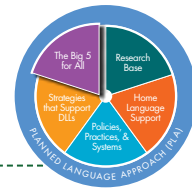
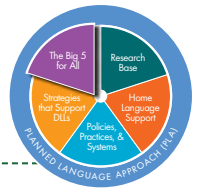


## ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE AND EARLY WRITING



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## INTRODUCTION TO ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE AND EARLY WRITING

Young children develop oral language through speaking and listening. Most languages, like English, also include a written form. For example, the letters of the alphabet are the building blocks of English. Pictorial characters are the written form of Chinese.

Alphabet knowledge and early writing are separate but related skills in alphabetic languages like English, Spanish, and Russian. Together they support later reading and writing. Young children show they are starting to understand alphabet knowledge and early writing when they

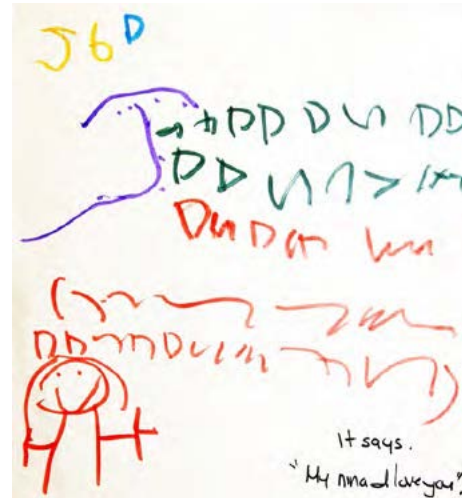
- begin to recognize letters and letter sounds;
- scribble to share a message—like taking an order in a pretend restaurant;
- make letters that look more and more like conventional print; and
- write (or try to write) their names.

Alphabet knowledge builds on young children’s experiences with letters in their daily lives. Babies and toddlers begin to see print in books and on labels and signs. Preschoolers begin to recognize these letters and learn letter names and sounds. The first letter children often learn is the first letter of their own name!

Children’s early writing reflects how they understand written language. They start by making marks, scribbling, and drawing. As they learn more about the writing system, their own writing will begin to look more typical. For example, children learning English will begin to make letter shapes. Children learning Chinese will begin to make Chinese pictorial characters.

Just like the other Big 5 topics, alphabet knowledge and early writing should be part of the curriculum—supported every day, throughout the day. Education staff can plan experiences or capitalize on teachable moments to help children learn about the alphabet and develop writing skills. Staff also support families as they help children learn how to write in their language(s). Professional development opportunities should help staff build children’s knowledge and engage families. In other words, supporting alphabet knowledge and early writing is part of a coordinated approach across the whole program to encourage each child to write in all the child’s languages.

A coordinated approach also ensures the full and effective participation of children who are Dual Language Learners (DLLs) and their families. This document shares the role that languages and culture play in children’s alphabet knowledge and early writing development. It also notes differences between English and other languages to so staff can better support diverse learners.



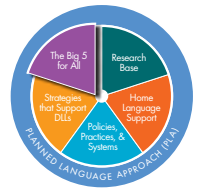
“Dual language learner means a child who is acquiring two or more languages at the same time, or a child who is learning a second language while continuing to develop their first language.” Head Start Program Performance Standards, Part 1305 - &1305.2 Terms

## 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 (ELOF) and the state’s early learning and development standards (ELDS). Since they are key literacy skills, alphabet knowledge and early writing are incorporated into state ELDS and the HSELOF. This resource will show where alphabet knowledge and early writing are addressed in the HSELOF.

For infants and toddlers, alphabet knowledge and early writing goals appear in the Language and Communication domain and the Emergent Literacy sub-domain. The primary goals that address these skills are:

- IT-LC 11: Child recognizes pictures and some symbols, signs, or words.
- IT-LC 13: Child makes marks and uses them to represent objects or actions.



Infant/Toddler Language and Communication Sub-Domains

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

Goals for Sub-Domain: Emergent Literacy

- Goal IT-LC 9. Child attends to, repeats, and uses some rhymes, phrases, or refrains from stories or songs.
- Goal IT-LC 10. Child handles books and relates them to their stories or information.
- ▶ Goal IT-LC 11. Child recognizes pictures and some symbols, signs, or words.
- Goal IT-LC 12. Child comprehends meaning from pictures and stories.
- ▶ Goal IT-LC 13. Child makes marks and uses them to represent objects or actions.

For preschoolers, alphabet knowledge and early writing goals are in the Literacy domain and two sub-domains, Print and Alphabet Knowledge and Writing. The primary goals that address these skills are:

- P-LIT 2. Child demonstrates an understanding of how print is used (functions of print) and the rules that govern how print works (conventions of print).
- P-LIT 3. Child identifies letters of the alphabet and produces correct sounds associated with letters.
- P-LIT 6. Child writes for a variety of purposes using increasingly sophisticated marks.



Preschooler Literacy Sub-Domains

- Phonological Awareness
- Print and Alphabet Knowledge
- Comprehension and Text Structure
- Writing

Goals for Sub-Domain: Print and Alphabet Knowledge

- Goal P-LIT 2. Child demonstrates an understanding of how print is used (functions of print) and the rules that govern how print works (conventions of print).
- Goal P-LIT 3. Child identifies letters of the alphabet and produces correct sounds associated with letters.



Preschooler Literacy Sub-Domains

- Phonological Awareness
- Print and Alphabet Knowledge
- Comprehension and Text Structure
- Writing

Goals for Sub-Domain: Writing

- Goal P-LIT 6. Child writes for a variety of purposes using increasingly sophisticated marks.



## WHY ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE AND EARLY WRITING MATTER: UNDERSTANDING THE RESEARCH

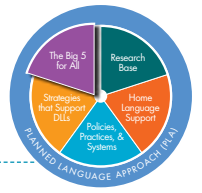
Children learn about the alphabet and writing when they have meaningful language experiences. Children use this knowledge to learn to read and write later in school.<sup>8,9</sup> Early writing helps children understand how written language works—supporting their writing later in life. It also boosts children’s later reading as they learn about the relationship between print and language.<sup>3</sup>

Alphabet knowledge helps children understand letter-sound relationships, which is key to both reading and writing in English and other alphabetic languages, such as Spanish, Arabic, and Portuguese.<sup>5</sup> Some languages are not alphabetic. This means they do not have an alphabet that uses letters (and their sounds) to form words. In Chinese, for example, a word is written as a pictorial character—not using individual letters. The individual sounds in a word are not related to parts of the pictorial character. Rather the pictorial character represents a word or phrase.

“With instruction and practice in writing, they [children] become increasingly proficient at recognizing and forming letters and using these letters to represent the sounds that they hear.” (Bardige 2009, 176)



Similarities and differences between English and other languages*				
	Hindi and English	Chinese and English	Spanish and English	Twi and English
<b>Written form of the language</b>	बालक (child)  बालिका (baby-formal)  बच्चा (small baby-colloquial)	小宝宝 (little treasure-boy)  小孩子 (little kid)  小囡囡 (little sweet girl)  小朋友 (little friend)  小贝贝 (little treasure-girl)  小东西 (little “little thing”)	chico, chica (small child-regional South America)  chiquillo, chiquilla (small child-regional Central America)  mocoso, mocosa (small child-regional Caribbean)  chamaco, chamaca (small child-regional Mexico)	Abofra (child)  Akola (same as child)  Ketewa (small or little-meaning little child)
<b>Written form of the language</b>	Letters represent sounds. However, the letters look quite different from English letters.	Chinese does not use letters to represent sounds. Words are symbolized by characters.	Letters represent sounds. Spanish uses many of the same letters as English, although the letters do not always make the same sounds as in English.	Letters represent sounds. The vowels are the same as in English but certain consonants in the alphabet are made up of more than one letter.
* Please note that this chart provides general information on how languages are similar to and different from English. Speakers of these languages may or may not need additional support in written English, depending on their prior experiences.				

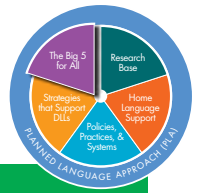


## LANGUAGE, CULTURE, LETTERS, AND EARLY WRITING

When staff have trusting relationships with families, they can ask about children’s experiences with letters and writing at home. These discussions, paired with observations of each child, can help staff plan activities that build on children’s existing print knowledge and experiences. Here are a couple examples of the different experiences children might have:

- Children have practiced drawing individual letters at home. Their families are proud of their child’s ability to draw letters. They celebrate when their children draw letters in English or the family’s home language.
- Children recognize letters and know their names. They know letter sounds, even at an early age. Their families encourage and celebrate learning alphabet letters. (This may also happen in families whose language uses pictorial characters instead of alphabet letters.)
- Children understand writing’s purposes and have helped their families draft a shopping list. They have used emergent writing to sign cards, thank you notes, or create labels for their drawings.
- Children are not as exposed to print and may use rich oral language to tell detailed stories about themselves and their experiences. While they have oral language skills in their home language, they may not understand how the alphabet or writing works yet—in English or in their home language.

It is important for every member of the education staff to learn how language and literacy are used and valued at home. These experiences may be different than expected in the early learning setting. Staff learn, honor, and extend what children learn at home. Home visitors can help parents directly through home visits and socializations.



## THE DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION FROM BIRTH TO AGE FIVE

Whenever very young children make marks of any kind—such as scribbling, drawing, and imitating adults’ writing—they are developing early writing skills. These skills directly support school readiness.

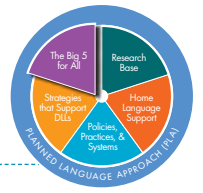
Children use early writing when they participate in print-rich environments at home and at school. These environments use print and writing in real and interesting ways—which adults model and discuss. Children and adults might create a shopping list together or follow recipes while preparing meals. Encourage children to make marks before they master conventional print.

ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE AND EARLY WRITING SKILLS INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

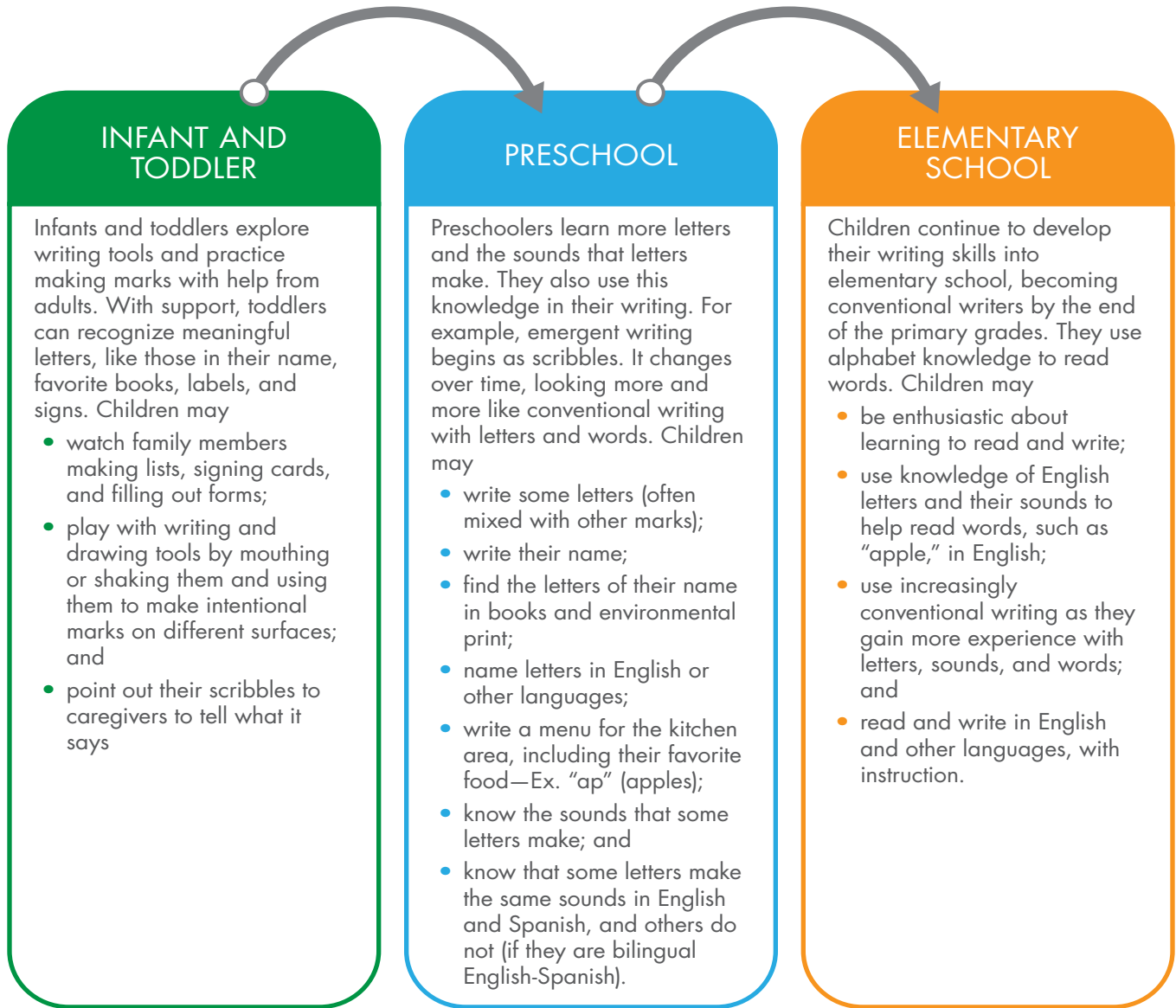
- Communicating through print (from first scribbles through first letters and words), such as
  - trying to make letters, words, and connected text (emergent writing) in real-life ways, like lists, captions, labels, stories, or information;
  - making letters that look more and more like conventional print; and
  - writing names that look more and more like conventional print.
- Understanding that letters are symbols used to read and write in English (and in other alphabetic languages).
- Observing and experiencing written language in their environments, which helps children understand that writing has special purposes, such as
  - communicating with others (e.g., where their personal items are stored in a group setting);
  - writing to remember (e.g., adding a date to breast milk to remind staff of when it was frozen);
  - documenting (e.g., watching the adult mark the child’s height on a growth chart); and
  - writing for pleasure or entertainment (e.g., making strokes with different colors on a blank page).
- Recognizing upper and lowercase letters in English and other alphabetic languages.
- Knowing that English letters, and letters in other alphabetic languages, represent sounds.
- Associating individual letters of the English alphabet and other alphabetic languages with their specific sound correspondences.

While eating a snack, two-and-a-half year-old Juanita watches her teacher write a note with a pen. The teacher sees her interest and lets Juanita make marks with a big, chunky crayon.





HOW DO ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE AND EARLY WRITING DEVELOP?





## ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE, EARLY WRITING, AND CHILDREN WHO ARE DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS (DLLS)

Children who are DLLs learn two writing systems. The basic but important insight that print conveys meaning— that it is speech written down— transfers across the writing systems of different languages.<sup>2</sup> Once children understand this concept in one language, they may find it easier to make the same connection in another language.<sup>7</sup> When the print systems of children’s languages are different—like English and Chinese—children need many experiences with each print system to develop writing skills in each language.<sup>6</sup>

Many writing activities, including dictation (adults or older children write down what children say), can use either of a child’s languages. Dictation helps children connect writing and speech. Children can transfer this insight from one language to another. They will, however, need to learn each language’s specific relationship with writing and speech.

English letters and sounds may be new to children who are DLLs. Some alphabetic languages, like English and Spanish, use many of the same alphabet letters and share sounds. Other alphabetic languages, like Arabic, do not use the same alphabet letters as English and only share a few sounds. Building on children’s home language knowledge, like noting similarities and differences between the languages, supports children as they learn English. Depending on children’s prior experiences, they may need to hear new sounds and see new letters more often (see *Phonological Awareness*).

Alicia (a Spanish and English speaker) and Xiao (a Chinese and English speaker) know different things about writing because of their experiences at home. They bring these differences to preschool.

“Given the robust literature demonstrating the transferability of literacy skills particularly across languages that share an alphabet, it is important that students’ native language literacy be assessed.”  
(NASEM 2017, 10-20)



### Alicia

My big sister taught me to write my name letter by letter. She made me copy it over and over, and now I can write it as good as she can!



### Xiao

I have been taking lessons in Chinese calligraphy from my grandmother. I can write my name and other characters myself!





## EFFECTIVE PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE AND EARLY WRITING

In a coordinated approach, all education staff work together to help children fully develop their language and literacy skills in all their languages. Home visitors, group care educators, and all who work with families learn about how families support children’s writing and share other strategies.

### WAYS TO ENCOURAGE ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE

Adults help children develop alphabet knowledge when they talk and sign about letter shapes—like similarities and differences between letters. Adults can point out letters, especially in children’s names and in family member’s names.

- “This letter [name letter] is in your name and in your mommy’s name.”
- “An *o* is like a circle.”
- “Lowercase *b* and *d* look similar, but are backwards.”
- “Lowercase *l* is a line, and *b* is a line with a ‘belly.’”

For children who have limited vision, adults can create tactile letters that children can feel and trace with their fingers. This may also include introducing and using Braille if this is on a child’s Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individual Education Plan (IEP).

Adults can encourage children to use their bodies and sense of touch to explore letter shapes. For example, adults can invite children to bend or curve their body like a C or hold their left arm up and right arm out like a capital L. Adults can also provide materials like finger paint and wet sand on which children can create letter-like shapes and actual letters using their fingers, hands, and arm movements.

Adults help children recognize letters in print when they point letters out

- in favorite books and other print materials such as magazines, menus, and greeting cards;
- on tablet, computer, and smartphone screens (see text box);
- in environmental print, such as signs, charts, or labels; and
- in words children “write” or see others write.

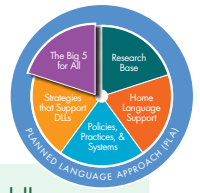
### WAYS TO ENCOURAGE EARLY WRITING

Early writing is both a literacy activity and a fine motor skill. Some children may need help developing fine motor skills—like gripping a ball or using scissors, beading, or putting small manipulatives together. Children will explore, practice, and enjoy early writing activities when adults provide appropriate and engaging materials, opportunities, and support.<sup>4</sup> Adults can

- model writing for a purpose—describe what they are doing and why (e.g., “I’m writing a list so I can remember what to buy at the store”);
- provide writing tools—including chalk, markers, crayons, and pencils—and encourage children to use them on different types of paper and other surfaces;
- adapt practices for children who may need more support—for example, offer chunky writing tools that are easier to hold or put grips on the writing tools, select the most appropriate surface angle for writing such as flat on the floor or a table top or vertical using a wall or easel, tape or clip paper to the surface so the paper does not move;
- encourage children to draw pictures and then write a letter, word, or scribble to describe the drawing;
- support children’s efforts to write, even when they scribble, or make reversals or other errors, and encourage them to keep writing;

#### American Academy of Pediatrics’ Recommendations for Children’s Media Use

- For children younger than 18 months, avoid use of screen media other than video-chatting. Parents of children 18 to 24 months of age who want to introduce digital media should choose high-quality programming, and watch it with their children to help them understand what they’re seeing.
- For children ages 2 to 5 years, limit screen use to 1 hour per day of high-quality programs. Parents should co-view media with children to help them understand what they are seeing and apply it to the world around them.



- ask children about their drawings and offer to write what the children say to model writing for a purpose; and
- offer children opportunities to make cards, lists, or posters—for example, birthday cards, a list of what to look for on a neighborhood walk, a poster with directions for how to feed the fish.

Eleven-month-old Maria cuddles with her abuela (Spanish for “grandmother”) as they look at a Spanish alphabet board book together. Abuela points to the letters on each page, signing and saying the names of the letters that are in her name and in Maria’s name. Maria is learning that each letter (print) is something important and can represent what we say. And that letters are in our names!



**HOW TO SUPPORT BABIES AS THEY DEVELOP ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE AND EARLY WRITING**

Babies develop language and motor skills as they watch, listen, and touch everything around them. Through meaningful interactions with adults and opportunities to explore their environment, babies develop ideas that they will write about someday.

Babies build alphabet knowledge and early writing when adults

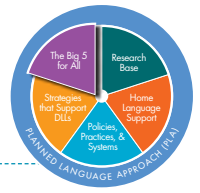
- form secure relationships with babies by responding to their interests and needs to sleep and eat;
- encourage babies to use a fist to reach for, grasp, shake, and bang objects;
- offer babies safe toys and objects, such as balls, spoons, and cups, all with a variety of textures—smooth, bumpy, and soft;
- supervise babies as they experiment with different materials that are safe for their age—like water, sand, and finger paints;
- talk or sign to babies as they play and discover how objects work—name them, describe their textures and shapes, and demonstrate the sounds or actions they make;
- cuddle up and look at books with babies every day—labeling or describing pictures; and
- give older babies writing materials—large crayons and nontoxic markers—and show them how to use them. Very young children may “write” while sitting in a chair, high chair, lap, or on the floor.

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

GOAL IT-IC 11. CHILD RECOGNIZES PICTURES AND SOME SYMBOLS, SIGNS, OR WORDS.



DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION			INDICATORS
Birth to 9 Months	8 to 18 Months	16 to 36 Months	By 36 Months
Looks at pictures of familiar people, animals, or objects while an adult points at and/or names the person, animal, or object.	Points at, signs, or says name of, or talks about animals, people, or objects in photos, pictures, or drawings.	Recognizes and uses some letters or numbers, such as letters in one’s name, and shows increasing interest in written forms of language, such as print in books or signs on buildings. Children who are DLLs recognize and use written forms of each of their languages.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Points to and names some letters or characters in their names.</li> <li>Recognizes familiar signs on a building or street.</li> <li>Attributes meaning to some symbols, such as a familiar logo or design.</li> </ul>



HOW TO SUPPORT TODDLERS AS THEY DEVELOP ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE AND EARLY WRITING

Toddlers enjoy making marks. Many giggle with delight or stare in surprise when they accidentally draw by jabbing or poking at paper with a marker. Their hands are stronger than they were just a few months ago. They are learning how to use and control writing tools. Toddlers learn about writing and print when they see adults writing and hear about print. Toddlers are observing and learning that writing is meaningful and important.

Toddlers develop alphabet knowledge and early writing skills when adults

Min, who is 34 months old, notices the letter M everywhere. He sees it on the milk carton, on signs for McDonalds, and in the title of the book Madeline. He loves to point out every time he sees his letter! His mother told Sara, their home visitor, about Min’s interest in the letter M. Sara shared the family’s excitement and explained that Min is learning that letters can be used in multiple ways in very different words.

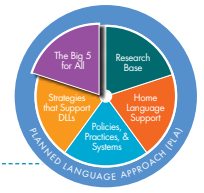
- model writing—texting, writing notes or emails, or making a shopping or “to do” list—then describe what they are doing and why;
- talk about how writing works, including the alphabet and words (e.g., “Oh look. The P on the pizza box is just like the P in your name, ‘Pilar.’” or “This says ‘wet paint’ so we don’t want to touch it”);
- encourage children to write in meaningful ways (e.g., “We had such a great time when Ms. Cora read us the story. Let’s each write her a thank you note. Here is paper so you can make yours while I make mine”);
- write down what children say or sign and read it back to them;
- help children talk about what they are writing and drawing and build on their explanations—for example, “I noticed that you put all the fall colors in your tree”;
- describe what the toddler does and the colors she uses, then share what her creation makes you think of (e.g., “That red color reminds me of the apples we had for snack today”);
- create safe spaces and places where children can write—include flat surfaces like child-size tables and high chairs, along with vertical surfaces like easels and a wall—include lots of writing materials like paper, envelopes, markers, and pencils;
- provide a variety of materials—such as finger paints, watercolors, paint brushes, crayons, markers, pencils, and pens—and help toddlers use them safely;
- point out written names and letters in names when parents sign in for their children; and
- point out letters when reading alphabet books or the letter of the child’s first name.

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

GOAL IT-IC 13. CHILD MAKES MARKS AND USES THEM TO REPRESENT OBJECTS OR ACTIONS.



DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION			INDICATORS
Birth to 9 Months	8 to 18 Months	16 to 36 Months	By 36 Months
Emerging	Makes marks on a paper with a large crayon or marker to explore writing materials.	Makes scribbles on paper to represent an object or action even though an adult might not recognize what it is.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Draws pictures using scribbles and talks with others about what they have made.</li> <li>■ Draws straight lines or curved lines.</li> <li>■ Makes letter-like marks or scribbles on paper.</li> </ul>



HOW TO SUPPORT PRESCHOOLERS AS THEY DEVELOP ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE AND EARLY WRITING

Many preschoolers are interested in writing. Some use scribbles to tell a story or pretend to take a restaurant order. Other preschoolers use letters and letter-like symbols—sometimes asking an adult to “read what it says.” When adults read and write with children, children see writing as meaningful and important!

Four-year-olds Ari and Jean can identify many letters by name. Sometimes they point to the environmental print in the class and name the letters in words such as markers: “M–A–R–K–E–R–S.” Their teachers support children individually and in small and large groups as they name letters in their daily lives. And now the children are doing it on their own!

Alphabet knowledge includes letter-name knowledge (in both capital and lowercase), letter-sound knowledge, and letter-writing ability. Children learn meaningful letters first—such as the letters in their name—and then other letters that they see often, for example, the letters in the names of family members.

Usually children learn letter names before letter sounds. However, occasionally, some children learn letter sounds first. Keep letter and sound activities fun and enjoyable.

Adults can name and use letters when reading a favorite book, a new sign or a pamphlet. Letter experiences should be very short (1-2 minutes)—not extended lessons.

GOAL P-LIT 3. CHILD IDENTIFIES LETTERS OF THE ALPHABET AND PRODUCES CORRECT SOUNDS ASSOCIATED WITH LETTERS.



DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION		INDICATORS
36 to 48 Months	48 to 60 Months	By 60 Months
Shows an awareness of alphabet letters, such as singing the ABC song, recognizing letters from one’s name, or naming some letters that are encountered often.	Recognizes and names at least half of the letters in the alphabet, including letters in own name (first name and last name), as well as letters encountered often in the environment. Produces the sound of many recognized letters.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Names 18 upper and 15 lower-case letters.</li> <li>Knows the sounds associated with several letters.</li> </ul>

PRESCHOOLERS DEVELOP ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE AND EARLY WRITING WHEN ADULTS

- talk or sign about the alphabet, point out letters in children’s names and other meaningful letters, like those in the names of their family members, friends, or pets;
- share alphabet songs and alphabet books;
- provide children with magnetic letters, alphabet puzzles, and other alphabet games;
- draw children’s attention to print in the community, like stop and exit signs, advertisements and logos, and in the home on labels, email, and mail;
- help children focus on beginning sounds in words—they might sort toys or pictures by sound—children with hearing loss may have specific goals about making the connection between spoken or signed language and writing and strategies to support this in their IEPs;
- label the letters in their names and other letters of interest;
- add writing materials to learning centers, such as menus in the kitchen or construction signs in the block area;
- encourage preschoolers to write for real and important reasons, such as writing cards, letters, and books; and
- use different materials to make writing extra fun, like playground chalk, sand, finger paint, and shaving cream.

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





GOAL P-LIT 6. CHILD WRITES FOR A VARIETY OF PURPOSES USING INCREASINGLY SOPHISTICATED MARKS.

DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION		INDICATORS
<b>36 to 48 Months</b>	<b>48 to 60 Months</b>	<b>By 60 Months</b>
Engages in writing activities that consist largely of drawing and scribbling. Begins to convey meaning. With modeling and support, writes some letter-like forms and letters.	Progressively uses drawing, scribbling, letter-like forms, and letters to intentionally convey meaning. With support, may use invented spelling consisting of salient or beginning sounds, such as L for elevator or B for bug.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creates a variety of written products that may or may not phonetically relate to intended messages.</li> <li>Shows an interest in copying simple words posted in the classroom.</li> <li>Attempts to independently write some words using invented spelling, such as K for kite.</li> <li>Writes first name correctly or close to correctly.</li> <li>Writes (draws, illustrates) for a variety of purposes and demonstrates evidence of many aspects of print conventions, such as creating a book that moves from left to right.</li> </ul>



EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE AND EARLY WRITING PRACTICES IN EARLY LEARNING SETTINGS

EXAMPLES WITH INFANTS AND TODDLERS

While Saied naps nearby, Mara sits next to the kitchen set with Zia and Bea and helps them use books and explore writing materials. Bea picks up the book *My Food/Mi Comida* and points to the picture of bread, one of her favorite foods. Mara says, “Bread. You love bread! Where do we keep the bread?” Bea finds the bread box on a nearby shelf, takes it out, and states, “Bread.” Mara says, “I think the bread box needs a label because it is where we keep the bread.” With Bea watching, she writes “Bread” on the label and says, “I’m writing the word bread and bread starts with the letter B, just like your name! Bea says excitedly, “B, B, B!” Zia pats the book Bea is holding, and Mara says, “Zia, you like bread, too!”

On another day, Mara says, “I wonder if we need any new food for the kitchen.” Bea starts to name her favorite foods. “Cracker! Juice! Cheese!” she exclaims. Zia says, “Meek [milk].” “Oh, these are great ideas,” Mara replies.

“Let’s make a list of what we need from the store. What did you say, Bea?” “Cracker! Juice!” she shouts. “Yes, let me see,” Mara continues. “We need crackers and juice—and you also said cheese.” Mara says “crackers, “juice,”



and “cheese” as she writes the words on paper taped to the pretend refrigerator door. Mara looks at Zia and says, “Zia, you said milk, so I’ll write that, too.” Bea watches, takes a crayon, and scribbles next to where Mara writes. After Mara finishes the list, she muses, “Hmm, let’s use one of these foods today and another one tomorrow. The first food on my list is crackers. Here are some crackers.” As she gives them a cracker box, Zia says, “Cack [cracker!” Zia points to her scribbles and says, “Cracker!”

Mara rotates the board books by the kitchen set. She also includes boxes with pictures and labels of the children’s favorite foods on them. Although she often glues the pictures onto small packing boxes, families also bring in empty containers from home.

Mara, a family child care provider, cares for Saied, 4 months, Zia, 13 months, and Bea, 23 months. She notices that Zia and Bea love to touch their food. She offers simple print-based experiences with food to support their early writing. Mara knows that Bea and Zia really enjoy the kitchen set in her playroom. Bea loves to pretend to make food and serve it to Mara and Zia. Mara places board books about food near the kitchen set. She tapes pictures from a food magazine around the kitchen set and writes the names of the foods on each picture. She also tapes a large piece of paper on the side of the door of the pretend refrigerator and places some fat crayons nearby, so Bea can pretend to write shopping lists, just like she sees Mara do.

### ON A HOME VISIT

Twelve-month-old Sūn reaches for the pen in his home visitor, Meilin’s, hand. “Oh!” Meilin says to Sūn’s mom, Huifen, “Sūn is reaching for my pen! I think he wants to write. What would you like him to write with?” Huifen smiles and replies, “He does that to me, too. I give him a blue crayon and some paper and tell him he can write me a letter. That makes him laugh. Then I write him a letter.” “That’s a wonderful way to support Sūn’s interest in writing. What do you think he would do if you gave him some crayons and paper now?” Meilin smiles again. She gets paper and crayons and places them in front of Sūn. He picks up the blue crayon, starts to scribble, and looks at his mom. Huifen says, “You’re writing me a letter?” Sūn laughs and continues scribbling. Meilin says, “You know your son well! I think he likes to write letters to you because he sees you write letters back to him.”



### IN AN INFANT CLASSROOM

Adele finishes diapering Jamal and carries him over to the rocking chair. She picks up one of Jamal’s favorite books and begins to sing the words, “Twinkle, twinkle, little star . . .” She stresses the rhyming words in the song and pauses to describe the objects Jamal points to in the book. Jamal smiles and babbles along. Adele smiles back and continues to sing. When she finishes, she says, “Jamal is a star! Yes, you are!” Then she chooses another book to read together.



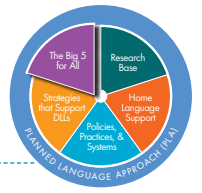
### DURING A GROUP SOCIALIZATION

Maribel is painting in the art center. Her mom, Luisa, and home visitor, Sandy watch her while she paints. When she finishes, Sandy prompts Luisa to ask her daughter about what she painted. Luisa says, “Tell me about your picture, mija.” Maribel points. “Yellow,” she states. “Sí! Veo amarillo [Yes. I see yellow],” Luisa replies. Sandy says, “Maribel, can you tell your mami more about your picture?” Maribel points again and exclaims, “Itsy bitsy!” Sandy and Luisa smile and laugh. Sandy says, “Oh, I see! Luisa, Maribel painted the itsy-bitsy spider! She added lots of yellow legs to her spider.” Then she encourages Luisa to ask her daughter if she wants to write anything on her painting. Luisa does, and together, she and Maribel decide that Luisa will write “araña [spider]” and “Maribel” on the painting. Sandy tells Luisa she has a handout with the words to “The Itsy-Bitsy Spider” in English and Spanish and will bring it to next week’s home visit.



### IN A FAMILY CHILD CARE HOME

The toddlers and preschoolers in Ms. Maria’s family child care see a letter carrier deliver mail every afternoon from the front window. Today, she will show the older toddlers how they can be letter carriers using old purses for mail sacks. “First we need to write letters. Then we will deliver them, just like our letter carrier does,” she explains. Ms. Maria shows the toddlers the paper and envelopes on a low shelf with writing supplies. A list of the names of all the children is taped to the nearby table. She encourages children to write letters and draw pictures for each other. Sometimes they try to write the first letter of a friend’s name. To give them ideas of what to write, she shows them some things that she gets in the mail such as postcards, coupons, and pamphlets. After creating their letters, the toddlers pick out a mail bag and place their letters inside. Ms. Maria watches as her new letter carriers walk around her living room, kitchen, and dining room happily delivering and receiving mail.



## EXAMPLES WITH PRESCHOOLERS

Amanda, a preschool teacher, notices that all the children in her class talk about eating bread at home. They also eat many kinds of bread—sliced bread, pan dulce, naan, bagels, and croissants. Therefore, she decides to explore the topic—making bread—with the children. Amanda and the children use shared writing to create a big cookbook. She asks each child to participate in writing recipes in a way that would allow him or her to succeed. Amanda posts the alphabet above the chart paper. Depending on each child’s knowledge and comfort level, she asks each preschooler to write either a single letter or multiple letters. For example, she asks Nancy to write the word naan (a type of Indian bread), since she can already form all those letters. Boris writes the “B” in bread, since he is new to English and that is the only letter he knows. He looks up at the “B” in the alphabet posted on the wall and slowly and deliberately makes his “B.” Angela uses a wheelchair and writing tools with grips so she can hold them more easily. Nancy tapes a piece of paper on the tray attached to Angela’s wheelchair and puts an adapted pencil on the tray. When Angela finishes writing the letters “P” and “D” for “pan dulce,” she lets Nancy know she’s ready for her to take the paper and tape it to the chart paper with the other children’s contributions.

Shared writing is when both adults and children write together. An adult may connect the letters children know to letters in picture books and support children in writing their names or simple labels.



To ensure each child’s success in this shared writing activity, Amanda does the following:

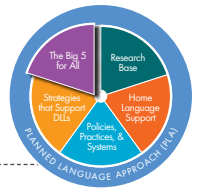
- Places the paper on an easel in easy reach of the children
- Gives each child an opportunity to hold the pencil and write letters or words
- Adapts the activity for a child with a disability or suspected delay so she can participate
- Helps children decide which letter comes next
- Gives children time to write their letters and posts the alphabet for help
- Understands that errors are learning opportunities and encourages the children to try again
- Does some of the writing herself
- Keeps the writing sessions short

Amanda also provides opportunities for children to produce longer connected text. She uses dictation to help them record their experiences eating different types of bread. Amanda asks each child to describe his or her favorite bread. She writes down what each child says and asks the child to illustrate the words. Nancy says, “My favorite bread was *naan* because it was flat and chewy. I liked stretching it out and putting toppings on it. The butter was so delicious!” Boris, who is new to English, says, “Bread good.” His aunt, who volunteers in the classroom every week, writes what he says in Russian. Мне понравился хлеб с изюмом, потому что изюм хорош. (Translated: I liked the bread with raisins because raisins are good.)

## ON A HOME VISIT

Jenifer, a home visitor who speaks Spanish, is visiting Miguel and his mother Maya, who also speak Spanish. Jenifer checks with Maya about the bookmaking activity they planned to have Miguel and Maya do together. Maya beams with pride as she asks Miguel to bring the book. He leaves the room and returns carefully carrying it. “Mostrarle [show her],” Maya says. Jenifer and Maya watch as Miguel lovingly opens the cover to reveal several pages with drawings of cars and trucks—Miguel’s favorite things! Under each picture Maya has printed a description in Spanish, such as “un camión de volteo,” and Miguel has traced over the words. In Spanish, Jenifer exclaims, “What a great dump truck! Did you write this?” as she points to the picture and word. Miguel smiles and nods. Jenifer says to Maya, “I can see how proud he is of his book! Your idea to have him trace over the words was a good way to have him practice writing.”





## IN A PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM

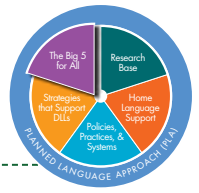
Sara reads a story about letter names to a small group of preschoolers before introducing a new game. “I put all of your names on cards in this envelope. My job is to pull out a name, one letter at a time. Your job is to guess whose name it is!” Sara pulls out the first name card so the children can see the first letter. “Here is the letter A,” she says. “So, let’s guess who it might be.” As the children call out names, Sara comments, “Yes. It could be for ‘Ana’ or ‘Adam.’ Let’s look at the second letter.” Ana shouts, “Me, me!” when the next letter is an N. “That’s right,” says Sara. It’s an N so it is not Adam’s name. His name is A-D-A-M,” Sara says as she points to Adam’s name on the chart on the wall. She takes out the “Ana” name card and holds it up so the children can see and say the letters in Ana’s name. “Let’s play again,” she says.

## SUMMARY

This resource focuses on teaching and learning alphabet knowledge and early writing in young children’s development. It discusses the connection between these skills and the goals of the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework and provides examples of the developmental progression from birth to age five.

Authors also stress the importance of language and culture on alphabet knowledge and early writing. When education staff understand children’s home experiences, they can more effectively support children as they develop a strong foundation for reading and writing. Staff and home visitors can plan learning activities using the similarities and differences between English and other languages this document outlines.

Note practical strategies for supporting alphabet knowledge and early writing in infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in different early learning settings. Vignettes describe young children’s active learning of alphabet and early writing during home visits, a group socialization, a family child care home, and a preschool classroom.



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