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.
- 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.
- Private schools and other agencies that do not receive public funding employ teachers from a variety of backgrounds and may establish teacher requirements locally.

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. 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.”
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. Unfortunately, most preschool teachers do not naturally engage in these practices. However, intensive and focused training can help teachers make big strides.

**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), 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). Teacher training in these areas can translate into substantial gains for children in alphabet knowledge, vocabulary, and language skills.

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. 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.

**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.
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

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

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. Teachers’ emotional support for their students is associated with better social competence and lower rates of behavior problems.

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. 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. 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, and give the candidate an opportunity to practice with the age group she plans to teach.

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


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).
- 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).”


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.


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.


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.

Some Assembly Required: Piecing Together the Preparation Preschool Teachers Need

17 Diamond et al. (2013).


19 Frye et al. (2013).


23 Mashburn et al. (2008).


27 Diamond et al. (2013).
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.

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