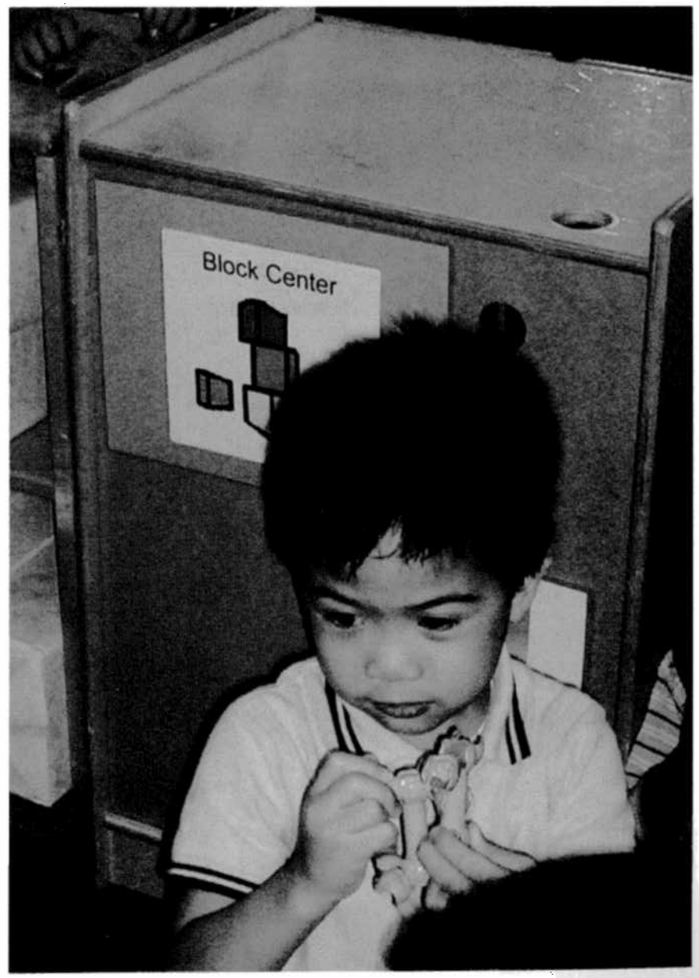
Oral Language Development

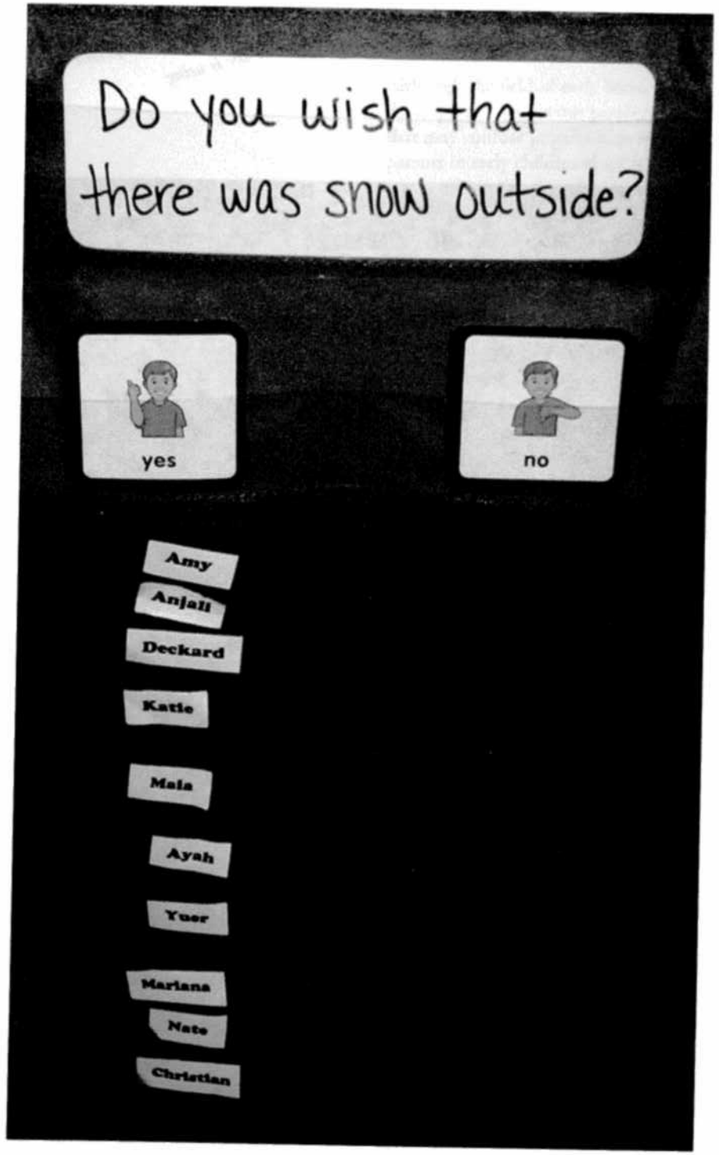
Oral language development is an important precursor to literacy as it is the vehicle through which children access text. Experts describe emergent reading behaviors as aligned with oral language development in that they are acquired through daily use in natural activities (Lindfors, 1987). For example, in reading activities, children rely on the grammar and vocabulary of their home language to access meaning from text (Clay, 1991; Cox, Fang, & Otto, 1997). In writing, young children use their abilities to articulate and segment the sounds of their spoken or oral language to produce writing and later to understand the written word (Comber & Cormack, 2005). Children need to be able to use language to understand the various purposes for speaking (Lindfors, 1987) and to grasp the meaning and vocabulary that are used prior to becoming literate. Regardless of a child's background or abilities, the ongoing development of oral language can be paired with appropriate early literacy activities. It is important for caregivers to be aware of the progression of basic oral language developmental milestones such as those recognized by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA, n.d.) and summarized in *Table 1*. Three basic strategies described in the next sections—self-talk, parallel talk, and expansion—are appropriate to facilitate oral language development for children with typical development, children who are second-language learners, and children with special needs, thus increasing children's potential to acquire literacy skills in school settings.

Self-Talk

Self-talk is described as a focused stimulation strategy (Cleave & Fey, 1997; Fey, Cleave, Long, & Hughes, 1993; Girolametto, Pearce, & Weitzman, 1996; Girolametto, Weitzman, van Lieshout, & Duff, 2000) or as indirect language stimulation (Manolsen, 1992) and can be used to encourage children's oral language development. Self-talk is used when the conversational partner, either an adult or a child with more sophisticated oral language abilities, talks about what she or he is doing, thinking, or feeling (Owens, 2004). For example, while bathing a baby, the mother may describe her own actions: "getting soap," "washing toes," and so forth. Self-talk can easily accompany everyday activities such as dressing, bathing, or playing. When using self-talk, it is important for the more advanced conversational partner to limit the length of each statement to one or two words above the level used by the child. This strategy is based on Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development. Using a language level

Using a language level just higher than that currently used by the child provides an opportunity for the child to learn through an interaction that is slightly more competent than the level he or she is using.





just higher than that currently used by the child provides an opportunity for the child to learn through an interaction that is slightly more competent than the level he or she is using. For example, with a child who has no verbal language or who has language limited to single words, self-talk would be limited to simple two- or three-word phrases or sentences.

Parallel Talk

Parallel talk is another focused stimulation strategy. Using this approach, the adult conversational partner describes what the child is doing, matching words to the child's actions, thoughts, and feelings (Owens, 2004). This technique can be closely related to a radio sports commentator describing the action that is unfolding before the listening audience. For example, during block play, the teacher could narrate the child's actions as, "blue block on," "getting more blocks," and "pushing blocks down." Parallel talk provides the words for actions, introduces new words, and supports continued use of established vocabulary similar to the way that text introduces pictures, events, and story narration to the emergent reader. As with self-talk, keeping the sentence level just above the level the child is using is important. It is not necessary to describe every aspect of the child's play. Pertinent words that help establish concepts such as descriptive words, possessives, quantity and spatial concepts, plurals, and pronouns will help these language forms become part of the child's communicative repertoire. This foundation of vocabulary and syntactic structure in oral language will easily translate into the child's independent production of text as she or he learns to write what she or he says.

Expansion

Expansion or recasting is the strategy whereby the conversational partner listens to what the child says and responds by adding to the child's words, using adult-like grammatical structures (Camarata, Nelson, & Camarata, 1994; Manolsen, 1992, Owens, 2004). Expansion does not add to the thought or concept the child produces; rather, it introduces more correct or mature structures. For example, the child may say, "Make cookies." The conversational partner would respond, "We're making cookies," providing a model of the proper use of a pronoun, a contraction, and a verb plus "-ing" form. The content of the message, however, has not changed. Children seem to perceive expansions as a cue to imitate (Scherer & Olswang, 1984), thus increasing the length of their own productions (Bradshaw, Hoffman, & Norris, 1998; Combs et al., 2005). Expansions maintain the child's dialogue and clarify the topic, later helping the child access and produce more formal genres of text (Camarata et al., 1991; Camarata et al., 1994; Weitzman, 1994).

Embedding Opportunities to Foster Oral Language Development

Returning to our opening vignettes, we see that at Littlewood Academy, Laura and Sheila recognize that wide variance in oral language development exists within their classroom, yet the three strategies described above have application for many of their students. The routines and activities in their preschool setting provide opportunities for consistent oral language use. For example, during circle time, each of the children is greeted. Read-aloud activities as well as show-and-tell afford occasions for Laura and Sheila to model various language structures and to use self-talk, parallel talk, and expansion. Unique activities within the classroom also provide opportunities for new vocabulary use. More sophisticated children will readily provide models for children who use English as a second language or who have special needs and whose spoken language may be limited. The conversations that ensue during novel activities are perfect opportunities for applying expansion as more complex concepts are explained.

The Sampsons have concerns for Janesha's language development because of the complexity of her special needs. The home visitor and speech-language pathologist providing early intervention services have demonstrated the use of self-talk and parallel talk during home visits. As the primary caregiver, Michael has many opportunities during the day to practice these strategies. For example, during Janesha's feeding and changing times, she is very alert and attentive to interactions with Michael. Michael tells Janesha, "Eat peas," "More peas in," and "Good peas." Catina also uses these strategies in the evenings as she bathes Janesha and prepares her for bedtime.

Margaret and Alicia at Childstop are excited when the school district

Modeling the tracking of print is crucial for children to see the left-to-right orientation that English reading requires. Understanding the flow of print by watching readers trace the text from left to right as they read demonstrates the future eye movements that will help children develop as readers; furthermore, touching each individual word while reading enhances the understanding of one-to-one correspondence.

consultant, Jennie, demonstrates the use of expansion during one of her weekly sessions with Seth, Pablo, and Yasmin. These children have each been reluctant to use sentences longer than one to two words. Margaret and Alicia readily see how this strategy can be used during mealtime and creative center activities. They introduce one new center weekly, which quickly engages the children's interest. This week, they bring in Sneakee, Margaret's king snake. Sneakee has just shed, and the children are excitedly commenting on the skin lying in his tank. Both Margaret and Alicia expand on the children's one- and two-word comments, providing additional grammatical and semantic models for the children.

Understanding the Development of Concepts of Print

Concepts of print are the beginning of emergent readers' interaction with the world of text. Behaviors such as understanding that print contains a message, understanding that text and pictures are related, and the notion that words that children say match the print that they touch are crucial to emergent and beginning readers (Strickland & Schickedanz, 2004). These are the precursors to understanding the code for reading. Understanding the code is crucial for future literacy development (Schickedanz, 2003). During read-aloud time, caregivers can facilitate the development of the concept of print by demonstrating that print contains a message, modeling the tracking of print, and pointing out the boundaries of words through one-to-one correspondence.

The understanding that print contains a message can be a part of everyday book and environmental print reading. Caregivers and family members can read books and point to the print as they read. Reading signs or labels and pointing to them in the child's environment assists children in understanding that the symbols of spoken language are meaningful. This beginning connection between print and the spoken word is one of the first steps to reading. Modeling the tracking of print is crucial for children to see the left-to-right orientation that English reading requires. Understanding the flow of print by watching readers trace the text from left to right as they read demonstrates the future eye movements that will help children develop as readers; furthermore, touching each individual word while reading enhances the understanding of one-to-one correspondence. One-to-one correspondence is the knowledge of word boundaries. Readers need to understand the difference between letters and words. By tracking print as they read, caregivers and parents can introduce children to the basic concepts of print that they need to become successful independent readers.

Table 2 provides a detailed progression of the developmental sequence of these skills. The listing of observable behaviors in *Table 2* provides a basic view of emergent reading behaviors that support early reading. Clay (1991, p. 141) conducted seminal work in beginning reading and proposed the following understandings as essential for young readers:

1. basic concepts such as letter, word, sound, drawing, writing, and reading;
2. hierarchical concepts such as collections of letters, which make up words, and collections of words, which make up sentences; and
3. terms for position such as *first* and *last*, *beginning* or *start* and *end*, and *next*, when they apply them within the directional constraints of the printer's code.

Embedding Opportunities to Foster Concepts of Print

During circle time at Littlewood Academy, Sheila is reading a big book to the children. As she reads, she is using her finger to touch each word, tracking left to right to model print-voice matching. The children all sit and follow along, participating by chanting the sections of the story that they recognize. As the story concludes, Sheila dismisses individual children by having them touch words that begin with the first letter in their first name. These children then proceed to the snack table, where Laura is working with a group including Ryan and Maria, preparing snacks using menus and labels. Ryan has set individual placemats on the table. Each placemat has diagrams with labels representing a plate, cup, napkin, and spoon. Maria helps him cover each placemat with the appropriate item, having matched the labels on the mats with corresponding labeled items. As the children approach the table, the peers read the selections from the menu to the arriving children and ask, "graham crackers or saltines?" and "applesauce or peaches?" The menu has both pictures and text, which helps the children make the connection between the item and the written word, one component of concepts about print.

Table 2
Concepts About Print

The child can locate the front of the book
The child knows that print contains a message
The child can point to where the text begins on the page
The child can follow the text left to right with his or her finger
The child can make the return sweep to the left at the end of a sentence
The child can match words read to the words in print with one-to-one matching
The child can indicate where in the book the story begins and ends
The child can touch the bottom of the picture to show the correct orientation of the book
The child can show that reading begins on the left page first
The child can differentiate between punctuation marks, words, letters in words, and upper and lower case letters

Note. Adapted from Clay (1979).

Although the development of phonemic awareness is completely separate from letter identification in text or from learning sounds through systematic phonics instruction, it does provide the groundwork for children's development in the areas of decoding and encoding text.

At the Sampson home, it is Janesha's naptime, and Michael holds her while sitting in a comfortable rocking chair. Janesha has a new book that will be used during today's story time. Michael hands the board book to Janesha to hold and proceeds to read, pointing out both pictures and text. By doing this, Michael is showing her the concepts of left to right and that print contains a meaningful message. Janesha pats the book as Michael reads and helps turn the pages. At the end of the story, Michael says, "The end," and Janesha turns the book to the front and says, "More." Michael reads the book one more time, and Janesha joins in by naming the simple pictures.

By 4:30 in the afternoon, some children in Margaret and Alicia's 3-year-old room at Childstop have already been picked up for the day. Margaret and Alicia take the time to converse with parents when the children leave, which means that the other children are engaged in self-directed activities. Within the classroom, a low table with blank colored paper, crayons, markers, and colored chalk is adjacent to the book corner. Although Seth has already left, Pablo and Yasmin are playing with a group of children in the book area. The children are flipping through books, retelling the storyline from memory, laughing at the pictures, and relating stories that were previously read. As the children at the table are busy drawing, Meg begins folding her paper in half, saying to Pablo, "Look, I made book." Pablo drags the book he was looking at over to the table, and says to Meg, "Me too." Pablo scribbles his "title" and picture on the page and hands it to Meg, who folds it carefully. They both run to show their "books" to Margaret, pointing to the front of the book with the title and then opening the book to track their scribbles left to right. They are demonstrating their knowledge of book orientation and directionality that they have seen modeled. Margaret excitedly responds, exclaiming over their creations.

Understanding the Development of PA

PA is the child's ability to orally segment and manipulate words and has been defined by Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) as

> the insight that every spoken word can be conceived as a sequence of phonemes. Because phonemes are the units of sound that are represented by the letters of an alphabet, an awareness of phonemes is key to understanding the logic of the alphabetic principle and thus to the learnability of phonics and spelling. (p. 52)

PA is one of the strongest predictors of subsequent reading and writing success (Adams, 1992; Ehri & Nunes, 2002; Snow et al., 1998). It also provides a foundation for children's understanding of spoken language as it will later translate into print. Although the development of PA is completely separate from letter identification in text or from learning sounds through systematic phonics instruction, it does provide the groundwork for children's development in the areas of decoding and encoding text (Barone, 2003; International Reading Association, 1998: National Reading Panel, 2000). Facilitating the development of PA includes activities such as reading rhyming books, focusing on syllables, and singing songs that play with sounds (Yopp & Yopp, 2000). *Table 3* outlines opportunities for caregivers to informally examine children's PA development.

Reading rhyming books allows children to hear the differences and similarities in words. The final ending sounds in words that rhyme sound the same, and distinguishing the sounds as they are spoken increases children's awareness of phonemes. Reading nursery rhymes and pausing to let children predict the rhyming word based on the previous words makes learning enjoyable. Repeated readings of familiar rhymes or songs also facilitate an awareness of sounds in words. Using activities that focus on how syllables work in words adds to children's knowledge of sounds in spoken language by breaking down words into chunks or units. Playing clapping games that use familiar words such as the child's name or common objects can encourage children to note that words can be broken down; clapping out words such as toy and apple demonstrates the early awareness of syllables that assists children in segmenting speech. In addition, songs that play with sounds such as "Apples and Bananas" (Yopp & Yopp, 1996) allow children to manipulate the sounds in known words. "Apples and Bananas" has different verses that require children to change the first letter of the lyrics to different vowels. Other familiar sounds can be modified to accomplish the same task. If children cannot hear these differences in spoken words, then they will most likely have trouble when engaging in the decoding of text (Leu, Kinzer, Wilson, & Hall, 2006).

Embedding Opportunities to Foster PA

During center time, six of the 4- and 5-year-olds in Laura and Sheila's preschool classroom at Littlewood Academy are sitting with Laura as she reads Dr. Seuss' (1960) *Green Eggs and Ham*. As she reads, she pauses at the end of each page and allows the children to verbalize the last word, knowing that the rhyming structure of the book will allow the children to predict the final word, reading, "Sam I . . . ." Laura is excited to see that after two or three pages, Maria follows Jordan's example and is soon chiming in saying, "am!" Although Ryan is not yet vocalizing the rhyming words, Laura observes that he is engaged in listening during the activity. She knows that allowing him to hear these rhymes will contribute to his awareness of auditory discrimination and, later on, auditory sound manipulation.

Michael and Janesha are taking advantage of a beautiful spring day

Table 3
Phonemic Awareness

Children who are phonemically aware are able to answer the following questions:	
Concept	**Question**
Rhyme	Do these word rhyme? (*lost-cost*)
Phoneme blending	What word do we have when we put the sounds /o/ and /n/ together? (*on*)
Phoneme counting	How many sounds do you hear in the word *at*? (2)
Phoneme isolation	What is the beginning sound in *run*? (/r/)
Phoneme segmentation	What sounds do you hear in the word *bat*? (/b/-/a/-/t/)
Phoneme substitution	What word would we have if we changed the /p/ in *pat* to an /m/? (*mat*)
Phoneme addition	What word we would have if we added /p/ to the beginning of *lay*? (*play*)
Phoneme deletion	What word would we have if we left the /s/ out of the word *stop*? (*top*)

Note. Adapted from Yopp and Yopp (1996).

to play in the Sampson's backyard. Janesha sees a bird in the tree and claps to get its attention. Michael follows Janesha's cue and joins her in playing "Pat-a-Cake." Janesha delightedly reaches for Michael's hands to repeat the rhyme "pa cae." This is the first time that Michael notices that Janesha is approximating the words rather than limiting her participation to the actions, indicating that the word play is motivating to her.

One of the favorite activities of the day in Margaret and Alicia's 3-year-old room at Childstop is singing "Willoughby, Wallaby, Woo." This song, like so many others enjoyed by this age group, is predictive and personalized. The song incorporates each child's name by placing a rhyme in the preceding line. The teacher is responsible for setting up the child's name for the rhyme, and the child is able to predict when to sing their name because of the similarity of the auditory pattern. For example, when Alicia gets to Seth, she leads the children in singing, "Willoughby, wallaby, *weth*, An elephant sat on *Seth*! Willoughby, wallaby, *wasmin*, An elephant sat on *Yasmin*!" (Lee, 1974). Over time, the children begin to predict the occasion of their own names and those of their peers based on the teacher's rhyming model. This contributes to their ability to manipulate sounds in the words they hear, an important aspect of PA and later word knowledge.

Conclusion

The teachers at Littlewood Academy, the Sampson family, and the caregivers at Childstop in our opening vignettes each demonstrate the importance of the ABCs. In each setting, aware adults used bundles of books to address the challenges of the individual children in their care. These components cannot exist in isolation; teachers and caregivers are mindful of their interdependence so as to maximize opportunities for children to develop early literacy skills. For example, at Littlewood Academy, Laura and Sheila were aware that some children were second-language learners and others had special needs. Although they were able to use books for all children in their classroom, they had specific strategies that emphasized early literacy skills for these individual children. In the Sampson home, both Michael and Catina demonstrated awareness of the connection between Janesha's early attempts at oral language and word play as well as the concepts of print that are emphasized while enjoying books with her. At Childstop, Margaret and Alicia were aware of the strategies that they observed Jennie, the early childhood special education teacher, using with Seth, Pablo, and Yasmin. By expanding on these children's limited oral productions, providing materials that allow for exploration of print concepts, and incorporating word-play activities into the routines of their setting, these caregivers provide an enriching environment for early literacy development.

The strategies suggested here demonstrate how language and literacy activities can be applied by families, child care providers, early interventionists, and early childhood special educators throughout everyday activities and in multiple settings where young children work and play. The ABCs are easy: Aware adults using bundles of books can address a variety of children's challenges to facilitate early literacy skills.

Note

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