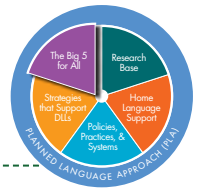




BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE



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INTRODUCTION TO BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Background knowledge is the information that children learn and store in their memories—including information about themselves, other people, objects, and the world around them. This includes the beliefs, values, rules, and expectations in children’s cultures, environments, and languages. Even very young children begin to understand the routines of their lives and the words people say to them. They learn when and how to eat, play, walk, run. They also learn how people interact with one another, what people wear, and what different objects are called and how we use them in our languages. Children use this background knowledge as they begin to talk, write, and use books and other print materials. Children may develop this knowledge in one or more languages and can transfer it from one language to another. As children grow and have meaningful interactions with new people, in new environments, and in new languages, they build on this prior knowledge.

Children learn from their experiences, often beginning with experiences within their family. For example, they learn about animals from having pets or living on a farm with livestock; or they learn about transportation by using cars, buses, trains, or boats in their community. They learn their family’s way of doing things—their languages, routines, cultural beliefs, values, rules, and expectations—in different settings, such as homes, stores, restaurants, and places of worship. Young children begin to make connections between what they see and hear and themselves. Children also learn through planned, intentional experiences, like hands-on learning experiences and reading books together. These experiences can help children build new knowledge and learn more about their world. They will use this knowledge as they begin to comprehend the books they hear and read. For example, they will draw from what they learned about plants when they read books about plants later in school. Knowing the types and parts of plants will help them read the words “stem” and “flower,” and help them understand books about the life cycle of plants.

Just like the other Big 5 topics, background knowledge is an important component of curriculum. This key literacy skill is addressed in the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, which is described fully on page 4. The curriculum should build on children’s backgrounds. Education staff can help children learn through planned experiences or teachable moments that build on children’s prior knowledge. Staff should also partner with families to learn about the rich background knowledge children already have and can use what they learn from their families with the children. Staff can also help families use this background knowledge to promote their children’s language and literacy skills at home, no matter what language they speak. Professional development opportunities should help staff build children’s knowledge and engage families. In other words, supporting background knowledge is part of a coordinated approach that supports children’s language and literacy development.



A coordinated approach also ensures the full and effective participation of children who are dual language learners (DLLs) and their families. We integrated the role that languages and cultures play in background knowledge development throughout this document.

“Dual language learner means a child who is acquiring two or more languages at the same time, or a child who is learning a second language while continuing to develop their first language.” Head Start Program Performance Standards, Part 1305 - 1305.2 Terms



CONNECTING EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS AND THE HEAD START EARLY LEARNING OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK: AGES BIRTH TO FIVE

Head Start and Early Head Start programs are required to implement program and teaching practices that are aligned with the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (HSELOF) and the state’s early learning and development standards (ELDS). Since background knowledge includes many types of knowledge, it is captured across domains such as cognition and social and emotional development. Background knowledge is also key to language and literacy development because children learn to express what they know through words and writing. Eventually, they read for meaning to increase their knowledge. This resource will show where the HSELOF addresses background knowledge from the language and literacy perspective.

For infants and toddlers, the goals associated with background knowledge appear under the Language and Literacy central domain and the sub-domains under the Language and Communication domain: 1) Attending and Understanding; 2) Communicating and Speaking; and 3) Vocabulary. The primary goals that address background knowledge are listed below.

ATTENDING AND UNDERSTANDING

- IT-LC 1. Child attends to, understands, and responds to communication and language from others.
- IT-LC 2. Child learns from communication and language experiences with others.



Infant/Toddler Language and Communication Sub-Domains

Attending and Understanding Communicating and Speaking Vocabulary Emergent Literacy

Goals for Sub-Domain: Attending and Understanding

- Goal IT-LC 1. Child attends to, understands, and responds to communication and language from others.
- Goal IT-LC 2. Child learns from communication and language experiences with others.

COMMUNICATING AND SPEAKING

- Goal IT-LC 3: Child communicates needs and wants non-verbally and by using language.
- Goal IT-LC 4: Child uses non-verbal communication and language to engage others in interaction.
- Goal IT-LC 5: Child uses increasingly complex language in conversation with others.
- Goal IT-LC 6: Child initiates non-verbal communication and language to learn and gain information.

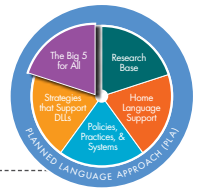


Infant/Toddler Language and Communication Sub-Domains

Attending and Understanding **Communicating and Speaking** Vocabulary Emergent Literacy

Goals for Sub-Domain: Communicating and Speaking

- Goal IT-LC 3. Child communicates needs and wants non-verbally and by using language.
- Goal IT-LC 4. Child uses non-verbal communication and language to engage others in interaction.
- Goal IT-LC 5. Child uses increasingly complex language in conversation with others.
- Goal IT-LC 6. Child initiates non-verbal communication and language to learn and gain information.



VOCABULARY

- Goal IT-LC 7. Child understands an increasing number of words used in communication with others.
- Goal IT-LC 8. Child uses an increasing number of words in communication and conversation with others.

ELOF



Infant/Toddler Language and Communication Sub-Domains

Attending and Understanding Communicating and Speaking **Vocabulary** Emergent Literacy

Goals for Sub-Domain: Vocabulary

Goal IT-LC 7. Child understands an increasing number of words used in communication with others.

Goal IT-LC 8. Child uses an increasing number of words in communication and conversation with others.

For preschoolers, goals associated with background knowledge appear in the Language and Literacy central domain and the sub-domains under Language and Communication: 1) Attending and Understanding; 2) Communicating and Speaking; and 3) Vocabulary. Find the primary goals that address background knowledge below.

ATTENDING AND UNDERSTANDING

- Goal P-LC 1: Child attends to communication and language from others.
- Goal P-LC 2: Child understands and responds to increasingly complex communication and language from others.

ELOF



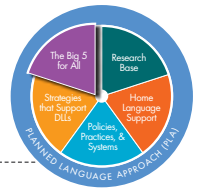
Preschooler Language and Communication Sub-Domains

Attending and Understanding Communicating and Speaking Vocabulary

Goals for Sub-Domain: Attending and Understanding

Goal P-LC 1. Child attends to communication and language from others.

Goal P-LC 2. Child understands and responds to increasingly complex communication and language from others.



COMMUNICATING AND SPEAKING

- Goal P-LC 3: Child varies the amount of information provided to meet the demands of the situation.
- Goal P-LC 4: Child understands, follows, and uses appropriate social and conversational rules.
- Goal P-LC 5: Child expresses self in increasingly long, detailed, and sophisticated ways.



Preschooler Language and Communication Sub-Domains

Attending and Understanding

Communicating and Speaking

Vocabulary

Goals for Sub-Domain: Communicating and Speaking

Goal P-LC 3. Child varies the amount of information provided to meet the demands of the situation.

Goal P-LC 4. Child understands, follows, and uses appropriate social and conversational rules.

Goal P-LC 5. Child expresses self in increasingly long, detailed, and sophisticated ways.

VOCABULARY

- Goal P-LC 6. Child understands and uses a wide variety of words for a variety of purposes.
- Goal P-LC 7. Child shows understanding of word categories and relationships among words.



Preschooler Language and Communication Sub-Domains

Attending and Understanding

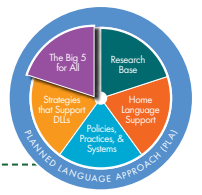
Communicating and Speaking

Vocabulary

Goals for Sub-Domain: Vocabulary

Goal P-LC 6. Child understands and uses a wide variety of words for a variety of purposes.

Goal P-LC 7. Child shows understanding of word categories and relationships among words.



WHY BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE MATTERS: UNDERSTANDING THE RESEARCH

Children develop background knowledge through their daily interactions and experiences in their families and communities. Their minds organize information into concepts (schemas) from birth. Children connect information they are learning to familiar concepts.

Children's growing knowledge is an essential component of their cognitive development and success later in school⁷. Background knowledge is important, not only for content and conceptual development, but also for reading comprehension and achievement¹. Evidence suggests that gaps in children's background knowledge may make it harder for them to understand what they read and hear later in school⁶. Wide and deep background knowledge helps children make sense of the new information they learn at school. "Everything that children read or hear is automatically interpreted relative to what they already know about similar subjects...children with rich knowledge bases are more successful at learning new information^(7, p. ix)".

Background knowledge "appears to be a key factor for both vocabulary acquisition and comprehension^(2, p. 206)."



"FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE" AS BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Children have similarities and differences in their background knowledge because they draw from different "funds of knowledge." Funds of knowledge are the information that children's families and communities develop, value, and share with their children⁴. Children from different cultures or backgrounds may have large sets of knowledge that adults from other cultures and backgrounds may not be aware of, so it is essential that education staff learn about the unique background knowledge each child has so they can build on these experiences. For example, some children may know a lot about gardening, since growing food is highly valued within their family and culture. Some children may develop self-care skills like dressing and feeding themselves at a very young age since independence is highly valued within their family and culture.

Some children may have lived in another country and be familiar with a different climates and landscapes. Others may have traveled little, but they have wide and varied experiences in their local communities that include going to the zoo, playground, library, or beach. These varied experiences contribute to the background knowledge children use to learn. Cultural knowledge is also part of children's funds. Children begin learning how to participate in a culture at birth. For example, a baby may experience a back-and-forth conversational exchange. A toddler will learn when and how to speak to elders or peers. A child may learn to be quiet during a religious ceremony or on a public bus. Each child's background knowledge is unlike any other child's because it is based on the child's own experiences and interests. These rich and varied experiences may be valuable resources when learning about different topics and in planning learning experiences and activities⁵. It is important not to assume what background knowledge children possess. The best way to find out is to engage with the children and their families.



BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE AND CHILDREN WHO ARE DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS (DLLs)

Children who are dual language learners (DLLs) develop background knowledge in each of their languages. For example, they may know about the foods and cooking techniques used at home in their home language. But they may not know all the vocabulary words in English they would need to express this information to an English speaker. They also may not know as much about the foods and cooking techniques included in a curriculum's unit or study on food and cooking. With support, children learn to transfer this knowledge from one language to another⁵.

Understanding children's prior experiences and background knowledge is crucial for valid screenings and ongoing child assessments. Screening and assessing children who are DLLs includes learning about children's experiences and prior knowledge in each of their languages. Families are an important part of the screening and assessment process because they have valuable information to share about their children's knowledge and skills within their home language and culture, as well as in English. See [Gathering and Using Language Information That Families Share](#) for more on assessing background knowledge.

Alicia, a Spanish and English speaker, and Xiao, a Chinese and English speaker, are preschoolers who have both developed background knowledge about animals based on their experiences in their families and communities.

Alicia

Animals are pets. My dog cuddles with me. He licks my face. He loves me!

My dog has a collar around his neck with my phone number. He stays close to me on a leash.



Xiao

Animals are food. We buy chickens from the market and my grandmother makes delicious soup. I help!

You can make lots of food from chicken. My favorite is chicken dumplings. I help make the wrappers and we fold the meat inside the dough.



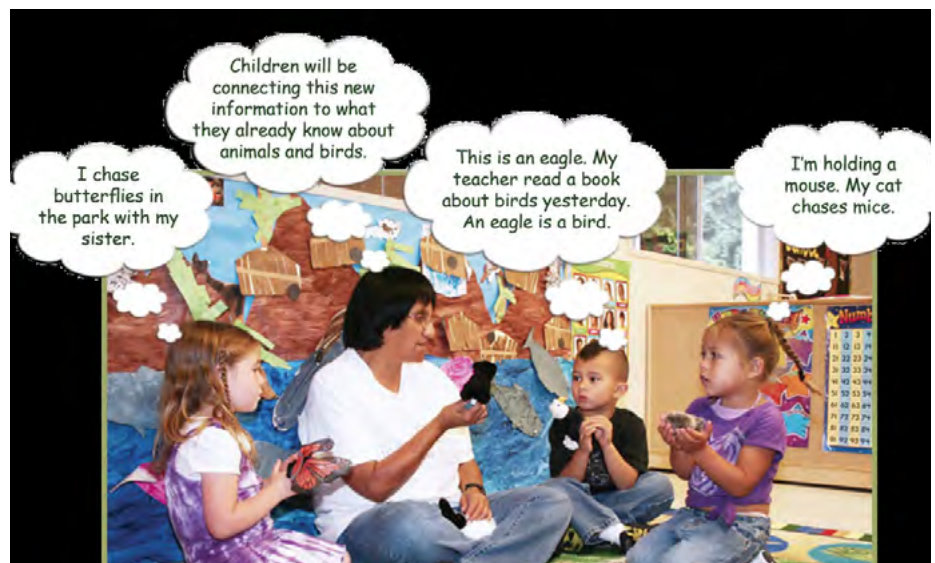
Note that Alicia and Xiao may be using their home languages to express their knowledge about animals. Each child has already developed a lot of background knowledge about animals through their experiences at home.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION FROM BIRTH TO AGE FIVE

Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers develop background knowledge as family members and other adults help them as they interact with their home, community, and environment. Adults teach children their language and cultural ways through their interactions and sometimes through intentional teaching practices. As stated earlier, children store information about themselves, other people, and objects, as well as their families' beliefs, values, rules, and behavioral expectations from these early experiences³. Education staff need to learn about the unique background knowledge each child brings so they can build on this knowledge.

Children develop and use background knowledge when they

- connect new information to knowledge they have already stored and organized in their memories;
- understand and gain new knowledge when adults provide a variety of diverse experiences and instruction, including observations, modeling, explanations, books, and other intentional interactions;
- solve problems and figure things out based on their emerging understandings about how their world works (e.g., people and interactions, objects, natural phenomena, and human-made events);
- offer to show things to others or share what they know;
- ask and answer questions about topics of interest;
- expand their use of language and develop new vocabulary as they learn more about their world;
- share their own cultural practices or ways of doing things;
- reflect on their knowledge, gain new insight, and rethink or ask questions based on those insights (preschoolers and older); and
- begin to express what they know through emerging writing skills.



HOW DOES BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE DEVELOP?

INFANT AND TODDLER

Infants and toddlers develop background knowledge primarily from their varied experiences exploring their world. Adult support can help them make sense of these experiences. Children may

- know the family dog and name other 4-legged animals as well;
- have experiences with cats and learn the correct name and characteristics of two animals; and
- expand their knowledge of 4-legged animals through experiences and books, learning the names and characteristics of many different animals.

PRESCHOOL

Preschoolers can connect their experiences with books that adults read to them and other sources of knowledge. They also enjoy displaying and sharing their knowledge with others. Children may

- learn about animals through books and school projects—in English and the home language—and transfer what they know in their home language to what they are learning in English;
- learn to categorize the animals they know into farm, zoo, and jungle animals;
- categorize more animals—for example, mammals, birds, fish, insects, and reptiles—and identify them as either wild or domesticated;
- understand the larger concept of mammals; and their characteristics; and
- become curious about insects and how they differ from mammals.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Early experiences building background knowledge support school readiness skills. This includes word recognition, reading comprehension, and positive approaches to learning. Children may

- recognize and understand words, such as “mammal,” “jungle,” and “wild” when reading;
- write the names of their favorite animals and insects in English and the home language;
- use their knowledge of animals to help comprehend the books they read; and
- confidently ask questions and engage with science and social studies activities because they like showing what they know and learning new things.

EFFECTIVE PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Talking, reading, and exploring the world with guidance from education staff provides opportunities for young children to build background knowledge. The more children understand about their world, the easier it will be for them to learn.

WAYS TO BUILD BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Explore rich and engaging topics together over time.

- Choose fun and interesting topics to explore based on children's preferences, families' suggestions, and your own interests and knowledge.
- Explore topics repeatedly over time—even over the whole year. It is easier for children to remember what they have learned when they see the information several times over an extended period.
- Create environments in which adults take children's questions seriously and respect them, even if they cannot answer them immediately. Model how to find answers to questions by researching together on a computer or in expository books from the local library.
- Invite families to provide background knowledge at home, in the group care setting, and during socializations. Encourage them to talk to their children in their home language about their own experiences with the topics you explore or ask them to share their knowledge with the entire group.



Build on children's prior knowledge.

- Look to families as a source of understanding about children's background knowledge. Talk to them about what their children know, do, say, and enjoy.
- Consider children's prior knowledge as you conduct screening and ongoing assessment so that you know what concepts or vocabulary may be new to children
- Talk with children about the connections between what they are doing and seeing at the moment, what they have done and seen in the past, and what they will do or see in the future.
- Ask children what they already know about an activity or a topic as you begin to explore it.
- Use home languages and English to learn about and discuss children's prior experiences. Support children who are dual language learners as they make connections between knowledge they developed in their home language and knowledge they are developing in English.
- Plan learning experiences and activities that build on prior experiences and connect to individual child goals and program level school readiness goals.
- Share information with families on an ongoing basis as you build children's knowledge together.





HOW TO SUPPORT BABIES AS THEY DEVELOP BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Babies begin to learn about the world around them even before they are born! With every interaction that babies and young children have with their environments and the people in them, they learn about how things work, how people respond, and what it feels like to be hungry or full, wet or dry, sleepy or alert. Babies develop background knowledge primarily from their varied experiences in their world and by interacting with adults who will help them make sense of those experiences.

Babies begin to develop background knowledge when adults

- notice when babies are alert and interested and take advantage of these moments to interact;
- talk or sign to babies about their daily routines and activities, such as feeding, diapering, swaddling, and tummy time, using their home language;
- offer safe toys or objects—things like balls, spoons, cups—that have different textures, such as smooth, bumpy, or soft. Modify the objects as needed so that babies who have fine motor challenges can hold or grasp the objects;
- intentionally use words in their home language or sign language to label textures, shapes, sounds, and actions as babies explore;
- engage babies in “conversations” by responding with different facial expressions, gestures, or words or signs each time a baby babbles and coos;
- provide and read a variety of culturally and linguistically appropriate books with interesting photos and illustrations of objects, animals, and people to point to and talk about;
- take babies out into the community to places such as grocery stores, parks, forests, cultural events, and places of worship and describe sights, sounds, and smells.



Eight-month-old Juanita touches a soft stuffed animal her mother has given her, and then she touches the hard floor, enjoying feeling the different surfaces at home. Her mother describes what she touches and feels in Spanish.

Juanita is developing her knowledge of texture, vocabulary, and how to make sense of what she feels!

When she comes to the infant classroom, she notices that there are hard and soft surfaces. Her teachers describe the surfaces and how they feel in Spanish. Juanita’s teachers help her build on knowledge and language she is developing at home.

Home visitors can help parents identify, adapt, and try the practices listed above during home visits and group socializations.

GOAL IT-LC 2. CHILD LEARNS FROM COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE EXPERIENCES WITH OTHERS.



DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION			INDICATORS
Birth to 9 Months	8 to 18 Months	16 to 36 Months	By 36 Months
<p>Pays attention when familiar adults talk or sign about objects, people, or events during face-to-face interactions by changing focus, making eye contact, or looking at people or objects.</p>	<p>Participates in joint attention with an adult by looking back and forth between the adult and object. Points or gestures when an adult is pointing, naming, or signing about a familiar or new object and learns names and uses of objects.</p>	<p>Participates in increasingly complex and lengthy periods of joint attention with adults. Shows interest, understanding, or enjoyment when participating in language activities, such as demonstrating understanding of objects’ functions and uses, or when joining in games, songs, rhymes, or stories.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Acts on descriptions provided by others about people, objects, or events. ■ Demonstrates interest and understanding when participating in language activities or games.

HOW TO SUPPORT TODDLERS AS THEY DEVELOP BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Toddlers develop background knowledge through their interactions with others and with guided opportunities to safely explore the world. Adults help toddlers develop background knowledge by providing them with lots of meaningful, hands-on experiences and describing what they see, hear, smell, and touch, and why they do—and do not do—certain things. Toddlers learn the words in the languages they hear, so it is important that they hear lots of languages during this exciting period of development.

Toddlers develop background knowledge when adults

- use a home or sign language to explain daily routines and activities (e.g., “First, we have to go to the grocery store, and then we will go visit your abuelita.”);
- help them safely explore the world by doing things like turning over rocks to look at insects, feeding birds, looking for pictures in the clouds, drawing pictures in the dirt with sticks, collecting interesting rocks (or seashells or leaves or acorns), and rolling down a grassy hill;
- use a home or sign language to talk about what children see (e.g., “Look at those ants carry those big crumbs! Let’s watch and see where they are taking them.”);
- teach them new and interesting words and concepts in a home language and in English—such as day and night, the changing seasons, types of weather, how things grow (e.g., “That is a coconut! It is the biggest seed in the world!”);
- provide and read a variety of culturally and linguistically appropriate books with interesting photos, illustrations, characters, and simple story lines to talk about;
- visit different places, such as grocery stores, parks, forests, cultural events, and places of worship, and describe what they see, touch, hear, taste, and smell (e.g., “Can you smell fish? This is the fish market. Let’s see if there are lobsters to look at.”);
- build on what toddlers know by stretching and expanding that knowledge (e.g., “Remember when we saw the ducks swimming with their webbed feet? Well, frogs have webbed feet, too. Those flaps of skin between their toes help them swim fast!”);
- respond to their questions (e.g., “That’s a good question. Let’s think about how we can find out the answer.”);
- provide feedback that helps them learn more about the world (e.g., “Well, yes, it looks like a duck, but it’s a swan. See how it has a long neck...”);
- talk about objects, animals and their categories (e.g., “Here is a knife, a fork, and a spoon. They are all silverware.” “Cows, chickens, and sheep live on farms. They are all farm animals”);
- encourage and support imaginary play (e.g., “Look at this box! We can pretend it is a car, boat, or a fire truck...”);
- encourage them to show what they know through painting, drawing, and “writing,” and talk with them about their creations; modify the environment and tools so that children who need more individualized support can access and use the space and materials for painting, drawing, and “writing;” and
- support children as they use assistive technology, as identified on their Individual Family Service Plans, to communicate what they know about people, objects, and events in their environments, and ask and respond to questions.



Min, 34 months old, is having a picnic with his family at the playground. They are eating bi bim bap, a Korean dish with beef, rice, and vegetables. Min sees his neighbor Miguel having lunch with his family. Miguel’s family is eating rice and beans rather than bi bim bap. Min asks his mother why. She explains that people around the world use rice in different ways. Miguel’s family comes from Mexico, and they like to eat rice with beans.

Min is developing his knowledge about rice and about different cultures!

Min tells the home visitor about the rice and beans. The home visitor tells Min and his mother that she eats biryani at home and that it is made with rice. Min’s mother adds that rice is also in sushi, a dish their Japanese neighbors made for them. Together, the home visitor and Min’s mother build Min’s background knowledge and vocabulary.

Home visitors can help parents identify, adapt, and try the practices listed above during home visits and group socializations.



GOAL IT-IC 6. CHILD INITIATES NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE TO LEARN AND GAIN INFORMATION.

DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION			INDICATORS
Birth to 9 Months	8 to 18 Months	16 to 36 Months	By 36 Months
Takes turns in non-verbal conversations by using facial expressions, sounds, gestures, or signs to initiate or respond to communication.	Asks simple questions using gestures, such as pointing, signs or words, with variations in pitch and intonation.	Seeks information and meaning of words by asking questions in words or signs, such as "What's that?" or "Who's that?" or "Why?"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asks questions in a variety of ways. Repeats or re-phrases questions until a response is received.



HOW TO SUPPORT PRESCHOOLERS AS THEY DEVELOP BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Children develop background knowledge and their own ways of thinking about the world (i.e., funds of knowledge) through their experiences with their family and within their culture using their home languages. The more opportunities they have to engage in conversations and experiences with others, the more they will develop these funds of knowledge. In addition, their background knowledge and experiences are a rich source of content for conversations in group care settings or group socializations. Building on children's funds of knowledge by explicitly connecting what they know in their home language to words and concepts in English expands what they already know and introduces them to new ideas in a new language.



PRESCHOOLERS DEVELOP BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE WHEN ADULTS

- show children their own interest and curiosity in the world (e.g., "This book says that crabs and ants have exoskeletons to protect them. I've never heard that word! Let's keep reading and see if we can find out how an exoskeleton protects them!");
- share age-appropriate informational (nonfiction) and narrative (fiction) texts in children's home languages and in English. Read parts or all of the text, depending on children's interest; briefly pause to explain unfamiliar words and concepts during reading (e.g., "He was curious—he wanted to learn about everything—curious.");
- use conceptually rich talk (verbally or sign language) that builds children's knowledge of words and concepts (e.g., "A bat is nocturnal. That means they are active at night.");
- develop thematic units or project-based investigations that provide opportunities for children to meaningfully explore fun and interesting topics, such as buildings, trees, plants, water, and transportation;
- engage children in concrete, meaning-making activities, such as planting a garden, and include opportunities to learn new vocabulary—words such as "seed," "plantlet," "cutting," "bulb," "tuber"—and concepts in meaningful ways (e.g., "We need to water the garden today because it has not rained and plants need water to grow—just like you do!"). Ensure children with physical limitations have access to space where activities take place and appropriate modifications to toys, materials, and tools used in the activities;

Four-year-olds Ari, Jean, and Stefan tend their sprouts in the community garden near their family child care provider's house every day, making sure the sprouts get both sun and water.

Ari, Jean, and Stefan are learning about plants, the water cycle, and where food comes from!

As Ari eats an apple for snack, he tells his family child care provider that his Abba (Daddy) said apples were also plants and need sun and water.

Ari's family child care provider notes that he is continuing to develop his background knowledge of plants. She shares a book about apple trees with Ari and his peers (even the two toddlers in the group are interested!). She tells the children that apple trees grow, just like Ari, Jean, and Stefan's sprouts do.



- connect new knowledge to what children already know (e.g., “Remember when we saw those chickens sitting on their eggs to hatch them? Frogs are different! Frogs lays their eggs in water and then they swim away!”);
- ask questions (verbally or sign language) that encourage thinking and reasoning about everyday experiences (e.g., “Why do you think a police siren makes such a loud noise?”) and the natural world (e.g., “How does camouflage keep animals safe?”);
- provide gentle but accurate feedback when a child is confused or misunderstands something (“That is called the banana peel, not the banana skin.”);
- have daily conversations (verbally or sign language) about topics of interests; explain unfamiliar words and concepts (e.g., “That window is transparent. ‘Transparent’ means something is clear and you can see right through it!”);
- talk about items and their categories verbally or using sign language (e.g., “This is a chameleon. It is a kind of lizard—just like your poodle is a kind of dog.”); and
- support their use of assistive technology, as identified on their Individualized Education Programs, to communicate what they know about people and the world around them, and ask and respond to questions.



Home visitors can help parents identify, adapt, and try the practices listed above during home visits and group socializations.

Five-year-old Alex learns the names and eating habits of 15 kinds of dinosaurs, an interest he picked up from his seven-year-old brother.

Alex is developing his content knowledge about dinosaurs, learning how to categorize, and becoming enthusiastic about learning and sharing knowledge!

At Alex’s Head Start center, he acts out the different dinosaurs. He carefully stretches out tall or squats down short, depending on how big the dinosaur is. Alex creates drawings of dinosaurs, sometimes relying on books for pictures and the spelling of their names.

Alex’s teachers support his interests by having conversations about dinosaurs. They provide him with materials about dinosaurs, including templates, books, and printouts from the Internet.



GOAL P-LC 1. CHILD ATTENDS TO COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE FROM OTHERS.



DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION		INDICATORS
36 to 48 Months	48 to 60 Months	By 60 Months
Shows acknowledgment of comments or questions and is able to attend to conversations, either spoken or signed.	Shows acknowledgment of complex comments or questions. Is able to attend to longer, multi-turn conversations, either spoken or signed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Uses verbal and non-verbal signals appropriately to acknowledge the comments or questions of others. ■ Shows ongoing connection to a conversation, group discussion, or presentation.

EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE PRACTICES IN EARLY LEARNING SETTINGS

EXAMPLES WITH INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Reyna, a toddler teacher, supports Jamal as he explores his world. While his explorations of food can be a distraction at mealtime and snack, Reyna knows they can also provide rich opportunities for learning.

Reyna notices that her toddlers love to touch their food, especially Jamal. He is very interested in separating the bread from its crust. When Reyna speaks with Jamal's family about his interest in bread, she learns that he has always loved bread and that his family eats it daily. As an infant, he would grab for it. With encouragement from Reyna, his family is following his lead and providing opportunities for him to explore bread. They have begun to introduce different toppings, like butter, jam, and cheese. Reyna builds on these home experiences and provides opportunities for further exploration in the classroom.



Reyna says the word “crust” each time Jamal tears off the crust. She also asks him to help her serve the bread and shows him what a whole “loaf” looks like. Jamal will not use these new words yet, but with Reyna's support he is learning information about his world that interests him greatly.

Reyna also shares books about bread with him, reminding him as she reads that he eats bread. She encourages Jamal to explore toppings as new ones are introduced, such as hummus and sunflower butter. She even encourages Jamal to share “crumbs” with the birds.

IN AN INFANT CLASSROOM

Clara notices that 4-month-old Jennie is staring at a stuffed cat near where she is laying on the carpet. Clara picks up the toy and moves it closer to Jennie's face. “Gato” [“Cat,”] she says as she gently shakes the cat. Jennie follows the cat's movement with her eyes. “Do you want to hold the cat?” Clara asks. “Here! You hold it,” she says as she puts it in Jennie's hands. Jennie brings the cat to her mouth and begins to chew on it. “Oh, does that cat feel soft in your mouth?” Clara asks. Later, Clara asks Jennie's mom or dad about whether they have a cat at home. She also brings in board books with cats and introduces them in the book bin.

IN THE COMMUNITY

During the last home visit, Mai and Chris, her home visitor, talk about teaching 11-month-old Hong new words and signs and symbols. Mai suggests taking Hong for a walk around the neighborhood and pointing out street signs. Chris adds suggestions about traffic and safety. Today, Mai and Hong take a walk to the store. On the way, they stop at a busy intersection and Mai, who speaks Vietnamese to her daughter, says, “Look at the red stop sign. That means we have to stop before we cross the street so we can be careful and safe. Cars have to stop, too.” When she sees it is safe to cross, Mai says, “The cars stopped, so we can cross the street now. Let's make sure we stay in the crosswalk!” They cross to the other side and continue walking to the store. On their way home, Mai repeats her talk about traffic, street signs, and safety and even uses the new word, crosswalk, again so that Hong can learn more about these words and concepts. Mai will share this experience with Chris during the next home visit.



IN A TODDLER CLASSROOM

Mr. Nguyen reads a short story about a butterfly with a small group of toddlers. He points to the photographs that show the butterfly landing on flowers. One of the children points to the butterfly's wings. Mr. Nguyen asks what the butterfly does with its wings; three children respond, “Fly!” and the

fourth moves his arms up and down. “Yes,” says Mr. Nguyen, “butterflies fly to different kinds of flowers and then land on them so they can eat the nectar. Nectar is a liquid like water. It’s sweet. Butterflies like nectar.” He shows the children some toy butterflies and some imitation flowers in a pot he has brought to class. “What would the butterflies do if they saw these flowers?” he asks. “They fly up,” answers Lea. “Can you show us how they would fly and land on a flower, Lea?” Lea demonstrates. “Yes. Like that!” Mr. Nguyen sets up a small area with the toy butterflies and flowers and the children go there when they want to help the butterflies land on the flowers.

IN THE COMMUNITY

Mrs. Diaz, a family child care provider, takes her small group of toddlers, including her two-year-old granddaughter, Soledad, to the market. Soledad and another toddler, Clara, sit in the shopping cart and look at the weekly food specials with Mrs. Diaz before going in. “Vamos a comprar maíz” [“Let’s get some corn,”] says Mrs. Diaz as she looks at her shopping list and points to the corn. “Corn is a type of vegetable. Look! There are beans and squash right next to the corn. They are all vegetables, too!” Mrs. Diaz is helping her toddlers learn that vegetables are a category of food and that corn, beans, and squash are part of that category. Soledad and her peers are also learning about the market, shopping lists, and food advertisements while they have fun with Mrs. Diaz, who loves all her children, especially her granddaughter, a lot!



EXAMPLES WITH PRESCHOOLERS

Ina is a home visitor to seven Armenian-speaking families and five English-speaking families. When she visits their homes, the children often talk about what they like to eat.

When Ina talks with the families about children’s interests in food, the topic of bread and bread-making comes up. So Ina and the families decide to explore this with the children. The families provide her with the names of the breads in their home languages, bread recipes, and descriptions of how the breads are used in their cultural traditions (for example, for certain holidays or at particular times of the day or year). One family shares gluten-free bread recipes because a family member has celiac disease.

During a home visit, Ina and each family make the family’s favorite breads. Many of the Armenian-speaking families want to make *lavash*, a thin unleavened flatbread. Ina and each family make a chart of all the steps involved in making bread. They also read books about bread (a favorite is *Bread, Bread, Bread* by Ann Morris; the local library carries the book and the Head Start program has copies in their family lending library). The children learn the vocabulary of making bread, including *knead*, *rise*, *bake*, *crust*, *dough*, and *yeast*. Over several group socializations, family members make an illustrated recipe book together. Each family receives a copy. The children and families enjoy flipping through the book as they remember making bread and decide which bread to make next.



IN A PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM

Teacher Nikki, who speaks English and understands some Spanish, is reading a book about animals. “This part of the book is about oviparous animals. I had to look that word up. *Oviparous* means ‘animals that lay eggs.’” She then asks the children to tell her what animals they might see in this part of the book. The children call out, “Un pájaro [a bird]! Una rana [a frog]! A whale!” Nikki says, “Well, yes. Birds lay eggs, and so do frogs, but a whale is a mammal. Most mammal babies are born live and do not lay eggs.” Eli adds, “My sister’s favorite animal is a platypus. Is a platypus ovi-ovi...” his voice trails off. “Is it oviparous?” Nikki responds, “Well, yes, it is because a platypus lays eggs. And a platypus is also a mammal. What else do you know about the platypus?” After Eli tells them what he knows, Nikki returns to the book. As she reads, she notices that Eli is smiling. She knows he is excited to share his new knowledge and his new word with his sister.



IN A FAMILY CHILD CARE HOME

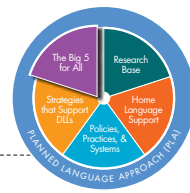
It is early summer and the three preschoolers in Marianna’s family child care have been learning about how plants and trees grow. Today they are outside exploring the small pear tree that the children helped Marianna and her husband plant early last fall in a corner of the backyard. They have been observing the changes in their tree all year as they learned about the seasons and weather. But now Marianna is encouraging the children to connect all the different things they have been learning about trees.

“Let’s talk about all the parts of this pear tree.” “Roots, branches, leaves,” the children call out. Pointing to the trunk, Marianna asks, “What is the special name for this part of the tree?” “The trunk,” two children call out. “Like an elephant!” responds the third. “Hmmm,” Marianna says, pausing to think. “You know, that is really interesting! This tree has a trunk. How is this trunk [she points to tree] different from an elephant’s trunk?” she asks. When the children have finished making the trunk comparisons, discussing the parts of the tree and how it is growing, Marianna passes out paper, clipboards, and pencils. “I want you to observe the tree—just check it out. As you observe it, I want you to draw what you see.” When the children return finish their drawings, Marianna tells them this is the kind of work that scientists do—observing nature and making notes.



IN A PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM

With their teacher’s help, Fatima and four of her friends are making a list of community helpers to post in the room. “Policeman!” Albert says. “Police! Booliska [*police* in Somali]!” “Police officer!” responds Fatima. Their teacher says, “Fatima has said something that we need to think about. The police officer who visited our school was a man—but Fatima, remind the class about your cousin.” Fatima says, “My cousin is going to police school. She’s a girl, so she can’t be a policeman.” The teacher nods and says, “That’s right. She is going to the police academy so she can train and learn how to become a police officer. So if we are talking about the men and women who work for the police department, we can say ‘police officer.’” As the teacher turns to write *police officer* on the class list, she notices that a child looks confused. “Daniel, what are you thinking about?” Daniel asks, “How do you say ‘girl fireman’?”



HOME AND SCHOOL CONNECTIONS

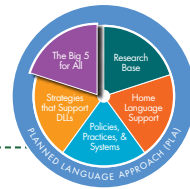
During dinner, 4-year-old Carlitos tells his parents and brother about something that happened at school that day. “Today, Chiara’s uncle brought his backhoe to school to show us.” His mother asks, “¿Que les dijo?” [What did he tell you?] “His name was Miguel,” explains Carlitos. “Miguel told us about how he works for a contractor that helps build houses and stores.” “¿Que interesante!” [That sounds interesting!] his father says. Carlitos continues, “He says that everybody had different jobs at a construction site, but that they all have to work together. If they didn’t, it would be dangerous.” Carlitos’ brother asks, “Did you get to sit in the backhoe?” Carlitos smiles, “¡Sí Pude tocar los controls.” [Yes! And I got to touch the controls.] “Miguel also drives an excavator. My teacher asked if he could bring it to school. That was so funny!” “Why was that funny?” Carlitos’ brother asks. “Because,” Carlito explains, “Miguel can’t drive his excavator to school. It has crawler tracks—not wheels!” After dinner, Carlitos shows his family pictures of backhoes and excavators in his favorite book, pointing out crawler tracks and a trailer Miguel could use to bring the excavator to school.

SUMMARY

This resource focuses on how background knowledge is an important foundation for learning. It discusses the connection to the ELOF’s goals and provides examples of the developmental progression from birth to age five.

Authors also stress the importance of language and culture in background knowledge. Children build on their background knowledge as they learn new things in each of their languages at home, in the community, and in early learning settings. They connect new information they see, hear, and experience to more familiar ideas.

Note the practical strategies that support children’s background knowledge in different early learning settings. Adults help support children build these connections between what they are learning now and what they already know (in English and in a home language). Adults also support children’s background knowledge by providing them with new experiences (in any language) that expand their thinking. Later in school, children will use this background knowledge as they understand what they read and as they write and speak.



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