



Literacy Beginnings

**A Prekindergarten
Handbook**



Physical Characteristics of a Literacy-Rich Prekindergarten Classroom

Let's step into a literacy-infused prekindergarten classroom and see how the physical space and its contents promote an active learning culture. Of course the classroom setup and focus will vary depending on whether the classes are for three-year-olds or four-year-olds or both.

Meeting Area As you walk into the room, a cozy, carpeted meeting area is immediately visible. Many teachers have children sit in a group on the carpet for a community meeting. The carpet may have a design that helps children sit in an orderly way (for example, squares or a circle). Some teachers use separate carpet squares for each child. Movement and music activities take place here. There is a low teacher's chair, sometimes a rocking chair, and a display of books the teacher has read aloud to children. Near the calendar is an easel for reading big books and poems; the easel is magnetic so it can also be used for letter and word activities.

Library Books are everywhere in the classroom, but a very important area is the class library with many picture books in colorful tubs and a variety of baskets, with books stored facing out so children can browse them easily. Books stored on shelves are also displayed so that the front of the book is visible. Books are organized by topics of interest to the children, by author, or by type (rhyming books, pop-up books, etc.). There are simple books with one or two lines per page, as well as alphabet books, counting books, books about colors and shapes, predictable books, and informational books. There are a couple of big, comfy pillows and a few book-related toys, as well as stuffed animals the children can read to. There are big books that the children read in a shared way with the teacher, and there are some little books that match the big books. Big books are displayed on a stand. Books are also displayed in other areas of the classroom, such as in the play corner or on the science table.

Listening As part of the library, a listening area has books, two chairs, and a little table with recordings, an audio player, and sets of headphones. The listening area is usually big enough for two to four children. A computer or child's tape player can also be used. Sometimes headphones are not necessary; a small group can listen if the volume is not too loud. Children will enjoy listening to recordings of favorite books you've read aloud as well as of books you've made together as a class. It can be fun to make the recordings yourself, or to ask family volunteers to record themselves reading books aloud.

Play Corner The play corner contains props that encourage children's imagination and discovery. This area is more carefully planned than the "house corner" of the past and always includes theme-related books and writing tools and other materials that encourage the integration of writing and reading. Throughout the school year, there may be themes such as restaurant, post office, doctor's office, or market. To encourage understanding of diversity, the play corner might include chopsticks, rice bowls, a tortilla press, or a yogurt maker (Horn et al., 2003). This area might include a range of artifacts that support not only the home but other themes as well: a stove, sink, refrigerator, tables, cupboard, doll bed, dishes, food containers, telephone and a number of puppets. The area is transformed as different projects develop; it may become a bank, a bakery, a farm stand, a puppet theater, a beauty or barber shop, flower shop, pizza shop, or other things your children are interested in. The play corner always includes dress-up clothes to support the current theme.

Art An art area offers children a chance to represent their ideas using drawing, painting, collage, or other media. Materials, including recycled materials that children have helped collect, are organized in bins labeled with both pictures and words. Crayons, paints and paper provide lots of options for skin tones and hair colors. Markers and a variety of other writing tools are available so that children can integrate writing into their art if they wish. Early in the year you may want to begin with very few choices in this area. You can introduce new materials and show children how to use and take care of them gradually throughout the year. You may also want to rotate materials in and out of the art area if you want children to practice working with a certain type of material.

Writing Center The writing center has all the materials children need for making books, including prestapled blank books, a variety of colored and textured paper for covers, crayons and washable markers, white correction tape, scissors and glue, and a tub of favorite books to help stimulate ideas. It includes tools for writing as well: different writing implements, letter stamps and pads, letter tiles, letter sponges, whiteboards, notebooks, note pads, traceable letters, sandpaper letters, stencils, an alphabet chart, and a variety of paper. As with the art area, it will be helpful to present a very simple version of the writing center when you introduce it to your class at the beginning of the school year. Label and trace the containers (to place a colored shape on the shelf) so children return them to the same spot. As you add materials, introduce them to the class first so they know what will be in the area and how to use and take care of it. The writing center can include bookmaking as an activity, or once children understand the process you may choose to do bookmaking in a separate, established area.

Blocks A block area with various types and sizes of blocks encourages building and exploration of different shapes and materials. Since it tends to become messy, this area is located on a carpet at one end of the classroom. Blocks are organized on shelves, each block's shape taped with a label on the shelf where that type of block is stored. Other toys such as signs, vehicles, Legos, and a dollhouse with furniture and people are included as well. Many teachers include books about topics such as buildings or bridges, a small basket with paper, writing materials, and tape so that children can make their own signs and labels for the block area. As with other areas, it is helpful to introduce new materials gradually.

Puzzles and Games Another play area holds puzzles and all kinds of manipulatives and games, including letter and word puzzles. While you will want to maintain a core group of materials—things like simple puzzles, magnetic letters, pattern blocks, and Unifix cubes, other materials in this area can be rotated to support various aspects of your curriculum throughout the year.

Sand and Water Play Sand and water tables offer rich opportunity for discovery concepts about volume and capacity as well as how these materials behave when poured. Both tables have cups and other containers of various sizes. Both have clear containers and opaque containers as well, and both have a couple of plastic funnels. The sand table may also contain plastic animals and people, and the water table may have plastic sea creatures and boats, and a bucket of objects that children can use to test the concepts of sinking and floating.

Music This area has simple instruments to help children explore rhythm (for example, small drums, tambourines, and shakers). It may also include a few instruments the children have made themselves, such as shakers made with paper towel tubes and beans, or guitars made with boxes and rubber bands. Making these instruments can also be an area-related activity, with an adult to guide and support the children's work. You may also want to have an audio device so that children can listen to, play along with, and remember favorite songs; this helps them internalize language, get the feel for rhyme, and expand vocabulary.

Science/Social Studies An area for science and social studies offers the opportunity for focused inquiry using concrete materials. It has some simple science equipment such as magnifying glasses, and a range of natural materials gathered from outside of school, both by the teachers and by students and their families. This area also contains writing tools and paper and wonderful nonfiction picture books with colorful photographs and drawings on subjects like animals, foods, families, and community. As with other areas, the materials here will be rotated to support inquiry work going on in the classroom. If your class is studying rocks, for example, the table will have baskets of rocks for examining, sorting, and drawing.

Math An area for math has a range of manipulatives for counting and comparing. You'll see things like pattern blocks, rods and coins. You may see other manipulatives such as Legos, counting bears, Unifix cubes, and colored plastic disks, as well as rulers, rods and games. Numerals are printed on cards, and there are simple counting tasks to match numerals. You may want to restrict what materials children have access to at certain points if you want to support them with practice using a certain material.

Print in the Classroom The walls of the prekindergarten classroom are filled with print! Children's names are everywhere—on a name chart, on an attendance record with pictures, on their finished art, in class-written stories. There are signs that reflect the environment. You also see many pieces of group writing that children have produced together. There are poems and songs on charts, and several alphabet charts. Everywhere, there is evidence of the inquiry projects in which children have been involved—charts reflecting their observations and conclusions.