

## Chapter 4

### From Spoken to Written Language:

### Setting Your Preschooler on the Right Path

#### DID YOU KNOW?

- Five-year-old children are like mini-adults in their speech and language skills.
- Kindergarten children tell stories with actual plots.
- Rhyming is an important building block for reading.

*Ellen and Joe both worked out of the home. They had the usual challenges of hardworking parents trying to hold down their jobs while raising their five-year-old daughter. Life was hectic. They worried that they didn't spend enough time with Annie to teach her what she needed to know before going into kindergarten. Sure, they read to her at night, but was that enough? They felt guilty because the time spent with her involved doing everyday routines or errands, with only some time devoted to direct play with her. Because of this guilt, they invented special games or activities to make up for lost "quality" time. When Ellen had to take Annie grocery shopping instead of staying home and reading, she made up a game of having Annie cross out the items as Ellen put them in the cart. When Joe felt guilty writing the bills instead of playing with Annie, he had her help put stamps on the envelopes to keep her occupied. When the parents took their daughter to the kindergarten screening day, they were nervous that the teachers would find she knew less than her peers. Imagine their shock when the teachers*

*marveled that Annie knew some of her letters and how to “read” from left to right. Ellen and Joe hadn’t taught Annie these things. How did she learn all of this?*

Your child has learned an incredible amount of language by the time he turns four. In fact, as you will see, he is soon to be considered “adult-like” in the complexity of his sentence structure and in the ways he interacts with others. His vocabulary continues to become more sophisticated and varied. As your child blossoms into a true conversationalist, you will find that you begin to emphasize another aspect of language, one that you know will be needed as your child enters formal schooling. This new area of language will be the written word.

Although we have talked mostly about what your child is learning about spoken language, and continue to do that in this chapter, you will find that your child also is beginning to show signs of learning about reading and writing. Some of this learning may be very overt. She may “read” books, saying sentences word for word as you have read them in her favorite book a thousand times. She also may begin to write her name or other simple words that she sees frequently. She is acquiring some other skills that will help her with written language; they may not be as obvious, yet they are equally important. These skills include learning to rhyme, knowing the names of letters, etc. Thus, this chapter will cover not only what other spoken language skills your child is learning during these years, but also what she is learning about written language that will help her as she begins to read, write, and spell. And we will show how parents can prepare their children for these “academic” skills in easy, everyday activities. So much being learned, so much you can do to help your child!

## **Further Developing Spoken Language Skills**

During her fourth and fifth years, your preschooler will be refining certain language skills she has been using for some time while also learning new spoken language skills. These new

developments occur in all areas of language, including semantics (meaning), speech sounds, grammar, and social language skills.

## **Sentence Structure and Grammar**

Your child's sentence structures should be quite varied and complex at this age. Many of his sentences should contain more than one verb, such as "I want to go now!" or "I know how to do that." Your child's use of these sentences, and his understanding of them, is important for several reasons. First, when your child uses these types of sentences, it allows him to convey much more information within shorter amounts of time. More complex relationships among thoughts can be expressed. In addition, within about three years, your child will be reading complex sentences in the books he reads. With a solid understanding and use of these types of sentences, his ability to understand them when he reads will be enhanced.

Along with sentence structure, you also will hear your child use word endings that sound quite mature. Even though your child has been using special endings on words for a year or so, such as the *ing* ("I'm eating"), the *s* ("He jumps." "Billy's swimming."), and the *ed* ("She walked to the park."), new and more advanced word beginnings and endings will develop. A good example of this occurred one day when Nick was asking his dad to wind up a toy motorcycle. Having discussed that each time the motorcycle raced across the floor, it was "rad", he turned to his dad and asked him to wind it up again so that it would go "radly." This example actually demonstrates two points. Nick was learning to attach the 'ly', an ending that is learned during these years to change an adjective or noun (*friend*) to an adverb (*friendly*). This example also demonstrates another point we have made, and will continue to make throughout this book: your preschooler is not just a little robot, imitating everything you say. Rather, your preschooler is

actively learning the rules of speech and language, constructing the rules based on what he hears everyday. What a genius!

## **Speech Sounds**

Your preschooler's speech skills also are nearing adult level. She continues to be highly understandable to others. True, she may still be trying to correctly produce her *r*'s, but she has mastered other difficult sounds like *s*, *z*, *ch*, *sh*, and consonant combinations, such as *st*, *ms*, and the like. By the end of their fifth year, most children will have even corrected their *r*'s. Children in their fourth and fifth year still may *trip up* on longer words, words that have several syllables in them, like *Cinderella*, *spaghetti*, and *aluminum*. But seriously, how many of us still say *cimmanon* for cinnamon?

## **Vocabulary**

As in the previous three years, your child's vocabulary continues to grow by leaps and bounds every day. In fact, vocabulary development will likely never stop. (We bet you have even learned some new words reading this book!) But your child's development in vocabulary this year is more than just new words. She is increasing her ability to express new meanings. For example, she now is able to use verbs that express communication acts, such as *tell*, *say*, and *talk*. While this may seem insignificant, it is actually quite important. Not only can your child use this new meaning to tattle ("I'm telling Mommy!" "He said a bad word!"), but it also allows your child to talk about language itself, a skill we will address later in this chapter.

Finally, your child is expanding her meanings of words that she already has learned. For example, your child may have learned the word *first* in relation to her older brother's grade (Nick is in first grade). Now, she is learning that the same word can signify other meanings, such as being first in line or the first word of a book. Taken as a whole, then, your child's meaning

system, semantics, is not only growing in size, but it is deepening in meaning as well. Amazing, isn't it?

## **Social Language Skills**

Perhaps more than in any other area of language, this year your child is really refining his social language skills. While he has already begun using appropriate eye contact, topic skills, and turn-taking skills, he now begins to use language in subtle ways, often as subtle ways to get what he wants! Children who are four and five year olds are developing the ability to use indirect language and hints. These language skills involve implying a certain meaning even when the words used do not state that meaning. A common example is the use of “politeness forms” when requesting an object. For example, during this time, your child will learn to ask for music by saying, “Can I turn on the radio?” Now, even though the ornery parent or two may say, “I don't know, can you?”, we all know that your child is not asking whether he has the potential to eat cookies. Rather, he is expressing his wants. Because your preschooler has learned that “softening” requests often gets him better results, he begins to construct these types of sentences. Sometimes it seems that these sentences happen more with others than with his own mom and dad. You may experience times when a neighbor or friend says, “Your daughter is so polite. She always asks for things in such a nice way.” And you feel yourself asking, “Who? My daughter?”

Besides demonstrating politeness, skills such as hints and indirect language also allow children to say what they want to say, without saying it specifically. When Nick was four years of age, he was being particularly stubborn about wearing his parka zipped up to the neck. Because it was bitterly cold outside, his mother kept insisting that it be zipped. After battling back and forth (he would unzip, she would insist he zip it up), she stated that he would need to go inside if he unzipped one more time. Not wishing to go inside, but still needing to express

how he felt, he waited a minute, and then began to verbalized his aversion to the jacket: “Ahem, mmm, boy this jacket is tight...(cough) ...This jacket makes it hard to breathe...(hack).”

Through his indirect language and his hinting, he was able to express his dislike of the situation and yet still play outside. As your child reaches this age, you will soon see how she can masterfully manipulate language to meet her needs. And you were excited when she said her first word!

Your child also is developing a much more sophisticated way of responding to requests for clarification. Recall that this skill is highly important for maintaining a conversation. If one person in a conversation asks for clarification and the other person does not respond with an understandable or useful clarification, the conversation goes nowhere (but downhill, that is). Up until now, you child should have been using two highly effective clarification strategies: changing how he says a word (saying it more clearly) and by changing the word in question to an easier-to-understand word. Now, during his fourth to fifth years of life, he should be adding a new strategy to his arsenal. When asked to clarify what he just said, your child also should be able to change the whole sentence structure to help another person understand. For example, when Genevieve was four, she was talking to her parents in the car. Noticing a particularly beautiful mountain range out her window, she said, “Look at the Canadia mountains!” Her parents, not quite understanding her, said, “What?” She replied: “Those mountains over there. The Canadia ones. Look at them.” Thus, she was able to help her listener understand what she was saying and the conversation continued successfully.

As your child develops during her fourth and fifth year, other social language skills that continue to develop and mature include her ability to maintain a topic (without your help, that is), and moving from topic to topic with very subtle yet understandable ways. This latter skill,

sometimes called topic shading, usually occurs when an individual is talking with another individual with whom she is quite familiar. For example, “listen” to the following conversation, which occurred in the car between Caitlin and her friend, Audrey. Notice how many different topics are covered, yet the movement from one topic to another is very subtle.

Caitlin: I want to get some new shoes at the mall.

Audrey: Me too. I saw some new shoes on T.V.

Caitlin: Yeah, and you know what else? I also saw they have new surprises in Kid’s Meals at McDonalds.

Audrey: Yeah, you know, Joey really likes McDonalds, mostly because of the play area.

Caitlin: I like that play area, too. Joey is really into Power Ranger stuff, huh?

Audrey: Uh-huh. Some of them are cute, but not as cute as Miss Kitty stuff.

Caitlin: Oh, that’s my favoritest thing. We went to Seattle and I went to a whole store that had that. Seattle is a fun place to go.

Audrey: I love going to Seattle because we always stop and get a TCBY on the way down.

Caitlin: Yummy! My favorite flavor there is white chocolate. What about you?

Audrey: My favorite is double dutch chocolate.

As you can see, these two friends had quite the conversation. While some may listen to this and be amused about the constant “chatter” between the two young girls, one can look at this short conversational excerpt and actually see how sophisticated it is. Both children took responsibility for keeping the conversation going. Both easily segued from one topic to another. In total, there were five topics covered (the mall/shoes, McDonalds, Joey, Seattle, and TCBY), but because each friend relied on her knowledge of the other and what she already knew, the

movement from one topic to the next was smooth and hardly noticeable. In situations such as this, you as a parent are able to view firsthand the incredible social language skills that your child is acquiring and using.

## **Storytelling Skills**

In chapter 3, we talked about your child's ability to link several thoughts and sentences about an event in a time-ordered fashion. Now, during years 4 and 5, she will begin to expand on this ability. Around the age of five, your child will begin to show some cause and effect in the stories she tells. In other words, there will seem to be a "plot" to her stories or descriptions of experiences she has had. At first, however, this only will occur when she's talking about events with which she has had lots of experiences. Let's provide an example. Consider this story told by Genevieve when she was five. She was asked to tell a story about some children who went to a jungle. She said:

"Once upon a time, there was two kids who went to a jungle. And when they came to the jungle, they had to pay some money. So they didn't have any money, so they went home, get some money, steal money from their mom's purse, come back to the...zoo and give him the money and he would give them some food to feed the animals. So they walked along and then that's the end."

As you can read in this example, Genevieve's story has a plot, a cause and effect. In her story, the problem, which was the lack of money, caused the children to get the money, which caused them to be able to get some animal food. This story was not only in the correct time sequence, but it also had the more mature cause and effect that most adults are expecting to hear in a story such as this. One could argue that this story was pretty advanced for someone of Genevieve's age (and her father would agree!), because she was talking about a topic that was

not that familiar to her: going to a jungle. But notice what she did. She turned the topic into one with which she had more experience: going to the zoo. (Of course, the hope is that the particular segment about stealing from the mother's purse was *unfamiliar!*) Your preschooler will continue to grow in her story-telling abilities, as well as her general ability to talk about events, as she matures. Her stories will become more detailed, longer, and include more plots, not unlike the daytime soap operas on T.V. As parents of teenagers, we can attest to the fact that, with age, stories become much more complicated. But that's another book!

## Helping Your Preschooler Refine Her Spoken Language Skills

As we said earlier, your child is an active constructor of knowledge, figuring out most of the rules of language without you telling her. Granted, this probably would not happen if you weren't such a good model. And so, during the fourth and fifth years, you should continue to do what you have done in the past. Be an active listener and participant in the conversations she wants to have. Follow her lead in conversations, asking open-ended questions ("tell me more") that encourage her to elaborate on her topics. If she is still learning to produce certain sounds, provide good, accurate models of words containing the sounds she is misarticulating, without asking her to repeat the words. Talk daily about events and happenings in your lives, so she can understand how people tend to talk about situations, especially when there is causal aspect to the action (problem, action, solution). Remember, your role is not to sit down and teach your child language (could any of us stand to do that?). Instead, your role is to provide lots of good models of speech and language, using encouraging and supportive comments and feedback that creates an atmosphere of trust, love, and understanding. This is the context in which we all want to learn, especially children. If you provide this kind of atmosphere, your child should find it much easier to grasp how she is suppose to communicate.

## **A “New” Language**

By the time your child is five years of age, most language experts will say that she is “adult-like” in her spoken language skills. We agree with this. As you can see from the examples provided above, she has become quite the conversationalist. She has taken on the formidable task of learning how to communicate and made the task look easy. She now is gearing up for another difficult task, one that will lay the foundation for everything she does in school. She is getting ready to read and write. In her fourth and fifth years, your child will start to learn about written language in ways that will serve her well as she starts to learn to read, write and spell.

The second half of this chapter will describe what she is learning about literacy during these years, how this knowledge will help your child when she starts to read and write, and what you can do as a parent to help her in that learning. You likely will notice something else different about how children learn this type of language. Whereas spoken language was learned implicitly, that is, your child was picking up the rules of speech and language without any direct attention or teaching from you about those rules, when it comes to written language, your child will require active attention, instruction, and directed play to acquire this aspect of language. And you can serve as an instructor while continuing to make the learning fun and exciting.

## **Developing Foundational Skills for Literacy**

During the first five years of life, your child is learning to speak language. However, ask her to talk or think about language she is learning, and she most likely will be stymied. What do we mean talk about language? Talking and thinking about language, often referred to as metalinguistics, means being able to treat our words, sentences, and rules of language as the

topic of conversation. When we talk about how many words are in a sentence, we are talking about language. When we discuss how another individual has an ‘accent’, we are talking about language. When we talk about a definition of a word, we are talking about language. All of these situations demonstrate metalinguistics, the thinking and talking about language. Children five and under show limited abilities to do this metalinguistic thinking and talking.

During years three and four, your toddler may be showing some precursory skills to metalinguistics, such as using rhyming words or talking about the “funny way” certain people talk. But it won’t be until she is closer to six years of age that she begins to understand how one can talk about language itself as a specific topic. Nevertheless, these precursory metalinguistic skills are helping to lay the foundation for later developing literacy skills. Let’s talk about some specific skills.

### **Knowledge About Print**

Hopefully, you’ve been reading to your preschooler since she was a baby. As you have been reading, you have been talking about the pictures, relating them to your preschooler’s life, and providing lots of readings of her favorite books. Perhaps you have noticed lately that your preschooler is starting to make comments about the books you read. She may be pointing to pictures of words you read. She may be tracing the sentences or words read with her finger as you read or as she “pretend” reads. You might observe her trying to write words, asking for letters. She might have even commented on how long her name is (Genevieve) versus her other friends (Mary). All of these comments and actions are signs that your preschooler is learning about print, the “stuff” that is written language. This developing knowledge will be a crucial component to developing her reading and writing skills. And the great thing about this is that you have played an important role in causing this to happen.

## **Book Reading**

During book reading times, your preschooler will be learning a great deal about books and how they are used that you take for granted. For example, by watching you as you read to her, she is learning how to hold a book, how to turn pages, where the first page is, and to wait until you are finished reading a page to turn to the next one. As you read to her and point to pictures or the words on the page, she is learning the differences between pictures and words, how the “white spaces” between the groups of letters represent the end of one word and the beginning of the next, and that the book or reading material dictates to a great extent what words are said. In other words, the book establishes the topic of the conversation. Most parents and adults take these concepts for granted, but they are new to your preschooler and must be learned before she picks up a book to read for herself.

## **High-Print Environments**

When children are in their third, fourth, and fifth years of life, they are not only noticing the objects and people around them, they also are beginning to notice that older individuals use certain objects to communicate with others. They see mom writing a note to an older brother, pinning it on the refrigerator, and then see the older brother reading the note and performing a chore. They see dad making a grocery list and then using it at the grocery store. They see parents and siblings reading magazines, newspapers, bank statements, and school books. They see family members typing on the computer and printing out their written product.

What are all these actions showing? Your preschooler is learning that language can be relayed via other modes of communication *and* he is seeing that there is a purpose to these actions. Preschoolers who see others using the “tools” of written language (pencils, pens, paper, computers, books, etc.) and how and why they are used (to remind, to inform, to pay, etc.) are

learning about printed or written language. These types of home environments are called “high-print” environments because they facilitate the preschooler’s ability to understand how and why printed material can be used to communicate. So, next time you head off to the hardware store, take your preschooler with you. Show him your list. Point out each item as it is purchased and let him check it off the list. You are helping him learn a great deal about written language and you’ve got a great conversational partner with you as well.

### **Letter Knowledge**

Children as young as three may have some idea that letters represent language and that strings of them are generally used to write down language. It is not uncommon to see three and four year old toddlers attempting to write letters on their artwork or a “letter to daddy.” As children reach the age of five, they have a much better idea of what letters represent. Coinciding with this is their growing understanding of letter names and letter-sound relationships.

As your preschooler enters her fifth year of life, and as she is exposed to more book reading and additional high-print experiences, she will begin to actively use her knowledge of letter names and letter-sound relationships to write language on paper. Letter name knowledge involves knowing the names of letters when she sees them. Letter-sound relationship means knowing the sound, or sounds, that a letter can make. Most preschoolers learn these letter names early by reading alphabet books or being actively taught letters by their parents. When preschoolers come from high-print environments, they also tend to learn about the “power” of letters: how letters stand for language, how to write them, and how letters differ from other scribbles and scratches made on paper. Encourage your preschooler to express herself in any way she chooses to write. While her inventions in word spellings may seem random or incorrect, she is learning and demonstrating a great deal of knowledge about written language.

## Knowledge About Words

Your preschooler has learned many new words since he spoke his first word at the age of one. Indeed, there may be some words you wished he had not learned! However, as good as he is at using a variety of words, he is less able to think and talk about those words, such as defining them, what they look like, and how they are written. Let's go over a few examples.

Most children, before five or six, will be able to use a word or phrase but not be able to define or explain it when questioned. When Nick was three years old, he was playing with his dad, and suddenly said, "Cut it out." He was asked what "cut it out" meant. He was unable to answer, even though he had just used that particular phrase correctly and appropriately. When his dad said, "Do you mean, cut it out, like with scissors?", he responded "yes." He was unable to think about what he was talking about, much less understand, the dual meaning of the words he was using.

Children before the age of five or six also have a difficult time separating an object from the name of the object. It seems for children in the first four to five years of life, the word that stands for an object is actually considered to be part of the object. For example, when a younger child is asked what a long word is, a typical response might be a hose or a train, or even an alligator. In the child's mind, the length of the object represents the length of the word. Using the one of the examples above, train would be called a long word because the physical item, train, has many cars attached to it. Thus, the child is not thinking about the word itself (how long it takes to say it, how many letters we use to write it) but rather what it looks like. You may even see this same confusion in your preschooler's early attempts at spelling. She may spell her dad's name with many letters, but her baby sister's name with only one or two. After all, her dad is bigger so his name should contain more letters. On the other hand, her sister is small so her name

should contain only a few letters. Although your preschooler may be making a mistake, her approach makes a lot of sense!

As she moves from her fifth year to her sixth year of life, you will find that your preschooler starts to recognize that words are separate from the objects to which they refer. She will begin to recognize that the length of a word, both in the way it sounds and is written, determines whether we call it long or short. This skill is highly important for literacy development. As she begins to write, her attempts to spell words will more closely represent what the word should look like. Ask your preschooler questions like, “What’s a long word?” and “Why is *alligator* a long word?” You will be fascinated with her answer as you begin to determine where she is in developing her metalinguistic knowledge of words.

### **Knowledge About Sounds**

This area of metalinguistics is probably the most crucial for children to learn. As you will see, without the ability to think and talk about the sounds of our language, a child is seriously at risk for experiencing difficulties learning to read and write. Remember, being able to think and talk about speech sounds is not the same as correctly using speech sounds (your preschooler has been doing that for awhile). Rather, this area of new knowledge will involve actively talking about and playing with speech sounds and parts of words as one would play with a toy. This knowledge of sounds, most often referred to as phonological awareness, will develop gradually. The sequence of development is fairly similar for almost all children.

Initially, children first start treating the speech sounds of our language as toys when they catch on to rhyming. This may occur as early as three years of age. By five, however, it is expected that preschoolers can rhyme. Rhyming involves thinking of or recognizing two or more words that sound the same at the end of the word. For example, *cat*, *hat*, *pat*, and *rat* all rhyme.

While this grouping of rhyming words might seem rather simplistic, for a preschooler to recognize this, she must be aware that all four of those words end with the same set of sounds: *at*. She must focus on the word, not the word meaning. This is not an easy task, which is why preschoolers develop these “pre-literacy” skills much later than they do their spoken language skills. For example, when Nick was about three years of age, he seemed to have some understanding of rhyming, but was missing a crucial component. He often would approach someone (anyone who would listen!) and regale the person with his expertise in rhyming: “I can rhyme. Listen. Elephant. Elephant. See? They rhyme.”

After rhyming, the next phonological awareness skill preschoolers generally develop involves knowing the number of words in a sentence. For example, a preschooler might recognize that “I like to eat sandwiches” contains five words. This skill might seem out of place in a discussion of preschoolers’ phonological awareness, or knowledge of speech sounds, but it fits here. Perhaps the best way to understand this is to consider the times which you have heard someone speaking a different language than your own. For most of us, we think the person is a “quick talker” and we are hard pressed to understand where one word stops and another begins. This occurs because we are unfamiliar with the language, and we cannot use our knowledge of speech sounds to know which ones complete a word and which ones begin the next.

As your preschooler masters her ability to produce speech and language, she will begin to understand when a word stops and the next one begins. Using the example above, a preschooler without this understanding might say there are only four words in the sentence: “I liketo eat sandwiches.” In this case, the *to*, which carries very little meaning, is ignored. Similarly, another preschooler with less mature phonological awareness might say there are six words in the sentence: I like to eat sand wiches. Try this with your preschooler. If she is five,

there is a good chance she will begin to “get it” and be able to count the number of words she hears in a simple sentence.

Children’s phonological awareness continues to develop, such that they are able to count the number of syllables in words. Now, most preschoolers, and some adults, are not familiar with what a syllable is. However, if provided an example (“*baby*” – clap, clap – “*baby* has two claps in it!”), the preschooler with this phonological awareness skill will catch on.

These early phonological awareness skills lay the foundation for future phonological awareness skills that are crucial for reading and spelling. Later, when your child is about six or seven, she will be prepared to think about each speech sound in a word. The ability to do this, either to break words up into their individual speech sounds, or to blend individual sounds together to form a word, is highly important for reading and spelling. That is, as a child begins to read in kindergarten or first grade, he will need to have some understanding that a series of letters represent sounds, and if you blend those sounds together (*c-a-t*), you get a word. Also, your preschooler will need to learn that to spell a word, he needs to think about the individual sounds he hears in the word (bath = *b, a, th*), and write down a letter or letters representing those sounds.

The skills discussed above, and the examples provided, help to re-emphasize the difference between spoken and written language. When your preschooler was learning to speak, she didn’t need to think about the sounds she was making. She didn’t need to consider what a word was and whether it was represented by lots of letters or a few letters. However, as she begins to read and write, she will need to actively think about language. No wonder reading and spelling are such difficult tasks! For many children, they are the most challenging tasks of their entire school career. The positive side of this is that you have the potential to making that

learning a bit easier. Let's talk about what you can do to make this transition from learning spoken language to learning written language less effortful.

## Helping Your Preschooler Learn About Literacy

The second half of this chapter discussed the many skills developing during the fourth and fifth years of life that can lay the groundwork for easier reading and writing development. Also, you have read that, unlike the development of spoken language, children need active, directed attention to written language to acquire these prerequisite skills. Does this mean you should be sitting down with your four- or five-year old, quizzing him on his letters, and teaching him rhyming pairs of words? Of course not! Your preschooler wants you to be his parent, not his teacher. However, you can still help your preschooler attend to written language in a way that highlights the important ideas he needs to learn while making this learning fun, enjoyable, and part of everyday situations. You have an important role to play in helping your preschooler learn about written language, but there is no reason you both can't have fun learning. We provide you with some ideas, although undoubtedly, you will think of others.

There is one other important point to keep in mind, one that we have been emphasizing throughout the last four chapters. As we discuss language games you can play with your preschooler to help her develop these pre-literacy skills, you want to repeatedly and frequently model the language concept you are showing your preschooler. Only after that might you occasionally ask your preschooler to demonstrate what she is learning. Keep in mind, for all of the suggestions below, the idea is to provide lots of rich learning experiences with your preschooler, not to "train" her to be a reader or writer. Remember, your role is to be a supportive parent who interacts, not interrogates.

### **Ideas For Around the House**

Pretty much anything you do, in any place within the house, can be a literacy learning experience for you and your preschooler. Whether during more formal literacy situations, like reading to your preschooler, or in less formal situations, such as making meals or doing chores, you can provide activities and experiences that will prove to be beneficial to your preschooler.

### **Reading Time**

Undoubtedly, you've already realized the importance of reading to your preschooler. Reading to your preschooler will help develop both his spoken and written language skills. As we have mentioned before, reading can expand his vocabulary and enable him to learn different ways of saying the same thing. While all children's books are useful for helping your preschooler learn about spoken and written language, you may wish to think about more than the topic of the books as you read to your preschooler. For example, find some books that involve rhyming (Dr. Seuss, Shel Silverstein, or any book that emphasizes rhyming). By reading these books repeatedly to your preschooler, chances are that your preschooler will catch on and begin to provide rhyming words before you can turn the page. Thus, reading these types of books to your preschooler helps him to focus on the sounds of our language without requiring him to sit through a lesson on rhyming.

You also might try and group together other books for reading that seem to contain simple plots involving problems, actions, and solutions. Many children's books will follow this format, perhaps with more than one problem-action-solution sequence involved. As you read and re-read these books to your preschooler, engage him in the book reading activity by pausing at logical points in a story and talking about what you and he thinks might happen next. This can help him to develop and use his understanding of cause and effect to predict or infer the plot of a story. If possible or appropriate, relate the story line to his own life. For example, you might

engage him in a conversation about his experiences with the topic of the book, or, after finishing the book, make up a new story that inserts him as the main character. These types of activities serve to increase his understandings of storytelling and helps him prepare for the day when he begins to read books on his own and must “read between the lines” to help make sense of the information.

As you read to your four and five-year-old preschooler, you also can begin to draw attention to the print on the paper and the speech sounds of our language. For example, as you read, you might, at logical stopping points, comment on how the character’s name begins with the same sound as her name (“Kitty..that has a *k* sound, just like your name...Caitlin. Hmm...? We use a *k* or a *c* to write the *k* sound). After finishing the book, you can review the book, showing and then asking your preschooler about words that begin with certain letters, or words that seem exceptionally long. You also may find yourself occasionally drawing your finger across the sentence as you read to him. As you do this, you might time your pointing with the words you read, so that it becomes clearer where words begin and end. These different types of interactions help increase your preschooler’s knowledge of sounds, print, and words.

### **Mealtime**

Most families, no matter how busy, inevitably end up being together for meal times. Though these times can be hectic amid the bustle of preparing dinner and talking about everyone’s day, they also can be used as means for facilitating your preschooler’s understanding of written language. For example, when the family is sitting down for breakfast, you can use the milk carton and some cereal as a way to develop knowledge of sounds, words, and print.

Consider the following scenario:

Father: Look at this word: *milk*. It sure is a small word. Let's see how many letters in that word.

Child: (Father and child pointing to letters) 1, 2, 3, 4. Four.

Father: Right! And it is short to say. *Milk* (clap). But look how much milk there is (holding up carton). Even though there is lots of milk, it has a short name. Now, look at this word: *Cheerios*. Let's count the letters in this word.

Child: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8. Eight letters.

Father: Wow! Eight letters. And it takes a long time to say: *Cheer* (clap), *ri* (clap), *os* (clap). Three claps. But look at this tiny Cheerio. It's so small. Even though it has a long name, it is so tiny!

Simple discussion, such as this one about the length of words, helps preschoolers understand that words are not part of the objects they name. This increases their metalinguistic knowledge of print and words.

Other games you might play at mealtime might include a rhyming game, thinking of all the words that rhyme with your meal (*egg, leg, beg...*). The family can pick a letter of the day, and see who can find the most occurrences of that letter on the bread bag. The ideas are endless. The point here is not to turn every mealtime into a quiz or lesson on words, sounds, and letters. Rather, it is to emphasize that a minute here or a minute there directed toward what you know about written language can lead to great pay-offs in your preschooler's literacy development.

### **Chore Time**

Even though we typically consider chores around the house as more of a burden than a pleasure, we actually can take advantage of those times to provide learning experiences for our children. For example, as you help your preschooler put away her toys, you can arrange the toys

on the shelf by the length of the sound of their name, rather than by size. As you wash the dishes, you can clap out the number of syllables you hear in the dishes and utensils you put in the dishwasher – “knife (clap), spatula (clap, clap, clap).” As you carry the laundry downstairs, use each step to say one word of a sentence – “We (step), are (step), almost (step), done! (step).” Your preschooler will be learning to play and talk about language, while helping you accomplish the household chores. What a bargain!

### **Ideas When Traveling**

When we were growing up, both of us were part of families who played alphabet games in the car. These games involved finding words on street signs or billboards that began with an “a”, then a “b”, and so on through the alphabet. We played games that required us to rhyme words with objects that one of our siblings saw and called out. Unbeknownst to us, we were learning about print and the sounds letters make as we played these games. It seems that these games have gone by the wayside for many families. Even though we would like to start a movement to bring them back, these games are not the only ones that you can play with your preschooler that will help her to learn about written language. In fact, your play with words can occur without any reference to what is outside of the car. When her dad was taking Genevieve to early piano lessons, they would play a game that involved thinking of different definitions of a word. For example:

Dad: Block. Like blocks kids play with, we live on a block, he’s a blockhead.

Genevieve: Pet. I have a pet. I pet Wendy.

Other games can be those that model and ask children to think of opposites of words (hot...cold) or categories of words (dogs: lab, poodle, wiener dog... ). These games encourage your preschooler to think about words themselves, rather than just using them in a sentence. By

thinking of the word itself, your preschooler is practicing her metalinguistic skills. And as we have said, these skills provide an excellent groundwork for literacy.

## **Ideas When Shopping**

Shopping can be a time when you just want to buy your groceries or clothes and get home, especially when your preschooler is asking for a pretzel or a quarter to ride the mini-carousel outside the store. However, you again can turn this outing into a fun-filled and learning time for your preschooler. Before heading off for the store, make a list, but write the list in front of your preschooler. Talk aloud as you write the list. Your list writing might sound like the following:

“Let’s see... we need milk”

(write *milk*).

“Hmm, milk has four letters. Now, we also need eggs”

(write *eggs*)

“Hey, I hear three sounds – *eh – g – z*, but I had to write four letters.”

By exposing your preschooler to the way you write language on paper, and your thought processes and observations about what you write, she will be learning a great deal about print and how we produce it. In other words, she will be learning, indirectly, about spelling.

After completing your list, take it to the store and have your preschooler help you cross off the words as you put the items in your cart. As she does this, you can talk, or ask her, about the words. Your discussions might be like the following:

“Pop. That doesn’t take very long to say, and the word you crossed out is pretty short, even though that’s a really big bottle. And look at this. Macaroni. That’s pretty long there, were I wrote it. It takes a longer time to say it, too. But these macaronis sure are small.”

In these kinds of interchanges, your preschooler not only is learning how words are separate from the objects they identify, he also is learning about the purpose of writing: to inform, to remind, etc. These simple examples demonstrate that children preschoolers can learn about language even during the most common, everyday activities.

## **Chapter Summary**

Obviously, the ideas we provide in these different situations are interchangeable (you can play rhyming games during shopping trips or make lists of chores to do around the house). The point is to show how you don't need to buy fancy toys or products to help your preschooler learn to read and write. You have the materials and know-how to do this right now in your very home or car. Take advantage of these opportunities. Lay that foundation for your preschooler that will help develop the knowledge and skills she will need to tackle that most difficult of school tasks: reading and writing.