

June 2016

Some Assembly Required Piecing Together the Preparation Preschool Teachers Need



A Resource for **Aspiring Teachers**



Want to teach preschool? Do your homework first.

Don't be fooled by the naptime and snack schedule: Preschool teachers have one of the toughest jobs around. Every day they manage a high-energy environment designed to prepare young learners to succeed in kindergarten and beyond. They introduce 3- and 4-year-olds to reading, math, science, and school routines — all while keeping their classrooms safe, fun, and under control. If you think this might be the job for you, these steps will help you get started.

1. Decide on the setting in which you want to work — it will determine what kind of training you will need

- Public schools tend to set the highest academic degree expectations for the preschool teachers they hire, often requiring a bachelor's degree from a teacher preparation program.
- Other programs, including those operating in daycare centers and faith-based agencies, may set their own requirements for preschool teachers, such as having a bachelor's degree, an associate's degree, or specialized training in preschool.¹
- Head Start, a federally-funded program operating in all 50 states, has steadily increased educational requirements for preschool teachers. Currently, nearly all Head Start teachers have at least an associate's degree, and over 70 percent have at least a bachelor's degree.²
- Private schools and other agencies that do not receive public funding employ teachers from a variety of backgrounds and may establish teacher requirements locally.³

2. Get training — and make sure it covers these basics

Programs that focus on a narrow grade span (such as preschool to second grade) will have more relevant coursework than those that cover a wide grade span (such as preschool to sixth grade).

- **Developing children's language ability:** Engaging in conversation represents one of the best learning opportunities for young children but, without training, teachers often miss opportunities to help children learn how to speak and listen. Teachers trained to ask young children questions that require more than a yes or no answer, engage them in meaningful discussion, and develop their vocabulary can make a big difference.
- **Building a foundation for reading:** While reading instruction may not begin in earnest until a child enters kindergarten, preschool sets the stage — teaching children about letters, rhymes, and books. Although listening to stories read out loud is a classic part of childhood, ensuring that preschoolers get the most out of each reading requires good planning and skill in delivery. A child who leaves preschool having experienced well-conceived read-alouds is likely to have better reading skills in kindergarten.
- **Introducing math to young children:** Young children can do much more than count to three — they can recognize and create patterns, use simple number lines, compare shapes, and measure objects.

Research suggests that the benefits of teaching math in preschool are at least as large as the benefits of teaching reading skills.

- **Establishing a warm and inviting classroom:** If you've ever been surrounded by a group of 3- and 4-year-olds, you won't be surprised to learn that preschool teachers need some serious classroom management skills. By helping children adjust to the school setting and learn how to regulate their own behavior, preschool teachers create an environment where everyone can learn and have fun.
- **Learning from and practicing with great teachers:** You can't learn everything you need to know about preschoolers from the comfort of a college classroom! Make sure you'll have the opportunity to work with young children under the supervision of an experienced, effective teacher and receive frequent feedback from an instructor on the important skills noted above.

Find out more!

To learn more about the quality of training available to you, take a look at course descriptions, contact program instructors, and speak with current students. Be sure to ask questions about what you'll learn and where you will be qualified to teach. Remember, requirements can vary from state to state, so do your research with the kind of placement you seek in mind.

The essentials: What to look for in a teacher training program

Becoming a great preschool teacher takes practice and lots of training. Teacher training programs have a responsibility to instill a wide array of skills and knowledge *and* provide adequate practice working with young children. Unfortunately, some teacher training programs fall short, sending teachers into the classroom before they've mastered essential skills.

This analysis focuses on a selection of the requisite skills and knowledge that are supported by strong research and require targeted training to learn and implement proficiently.

The focus areas include: developing children's language ability, building a foundation for reading through emergent literacy skills and read-alouds, introducing emergent math, creating an inviting classroom environment, and honing skills through student teaching. The analysis is based on a sample of 100 preparation programs that certify preschool teachers, including five associate's degree programs, 54 bachelor's degree programs, and 41 master's degree programs.

Many experts agree that science and social studies instruction are also important, but less information exists on what teachers should learn about how to teach these subjects. Other essential skills that are not analyzed here include engaging families, maintaining classroom safety, and supporting diverse learners.

In addition to summarizing the research on effective preschool teacher training, the following section highlights findings about whether preschool teacher prep programs teach these essential skills, and shows what aspiring teachers should look for in a training program to make sure they'll get the preparation they need. However, these suggestions only offer a place to start the search for great training. Because many teacher prep programs certify teachers for both preschool and a range of other grades, aspiring preschool teachers should check course descriptions and talk with faculty to confirm that the required courses devote sufficient attention to teaching young children.

Developing children's language ability and building a foundation for reading

What is language development and why is it important?

Developing children's language skills is important in and of itself, but it is also the key that opens the door to so many areas of learning for children. Many children entering preschool are hindered by a language deficit: By the age of four, an economically advantaged child may have heard as many as 45 million utterances and be well along the path to literacy, and to academic and social success. If economically disadvantaged, the child may have heard 30 million fewer utterances and be falling far behind.⁴ The gap in oral language plays out along racial lines as well as socioeconomic ones, and puts children at risk for "future academic and social difficulties."⁵

Especially for young children who are already behind, preschool teachers can play a critical role in language development. It is imperative that preschool teachers have the skills to develop children's ability to communicate.⁶ Unfortunately, most preschool teachers do not naturally engage in these practices.⁷ However, intensive and focused training can help teachers make big strides.⁸

FINDINGS

- *Only 59 percent of preschool teacher prep programs require candidates to take a course that addresses developing preschool children's language development.*
- *Many programs fail to evaluate whether student teachers can develop children's language ability in key areas like building vocabulary (only 8 percent of programs evaluate this), providing opportunities for children to talk (28 percent of programs) and asking children questions (60 percent of programs).*

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A TRAINING PROGRAM

- Look at the list of required course titles and their descriptions. Course titles like *Speech and Language Development* and *Development of Language and Literacy in Young Children* may indicate that they cover this critical content area.
- Request a few course syllabi and look for lecture titles like *Expanding children's knowledge of words, Speaking and listening, and Increasing reading vocabulary.*

What is emergent literacy and why is it important?

Emergent literacy encompasses a range of skills that are essential to reading, but may not come naturally to all children. These skills include phonological awareness (the ability to detect or manipulate the sounds in words, such as syllables and rhymes),⁹ phonemic awareness (a subset of phonological awareness relating to the sounds of letters), learning the alphabet, and concepts of print (such as title, author, text direction, and turning pages in a book).¹⁰ Teacher training in these areas can translate into substantial gains for children in alphabet knowledge, vocabulary, and language skills.¹¹

The early introduction of language and literacy can make a lasting difference for children. Unsurprisingly, children with low language and literacy skills in preschool demonstrate lower reading skills in kindergarten.¹² However, not all approaches to teaching emergent literacy are equally effective, and the quality of preschool curricula varies, making it that much more important that preschool teachers have ample training in how to develop their preschoolers' emergent literacy skills.¹³

FINDINGS

- *While literacy is an essential skill for ALL children, only 73 percent of preschool teacher prep programs require candidates to take a course that addresses building preschool children's foundation for reading.*
- *Prep programs' required courses do not always teach key skills: 62 percent of programs teach about building children's understanding of the sounds of words or letters and 44 percent teach about developing children's alphabetic knowledge.*

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A TRAINING PROGRAM

- Review required courses, and look for course titles like *Emergent Literacy, Foundations of Reading and Writing in Early Childhood, and Language & Literacy for Young Children*. Course descriptions often indicate the target age range — look for one that mentions preschool, and beware of programs that only require courses addressing elementary or middle school children.

- Request a sample syllabus, and look for lecture titles like *Read-alouds: Comprehension & vocabulary development*; *Alphabetic knowledge*; *Rhyme, rhythm, and song*; and *Phonological and phonemic awareness instruction*.

What are read-alouds and why are they important?

Reading to a child is a powerful experience that builds an emotional bond, teaches new words and ideas, and introduces information about the wider world. Using read-alouds effectively can boost literacy skills for years to come, and can improve children’s vocabulary and other language skills.¹⁴

FINDINGS

- Only 20 percent of programs teach about and expect candidates to practice reading aloud to children.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A TRAINING PROGRAM

- Read-aloud assignments may appear in language development, literacy, or children’s literature courses. Request a sample syllabus, and look for assignments like:
 - Dialogic book reading: Write about and conduct dialogic reading session with children ages 3 to 6.
 - Read-aloud activity: Design a read-aloud lesson that focuses on teaching key vocabulary words.

What is emergent mathematics and why is it important?

Young children can do much more mathematically than count to three and identify basic shapes. Introducing children to more complex mathematical concepts from an early age may increase their math ability in later years.¹⁵ In fact, some research suggests that the relationship between children’s early math skills and future math achievement is twice as strong as the relationship between emergent literacy and future reading achievement.¹⁶

Teachers should build children’s number sense and understanding of numerals’ spatial position on a number line,¹⁷ as well as patterns, measurement, and geometric concepts.¹⁸ Teachers should also teach children to measure objects using formal instruments like rulers and informal instruments like the length of their arms.¹⁹

FINDINGS

- Only 40 percent of programs require a math course that clearly addresses teaching preschool.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A TRAINING PROGRAM

- Review required courses and look for course titles like *Teaching Mathematics in Early Childhood Education* and *Mathematics and Science for the Early Years*. See if the course description includes preschool-age children in the relevant age range.

What should teachers do to create an inviting classroom environment?

Maintaining a positive, developmentally appropriate preschool classroom environment is no easy feat — and yet it is critically important. As evident from the reported behavioral problems of children in kindergarten and entering Head Start, as well as the high suspension and expulsion rate for preschool children, teaching appropriate behavior poses a challenge for many preschool teachers.²⁰ Teachers need substantive training and practice with effective classroom management strategies that can build social-emotional skills and prevent or resolve many behavioral problems.²¹

Of course, classroom management is about more than discipline: it is about establishing an environment that actively supports learning.²² Teachers' emotional support for their students is associated with better social competence and lower rates of behavior problems.²³

FINDINGS

- *Only one in five programs (19 percent) ensure that student teachers know what to do when a child acts out or disrupts the classroom.*
- *Only a quarter of programs (26 percent) evaluate student teachers on using positive reinforcement — even though this strategy is backed by a wealth of evidence.*
- *Preschool children often learn through play or activity centers — but only 36 percent of programs evaluate student teachers on managing these activities.*

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A TRAINING PROGRAM

- Ask what kinds of practice and instruction you will get around classroom management. Look for courses with titles like *Classroom Management* or *Guiding Young Children*. Beware of programs whose only assignment is to develop your own “philosophy of classroom management” — you’re in training to learn what works, not to have to make up your own approach.
- Ask to see the observation forms used in student teaching. Look for whether you will receive feedback on essential skills like how well you establish rules, use positive reinforcement, or manage play.

What are the hallmarks of an effective student teaching experience for a preschool teacher?

The importance of student teaching is undisputed.²⁴ While student teaching offers the potential for teacher candidates to build skills related to instruction, classroom management, family engagement, and more, a bad experience can instead instill counterproductive techniques, or even worse, quash the candidate’s excitement about teaching.

Teacher candidates gain the most from their student teaching experiences when those experiences require frequent observations by a university supervisor who can give them ongoing feedback about their strengths and areas for growth.²⁵ Great placements should also pair teacher candidates with a cooperating teacher who is both a good mentor and an effective teacher from whom the candidate can learn, last long enough for the student teacher to gain a wealth of firsthand classroom experience,²⁶ and give the candidate an opportunity to practice with the age group she plans to teach.²⁷

FINDINGS

- *Most programs (80 percent) give candidates the option to student teach in a preschool setting.*
- *Only half of programs (52 percent) make sure student teachers are observed at least four times by their university supervisor — even though the research says they need even more frequent observations.*
- *Only 5 percent of programs make sure to pair student teachers with an effective classroom teacher.*

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A TRAINING PROGRAM

- Ask whether you will have the option to student teach in a preschool, and if so, whether your training program already has relationships with any high-quality preschools where they can place you.
- Ask how many times you will get feedback on your teaching — and don’t be shy about asking for more frequent observations!

Endnotes

- 1 Barnett, W. S., Carolan, M. E., Squires, J. H., Clarke Brown, K., & Horowitz, M. (2015). *The state of preschool 2015: State preschool yearbook*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. Retrieved from <http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/2015%20Yearbook.pdf>.
- 2 Head Start Act. Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/law>
- 3 Pre-k funding sources. New America, EdCentral. Retrieved from <http://www.edcentral.org/edcyclopedia/pre-k-funding-from-state-and-federal-sources/>.
- 4 Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (2003). The early catastrophe. *American Educator*, 27(4), 6-9.
- 5 Farkas and Beron (2004) found that across the span of 36 months to 13 years of age, white students had significantly higher oral vocabulary scores than African American students. Farkas, G., & Beron, K. (2004). The detailed age trajectory of oral vocabulary knowledge: Differences by class and race. *Social Science Research*, 33(3), 464-497. A research synthesis prepared by the National Early Literacy Panel discusses a modest correlation that grows stronger when “oral language” is defined as more complex than vocabulary size. However, some researchers argue that this study understates the importance of oral language. Neuman, S.B. (2010). Sparks fade, knowledge stays: The national early literacy panel’s report lacks staying power. *American Educator*, 34(3), 14-17. Dickinson, D. K., Golinkoff, R. M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2010). Speaking out for language: Why language is central to reading development. *Educational Researcher*, 39(4), 305-310. Dickinson, D., Golinkoff, R., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Neuman, S., & Burchinal, P. (2009). The language of emergent literacy: A response to the National Institute for Literacy report on early literacy. Retrieved from <http://nieer.org/pdf/CommentaryOnNELPrep.pdf>.
- 6 With regard to young children, “oral language” is a broad term that encompasses many specific skills. For instance:
 - The IES defines oral language as “children’s understanding and use of language to communicate ideas.” Diamond et al. (2013).
 - Piasta et al. (2012) place oral language *development* in two categories: “communication facilitation” (providing children with opportunities to speak and engage in turn-taking conversations) and “language-developing” (increasing the complexity of children’s language through techniques such as recasting). Piasta, S. B., Justice, L. M., Cabell, S. Q., Wiggins, A. K., Turnbull, K. P., & Curenton, S. M. (2012). Impact of professional development on preschool teachers’ conversational responsivity and children’s linguistic productivity and complexity. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27(3), 387-400.
 - Coll (2005) defines the components of oral language as “various skill sets including vocabulary (receptive and expressive), syntactic and semantic knowledge, and narrative discourse processes (memory, comprehension, and storytelling).”

To develop children’s skills, teachers should engage children in frequent conversations with multiple back-and-forth exchanges. They should verbally describe their actions and the actions of the children in their class. Teachers should ask questions that inspire children to provide longer and more detailed responses (Diamond et al. (2013)). Teachers need to discuss the meaning of words during read-alouds and help children organize these words conceptually (Diamond et al. (2013); Beck, I. L., & McKeown, M. G. (2007). Increasing young low-income children’s oral vocabulary repertoires through rich and focused instruction. *The Elementary School Journal*, 107(3), 251-271; Institute of Medicine & National Research Council. (2015). *Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; M. Adams, personal communication, January 2016). They should encourage conversation, extend talk (e.g., by asking for more information), use relatively sophisticated vocabulary, and correct children when their speech is inaccurate (Dickinson, D. K., & Porche, M. V. (2011). Relation between language experiences in preschool classrooms and children’s kindergarten and fourth-grade language and reading abilities. *Child Development*, 82(3), 870-88).

- 7 Diamond et al. (2013).
- 8 For example:
 - One rigorous study found that when teachers underwent intensive professional development on a range of practices including language enrichment and scaffolding language, use of book readings to enhance language skills, and several other techniques directly related to language, their students showed gains in language comprehension and vocabulary. Landry, S. H., Swank, P. R., Smith, K. E., Assel, M. A., & Gunnewig, S. B. (2006). Enhancing early literacy skills for preschool children bringing a professional development model to scale. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 39(4), 306-324.
 - Gerde et al. (2009) found that teachers with more extensive training/educational background in early childhood were more likely to employ instructional approaches that lead to vocabulary gains. Gerde, H. K., & Powell, D. R. (2009). Teacher education, book-reading practice, and children's language growth across one year of Head Start. *Early Education and Development*, 20(2), 211-237.
 - Another study found that teachers rarely used conversational responsiveness and language developing strategies, although teachers' use of the former – and their students' language ability – improved when they trained in these areas. Piasta, S. B., Justice, L. M., Cabell, S. Q., Wiggins, A. K., Turnbull, K. P., & Curenton, S. M. (2012). Impact of professional development on preschool teachers' conversational responsiveness and children's linguistic productivity and complexity. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27(3), 387-400.
 - Neuman and Wright (2010) found that current preschool teachers showed no improvement after taking professional development coursework in early language and literacy development; however, they showed sustained improvement in teaching practices when completing this coursework in conjunction with weekly on-site coaching. Neuman S. B., & Wright, T. S. (2010). Promoting language and literacy development for early childhood educators: A mixed-methods study of coursework and coaching. *The Elementary School Journal*, 111(1), 63-86.
- 9 U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse. (2012). *Early childhood education interventions for children with disabilities intervention report: Phonological awareness training*. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/intervention_reports/wwc_pat_060512.pdf.
- 10 Diamond et al. (2013). An additional study defines print knowledge as “young children’s emerging knowledge of the specific forms and functions of written language. This includes understanding letters, rules governing print organization (e.g., left-to-right directionality of print in English orthography), and concept of word (i.e., words as being meaningful, discrete units that map to spoken words).” Piasta, S. B., Justice, L. M., McGinty, A. S., & Kaderavek, J. N. (2012). Increasing young children’s contact with print during shared reading: Longitudinal effects on literacy achievement. *Child Development*, 83(3), 810-820.
- 11 Landry et al. (2006). Note that these studies focus specifically on children with learning disabilities. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse. (2012). *Early childhood education interventions for children with disabilities intervention report: Phonological awareness training*. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/intervention_reports/wwc_pat_060512.pdf.
- 12 Diamond et al. (2013).
- 13 Diamond et al. (2013).
- 14 Diamond et al. (2013); Piasta et al. (2012).
- 15 Watts et al. (2014) found that math achievement and gains between preschool and first grade were highly predictive of math achievement up to age 15, although the strength of the relationship faded over time. Watts, T. W., Duncan, G. J., Siegler, R. S., & Davis-Kean, P. E. (2014). What’s past is prologue: Relations between early mathematics knowledge and high school achievement. *Educational Researcher*, 43(7), 352-360.
- 16 Diamond et al. (2013); Duncan, G. J., Dowsett, C. J., Claessens, A., Magnuson, K., Huston, A. C., Klebanov, P., ... & Japel, C. (2007). School readiness and later achievement. *Developmental Psychology*, 43(6), 1428-1446. Other research found that children’s math ability in preschool predicted their math ability at age 15, even after controlling for early reading ability and family characteristics. Watts et al. (2014).

- 17 Diamond et al. (2013).
- 18 Frye, D., Baroody, A. J., Burchinal, M., Carver, S. M., Jordan, N. C., & McDowell, J. (2013). *Teaching math to young children: A practice guide* (NCEE 2014-4005). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practice_guides/early_math_pg_111313.pdf.
- 19 Frye et al. (2013).
- 20 As summarized in Diamond et al. (2013), Gilliam and Golan (2006) report that preschool children are suspended at a higher rate than either elementary or secondary students. Gilliam, W. S., & Golan, S. (2006). Preschool and child care expulsion and suspension: Rates and predictors in one state. *Infants & Young Children, 19*(3), 228-245. Denton, Germino-Hausken, and West (2000) report ECLS-K data that 10 percent of children enter kindergarten exhibiting persistent behavior problems. Denton, K., Germino-Hausken, E., & West, J. (2000). *America's Kindergartners* (NCES 2000-707). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/2000070.pdf>. Kupersmidt, Bryant, and Willoughby (2000) report that 10-23 percent of children in Head Start exhibit such problems. Kupersmidt, J.B., Bryant, D., & Willoughby, M.T. (2000). Prevalence of aggressive behaviors among preschoolers in Head Start and community child care programs. *Behavioral Disorders, 26*(26), 46-52.
- 21 Diamond et al. (2013). Epstein, M., Atkins, M., Cullinan, D., Kutash, K., and Weaver, R. (2008). *Reducing behavior problems in the elementary school classroom: A practice guide* (NCEE 2008-012). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practice_guides/behavior_pg_092308.pdf. National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2010). 2010 NAEYC standards for initial & advanced early childhood professional preparation programs. Retrieved from <http://www.naeyc.org/files/ecada/file/2010%20NAEYC%20Initial%20&%20Advanced%20Standards.pdf>.
- 22 Training teachers to establish clear rules and routines, reward positive behavior, and redirect negative behavior may lead to improvements in children's self-regulation as well as gains in vocabulary, letter-naming, and math skills. (Raver, C. C., Jones, S. M., Li-Grining, C., Zhai, F., Bub, K., & Pressler, E. (2011). CSRPs impact on low-income preschoolers' preacademic skills: self-regulation as a mediating mechanism. *Child Development, 82*(1), 362-378). Training kindergarten teachers in the Tools of the Mind curriculum, which emphasizes executive functioning and the role of play in learning, helped improve children's reasoning and control of attention, as well as reading, vocabulary, and math skills (Blair, C., & Raver, C. C. (2014). Closing the achievement gap through modification of neurocognitive and neuroendocrine function: Results from a cluster randomized controlled trial of an innovative approach to the education of children in kindergarten. *PloS One, 9*(11), e112393)).
- 23 Mashburn et al. (2008).
- 24 Levine, A. (2006). *Educating school teachers*. Washington, DC: The Education Schools Project. Committee on the Study of Teacher Preparation Programs in the United States, & National Research Council. (2010). *Preparing teachers: Building evidence for sound policy*. National Academies Press.
- 25 Boyd, D. J., Grossman, P. L., Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2009). Teacher preparation and student achievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 31*(4), 416-440; Rose, D. J., & Church, J. R. (1998). Learning to teach: The acquisition and maintenance of teaching skills. *Journal of Behavioral Education, 8*(1), 5-35.
- 26 The State Teacher Policy Yearbook recommends that student teaching last at least 10 weeks. Several weeks should be spent fulfilling full-time teaching responsibilities. Jacobs, S., Doherty, K., Joseph, N., Lakis, K., Staresina, S., & Wasbotten, C. (2015). *2015 State teacher policy yearbook: National summary*. Washington, DC: National Council on Teacher Quality. Retrieved from http://www.nctq.org/dmsView/2015_State_Teacher_Policy_Yearbook_National_Summary_NCTQ_Report/
- 27 Diamond et al. (2013).



National Council on Teacher Quality

1120 G Street, NW, Suite 800
Washington, D.C. 20005
Tel: 202 393-0020 Fax: 202 393-0095
Web: www.nctq.org

**NCTQ is grateful to the W. K. Kellogg Foundation
for the funding for this work.**

The National Council on Teacher Quality advocates for reforms in a broad range of teacher policies at the federal, state and local levels in order to increase the number of effective teachers.

Follow us on  